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Final Thesis

**Scandals at the  
Venice Biennale**  
The Cases of Gino De Dominicis,  
Gran Fury and Christoph Büchel

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**Abstract.** Since the very beginning, the Venice Biennale has been characterised by many scandals; some of them also had positive effects on the International Exhibition itself - generating public curiosity - and on the career of the artists involved. So, even though the various Commissioners for the Visual Arts Department have usually tried to avoid stir, the latter appears as an unavoidable element of the event. In my thesis, I decided to analyse three projects that made a sensation in three different editions of the exhibition. The first one is *Seconda Soluzione d'Immortalità (L'Universo è Immobile)* by Gino De Dominicis, who presented this artwork at the Biennale for Figurative Arts in 1972. This work was considered outrageous because Gino De Dominicis exhibited a young man with Down Syndrome as part of the installation, the artist and his assistant were even sued for circumvention of an incapable. The second is *The Pope and the Penis* by the artists' collective Gran Fury, who proposed this work for the 1990 Biennale for Figurative Arts to try to raise awareness about the AIDS epidemic and condemn the point of view of the Catholic Church on contraception. The last project analysed is *The Mosque* by Christoph Büchel, presented in 2015. This work created stir because the artist set up the mosque in a deconsecrated church that soon became a functioning place of worship for Muslims, who never had one before. In addition to the projects themselves, the fundamental part of the dissertation is dedicated to the impact the scandals had on the press and art criticism and to trying to answer the question: had these artistic scandals just an ephemeral mediatic effect or hid they a more reflective aspect?

**Sommario.** Fin dall'inizio, la Biennale di Venezia è stata caratterizzata da molti scandali; alcuni di essi hanno avuto anche effetti positivi sull'Esposizione Internazionale stessa, generando la curiosità del pubblico, e sulla carriera dell'artista coinvolto. Quindi, anche se i vari Commissari per le Arti Figurative hanno solitamente cercato di evitare di suscitare scalpore, quest'ultimo appare come un elemento imprescindibile dell'evento. Nella mia tesi, ho deciso di analizzare tre progetti che hanno fatto scalpore in tre diverse edizioni della mostra. La prima è *Seconda Soluzione d'Immortalità (L'Universo è Immobile)* di Gino De Dominicis, che presentò quest'opera alla Biennale per le Arti Figurative nel 1972.

Questo lavoro è stato considerato oltraggioso perché Gino De Dominicis ha esposto un giovane con sindrome di Down come parte dell'installazione, l'artista e il suo assistente sono stati persino citati in giudizio per elusione di un incapace. Il secondo è *The Pope and the Penis* del collettivo di artisti Gran Fury, che ha proposto questo lavoro per la Biennale di Arti Figurative del 1990 per cercare di sensibilizzare sull'epidemia di AIDS e condannare il punto di vista della Chiesa cattolica sulla contraccezione. L'ultimo progetto che ho scelto di analizzare è *The Mosque* di Christoph Büchel, presentato nel 2015. Questo lavoro ha creato scalpore perché l'artista ha allestito la moschea in una chiesa sconsacrata ed è diventata un luogo di culto funzionante per i musulmani, che non ne avevano mai avuto uno prima. Oltre ai progetti stessi, una parte fondamentale della tesi è dedicata all'impatto di questi scandali sulla stampa e sulla critica d'arte e al provare a rispondere alla domanda: questi scandali artistici hanno avuto solo un effetto mediatico effimero o nascondevano un aspetto più riflessivo?

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## Introduction



Ill. 1: Central Pavilion in Giardini; <https://www.labiennale.org/it/news/il-calendario-la-biennale-di-venezia-2018>.

Exhibitions are critical points of intersection of the many actors, objects, and institutions that make up the system of artistic production and distribution. Here artists, dealers, collectors, critics, curators, politicians, bureaucrats, and of course members of the public, all come together within their overlapping spheres of activity and influence. The study of exhibitions thus involves the study of nodes in systems, or in networks of transaction and of value, with exhibitions functioning in various ways within larger systems of artistic practice, markets and commercial relations, local and national economic development, and political activity of various kinds. And exhibitions in themselves are best viewed in this light, as events within which various individuals play roles related to their places within broader systems.<sup>1</sup>

It follows that there are many different realities that interact in this system: the national, local, international, and global.<sup>2</sup> The very first edition of the Venice Biennale took place in 1895 from April the 30<sup>th</sup> to October the 22<sup>nd</sup> at the initiative of the city mayor Riccardo Selvatico. A year before the opening Selvatico sent letters to the best international artists of that period to invite them to the exhibition. Therefore, the ambition of the organisers was to collect the best artworks; they had to make an accurate selection among the artists because it was not possible to invite in Venice the whole flagship of modern art.<sup>3</sup>

The *Universal Expositions*, like the one in London at the Cristal Palace in 1851, brought to the creation of independent international art events throughout Europe, “as municipalities and states sponsored exhibitions seeking to establish themselves as cultural centres, and to promote the sale of works by their artists.”<sup>4</sup> So,

the Venice Biennale must be seen, within this context, as an effort by a municipality to reinforce and support its cultural status, and to encourage tourism, in line with the growing European trend of creating international exhibitions. And while the plan for the first Biennale called for one-half of the artists to be Italian, it soon developed a structure fully based on the model of the international exposition, with artworks selected by participating nations and installed by country.<sup>5</sup>

The Venice Biennale has become, over time, one of the art world’s most important exhibitions. Not only it has always brought attention to famous international artists of the moment and served as launchpad for the careers of new

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<sup>1</sup> B. Altshuler, *Exhibition History and the Biennale*, in “Starting from Venice”, edited by Clarissa Ricci, Et al./Edizioni, Milan, 2010, pp. 17-27, here p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> E. Roddolo, *La Biennale: Arte, Polemiche, Scandali e Storie in Laguna*, Marsilio Editori S.p.A., Venice, 2003, pp. 262, here pp. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> B. Altshuler, *Exhibition History and the Biennale*, cit. p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., cit. pp. 19-20.

ones, but, during the years, it has also become a stage for various artistic movements coming from all over the globe.<sup>6</sup> For this exact reason, the Biennale has never lacked twist and turns, and scandals in its centuries-old tradition; in fact, in the very first edition *Il Supremo Convegno* by Giacomo Grosso caused so much stir that there was the intention of exhibiting it, for a paying public, in various countries.<sup>7</sup>

Sticking with the theme of scandal, the basis of this thesis is the analysis of three projects presented for different editions of the Biennale: *Second Solution of Immortality (The Universe is Still)* by Gino De Dominicis (Biennale 1972), *The Pope and Penis* by Gran Fury (Biennale 1990), and *THE MOSQUE: The First Mosque in the Historic City of Venice* by Christoph Büchel (Biennale 2015). I chose these works because they all caused stir in different periods and it can be observed how the concept of what can be considered scandalous has changed over time. In particular, the thesis has the objective of studying the resonance of these scandals on the press and on the art critique.

The dissertation is divided in three chapters, one for each artwork, which in turn are divided in four paragraphs: one for the context in which the project was exhibited, one dedicated to the artist, one for the description of the artwork, and one for the reasons provoking the scandal and the resonance it had on the press in general and on art criticism. The research was done consulting the press review, preserved in the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee in Venice, of the three editions of the Biennale in which the selected works were presented.

This inquiry has brought me to wonder whether these artistic scandals had just and ephemeral mediatic effect, or whether critics recognised a more reflective aspect behind them, that is whether the artists were aware of what their works would have caused. However, this question will have an answer in the final conclusions of this paper.

Before analysing the impact on critics of the three cases I decided to analyse in my thesis, framing the concept of scandal as a cultural phenomenon is necessary. The term “scandal” originates from the Greek word *skandalon*, which also

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<sup>6</sup> L. Bialasiewicz., *That which is not a Mosque*, in “City”, 8 June 2017, vol. 21, n. 3-4, pp. 367-387, here p. 367; DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2017.1325221.

<sup>7</sup> E. Roddolo, *La Biennale: Arte, Polemiche, Scandali e Storie in Laguna*, cit. pp. 14-15.



indicates “a stumbling block.”<sup>8</sup> This etymology -alluding to the idea of an obstacle- highlights the fact that a scandal arises, metaphorically, when someone bumps against this obstacle, and concretely, when someone causes offense.<sup>9</sup> In Russia, on the other hand, the word scandal can also take the meaning of “outburst”, “public argument”, “attitude against the etiquette”. There, the moments that concern “anti-behaviour”, rebellion, violations... were considered anti-Christian. According to Michail Bachtin, for example, a scandal was something that occurred at the wrong time and in the wrong place; something that subverted the ordinary course of existence.<sup>10</sup>

When we think about art, the first question that comes to mind is about the nature of the obstacle, since artistic scandals constitute an important part of the writing of art history. Nowadays, the focus on scandal in the media can also be examined.<sup>11</sup> While some artists may try to outwit economic strategies with humour or irony, others might believe that these schemes are part of a widespread context. Moreover, since the second half of the twentieth century, some artists, who are aware about the scandals documented by modernity and the avant-garde, are conscious of the positive value of scandal.<sup>12</sup> However, what must be emphasised is that in the art world, professionals, and art lovers, specialists, and amateurs, or artists and viewers, are intertwined. So, the very idea of scandal is not steady and varies according to these intricate relationships. “Although there are doubtlessly recurrent conditions for the expression of artistic scandal, it is also clear that the expectation horizon for a given time differs.”<sup>13</sup>

Whether the artist is always held accountable for the scandal -and this indicates one of the undesirable outcomes of the artistic scandal- this is not so evident as far as artistic practices are concerned, which are primarily linked to certain qualitative characteristics. So, if a scandal has a chance of having positive effects, it should

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<sup>8</sup> C. Desbordes, *Scandal and the Artist's Ethics, Between Aesthetics and Politics: from Brancusi to Cattelan*, in “Homo Oeconomicus”, vol. 30, n. 3, 2013, pp. 385-400, here p. 385.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> G. P. Piretto, *Skandal à la Russe*, in *Scandalo: Quaderni di Synapsis vol. 8*, edited R. Carbotti, Mondadori Education, Milan, 2009, pp. 40-52, here pp. 40-44.

<sup>11</sup> C. Desbordes, *Scandal and the Artist's Ethics, Between Aesthetics and Politics: from Brancusi to Cattelan*, cit. p. 386.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

be possibly considered from the point of view of the artist's intention.<sup>14</sup> Many artists, and in particular artists of the contemporary age, try to communicate things that have upset them or, at least, they try to underline some flaws of their time through their sensitivity and their work. So, they no longer care about creating aesthetically pleasing artworks, since their desire consists more in expressing an urge to break down reference points than in causing a scandal.<sup>15</sup> So, the artistic scandal, in its ability to break out into the symbolic order and to create a shortcoming, reveals indications of the world in which it occurs.<sup>16</sup>

In the second half of the 1800s, with the Impressionists' contributions, there was the first reference to scandal for an artistic work. Indeed, the first case was the painting *Breakfast on the Grass* (oil on canvas, 1863) by Edouard Manet. The artist was very aware of the fact that proposing a picnic with a naked woman between two dressed men would create a hornet's nest. The painting, as predictable, was banned from the Paris Salon.<sup>17</sup> It must be noted that until then, and it has been so for centuries, art was not an activity for a few privileged people; art permeated life. In churches, in common places, in squares... and for artists it was a responsibility and a wish to be understood by everyone. Napoleon III, in 1863, organized the Salon des Refusés where all the works rejected by the Academy could be exhibited in the Palace of Industry in Paris.<sup>18</sup> So, people saw the painting and the scandal spread. From that moment onward, scandalising and revolutionising became part of the programs of all the avant-gardes that had no longer interest in being understood. Those who did not understand were ignorant, in the sense that they did not get the true and profound meanings proposed by the artists.<sup>19</sup> The artistic discourse began to be mediated and interpreted by critics and art curators, gallery owners with solid friendships with museum directors, and a very small audience of users and investors who have the intellectual or economic means to appreciate. The artist no longer turns to common people, but the museums and influential

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., cit. p. 387.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> A. Fadini, *L'arte e gli scandali fruttiferi*, in "pitteikon.com", 19 December 2020; <https://pitteikon.com/blogs/news/l-arte-e-gli-scandali-fruttiferi>. [last accessed 28 September 2021].

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

people in the field of artistic diffusion. Scandalising is a sure way to get visibility and audience.<sup>20</sup>

Russia, before the October Revolution, was populated by a society considered on its way to becoming perfect (Socialism achieved and Communism under construction) there was no room for protests, eccentricity, or extravagance. In turn, during the post-revolutionary 20s, with politicians and artistic avant-gardes cooperating, scandals were a daily occurrence. The planned subversion of the obsolete capitalist order encouraged transgression and to *épater le bourgeois*.<sup>21</sup> With the advent of modernity, the artistic field and the artistic language have suffered a strong shock and some rules of the classical tradition were modified and others completely abandoned, like the principle of imitation, everyday materials were introduced in the realisation of the works, new technologies began to be used. It was all about *épater les bourgeois* (which can be translated as “surprising the bourgeois”) opposing a ruling class but also an artistic technique that bordered on academism and accommodating repetition.<sup>22</sup> The first example of such renovations in the artistic field was Futurism, which is commonly regarded as the earliest of the European artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. Futurism had a founder, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), and a date of birth, 1909. In that year the first Futurist Manifesto, by Marinetti himself, was published, at the beginning, in some Italian newspapers and later, in its final version, in “Le Figaro” (in France) on February the 20<sup>th</sup>. Futurism presents itself as a movement of rupture: against the past, against the apathy of the academies, against the tired customs of a bourgeois world that struggled to free itself from nineteenth-century respectability. The reaction of Futurism to this situation, judged unbearable, is incredible: the adherence to an all-encompassing, wild, and aggressive vitalism, the unbridled adulation of progress made possible by scientific and technological developments, the cult of technique, speed, flight.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> G. P. Piretto, *Skandal à la Russe*, cit. pp. 40-44.

<sup>22</sup> A. Vettese, *Apriti, contemporanea*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 22 giugno 1997, in A. Detheridge and A. Vettese, *Guardare l'Arte. Cultura Visiva Contemporanea: le Recensioni, i Temi e gli Appuntamenti. 1997-1999*, Il Sole 24 Ore, Milano, 1999, pp.16-17.

<sup>23</sup> Domus, *Futurismo*, in “domusweb.it”; <https://www.domusweb.it/it/movimenti/futurismo.html> [last accessed 27 September 2021].

There is no reliable way to predict whether something will be considered offensive, the obscene, just like beauty, is a subjective issue.<sup>24</sup> As Mimi Vasilaki wrote in her essay *Arte, Pornografia e Scandalo dell'Osceno*:

judgments about obscenity are generally more passionate than those made for other narrative categories. [...] Simply put, critical evaluations of transgressive works of art ultimately boil down to a matter of aesthetic ideology, rather than referring to objective standards. Some critics appreciate the artistic value of certain obscene works of art and consider art regardless of their pornographic function; others, on the other hand, more intent on strategically preserving borders, consider them pornographic, without denying their artistic value. Still others find it useful to distinguish between pornography and erotic art.<sup>25</sup>

The constant attempts to marginalise the obscene, however, were not successful: it is deeply rooted in the aesthetic, erotic, political, and religious dimensions.<sup>26</sup> The evaluation process is challenged by the obscene nature of an artwork because people usually refer to common hypothetical sense of ethics. However, the unease remains evident in the obsessive negotiation and repositioning of boundaries. It goes without saying that people persist in tracing those boundaries, because they hope to get rid of the problem of evil. Nevertheless, limits collapse with death. People do not have any choice but accepting that without taboos, as well as without death, there is no life.<sup>27</sup>

If it is really astounding, art contains something intolerable. There are artists whose degree of intolerability is so high that any attempt to integrate them becomes ridiculous and disrespectful; one case above all, is Francis Bacon. On the other hand, there are other artists whose tolerability is only apparent: like Caravaggio, certainly a realist, but there would be much to say about the gloomy density of his shadows. So, it is not necessary to make tolerable what is not.<sup>28</sup>

According to Djelal Kadir, given the universal lawlessness, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the chance of a scandal was replaced by the omnipresence of scandals. Indeed, since a scandal can be considered an offence that interrupts normality, the chance of scandal itself can be weakened by the emergence of a

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<sup>24</sup> M. Vasilaki, *Arte, Pornografia e lo Scandalo dell'Osceno*, in *Scandalo: Quaderni di Synapsis vol. 8*, edited R. Carbotti, Mondadori Education, Milan, 2009, pp. 165-175, here p. 165.

<sup>25</sup> Translation of the author M. Vasilaki, *Arte, Pornografia e lo Scandalo dell'Osceno*, cit. pp. 165-166.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, cit. pp. 166, 168.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, cit. p. 173

<sup>28</sup> Frangi, and Stolfi, *Scandalo, è Arte*, in "Tempi", 11 August 1999; <https://www.tempi.it/scandalo-arte/>. [last accessed 28 September 2021].

greater scandal, as a contradictory principle that rules these dynamics. The professor added that it is beneficial for human existence when scandal is possible, when it can be an option. For him, the absence of this perspective, caused by the ubiquity of the scandal, is a danger for society and for the vital and creative chance of a productive culture. In Kadir's opinion, the absence of scandals impedes the opposite of the scandal too; he defined the lack of scandals as the greatest scandal itself.<sup>29</sup> According to him the interdiction of scandal tends to be based on three easily identifiable fulcrums (or any combination them). He added that the greatest scandal is the limit that obliges us to conform to an absolutist virtue, a request that inevitably becomes a normalisation of the scandal as an inevitable norm and absolute consent. Today, political semiotics of scandal and its mediatic handling, mainly through global or local mass media, is a prerogative of a transnational industry that uses advanced information and communication technologies.<sup>30</sup>

Gillian Beer, in her essay *Le "turpi araldiche" di Darwin* for the Bertinoro conferences about scandal in 2007, wrote that a scandal is something that always concerns "someone else".<sup>31</sup> According to her, a scandal is:

a reaction to something that, at least on the surface, is alien to us. What may seem perfectly acceptable within one group, horrifies another. The main source of the scandal is a secret that comes to light. This abrupt change has a euphoric effect. The scandal gives a thrill of pleasure. Retrospective and review are also part of the scandal: the judgment we have of a person, our opinion on certain issues or the sense of ourselves as educated and controlled individuals turn out to be labile.<sup>32</sup>

Scandal, according to Beer, is a spectator's sport that hurts whoever is involved in it and is something to joke about for everyone else. Indeed, as already mentioned, Beer suggested that a scandal does not occur when something unexpected is revealed, but when the rumours, suspects, suggestions, originally suppressed, are confirmed.<sup>33</sup> The interesting thing about scandals is having discerned vital clues since the very beginning, being aware. Moreover, she added

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<sup>29</sup> D. Kadir, *Un'Esortazione Urgente allo Scandalo*, in *Scandalo: Quaderni di Synapsis vol. 8*, edited R. Carbotti, Mondadori Education, Milan, 2009, pp. 5-14, here p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, cit. 7-8.

<sup>31</sup> G. Beer, *Le "turpi araldiche" di Darwin*, in *Scandalo: Quaderni di Synapsis vol. 8*, edited R. Carbotti, Mondadori Education, Milan, 2009, pp. 73-85, here p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> Translation of the author G. Beer, *Le "turpi araldiche" di Darwin*, cit. p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

that a scandal usually creates “tribes”: friends and enemies join their respective blocs. Spectators find themselves aggregated to one or the other group.<sup>34</sup>

After framing the scandal as a cultural phenomenon, a review of the impact the three works had on the press and on art criticism is necessary. The three cases I will analyse in the following chapters caused stir and polarised the opinions of experts and visitors, monopolising the attention of the media. The first selected artwork is, *Second Solution of Immortality (The Universe is Still)* (1972) by Gino De Dominicis. The artist proposed an installation with four main objects: an invisible cube made with tape, a rubber ball, a stone, and Paolo Rosa, who observed the scene from a chair with a sign around his neck, on which was written “seconda soluzione d’immortalità”. What caused the scandal was the fact that Paolo Rosa was affected by the Down Syndrome, and the mediatic scene was divided between people who found the work as a way to blame a society that claims to defend people like the young man exhibited by De Dominicis but then call him a mongoloid or subnormal, people who thought it was not a crime since Rosa had to be considered as an aesthetical object, and finally people who thought that the installation was offensive, and humiliating and that considered De Dominicis and his assistant Simone Carella guilty of at least circumvention of an incapable. Even though the installation was removed, the scandal had a huge resonance, and even after years this episode is still mentioned by various experts.

The second project I examined is *The Pope and the Penis* (1990) by the artists collective Gran Fury. The artwork consisted in two panels that had the aim of raising awareness about the HIV crisis in the USA and in the whole world and of condemning the Catholic Church position about contraception. The group of artists did this placing next to each other an image of an erected penis and the image of Pope John Paul II. This work shocked the Venice Patriarchy that has a long history of excommunications connected to the Biennale, first of which was namely linked to the painting *Supremo Convegno* by Giacomo Grosso that the Patriarch asked to remove from the central pavilion. The Biennale’s director of Fine Arts Giovanni Carandente, some members of the board of directors, many journalists, and art critics were shocked too, because they thought it was offensive towards the Pope

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

and the Christian religion. The artists even had to be judged by a court, because they were accused of blasphemy and contempt, and they risked having their work removed from the exhibition. On the other hand, there were many people who did not find the two panels offensive because they were separated and because the Biennale should be a place characterised by freedom of expression. Gran Fury took advantage of the popularity of the exhibition to educate people about a very important issue.

The third, and last, work is *The Mosque* (2015) by Christoph Büchel, who turned a disused church into a mosque, which Venice did not have. This installation too generated stir within the Venice Patriarchy and the Catholic community, and the public authorities. Many thought that the work was disrespectful towards the Christian religion because the church was not actually deconsecrated, and that it was provocative. The authorities feared a terroristic attack, considering what happened to the headquarters of Charlie Hebdo, a satirical French journal, a few months before, and claimed that the organisers did not respect the security norms because there were too many people at the same time inside the installation. On the other hand, there were people thinking that Büchel did not want to be provocative and that there was no political intent behind the installation, he only wanted to establish a dialogue between different communities and show how essential it is for Muslims to have a proper place to pray. The installation was shut down, but it made the debate about building a mosque in Venice rekindle.

As it will be explained better in the conclusions, there would have not been such an outcry, for all the three works taken into consideration, without the press and media constantly writing and talking about them. On the other hand, if they did not cause so much stir and indignation, one of the major contradictions of the Biennale would not have been uncovered, which is its claim to be a neutral exhibition where artist could express freely.

Therefore, it can be said that the term “provoke” has become, over time, a constant in art exhibitions, especially in the international ones like the Venice Biennale. Provocations aim to highlight a specific issue, be it immortality of the soul as in the case of Gino De Dominicis, HIV epidemics as in the case of Gran Fury, or the importance of integration between different cultures as in the case of

Christoph Büchel, discuss the issue and eventually try to solve it. However, this process is often reduced acquiring visibility, being newsworthy, and improvement in economic performances of authors and art dealers. The tangible results in other fields that can be achieved through provocations still have to be laid down.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the object of debate in all the three examples was something completely different to what the artists had in mind.

So, the Biennale has been characterised by scandals since its very beginning. Some scandals were purposely thought for publicity or for genuinely contesting a specific issue, other scandals, instead, are truly unintentional and are recognised as such only retrospectively.<sup>36</sup> However, the scandals that make headlines are the ones that are generated on purpose by artists that want to use the Biennale as a sounding board.<sup>37</sup> The 60s and 70s were the golden age of provocations:

Partly because the deeply politicized and ideologized artistic and cultural environment pushed in a sometimes even uncritical way towards “contestation”, partly because the public was less vaccinated against the virus of scandal which therefore appeared more aggressive.<sup>38</sup>

After a period like this, from 1982 onward the Biennale started to align with the evolution of customs and society. The exhibition wanted to privilege again the permanent against the ephemeral, to go back to considering the exhibition venue a place devoted to art and not to provocations. However, as will be made evident in the following chapters, scandal is always around the corner, as an indispensable characteristic of art.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> R. Pestriniero, *Parola d'ordine provocare*, in “Il Gazzettino”, 12 May 2015.

<sup>36</sup> M. Spezi, *Un minorato, greggi dipinti, monte di tori in esposizione*, in “La Nazione”, 25 May 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Translation of the author M. Spezi, *Un minorato, greggi dipinti, monte di tori in esposizione*, cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



## 1. Second Solution of Immortality (The Universe is Still), Gino De Dominicis (1972)



Ill. 2: G. Zucchiatti, *Italy's Poster. Work or Behaviour. 36th Venice Biennale*, digital format, 2536x3720; <http://asac.labiennale.org/it/documenti/fototeca/avvicina.php?scheda=218522&p=1>.

## 1.1. The 36<sup>th</sup> Biennale: the dawn of a new era for the Venice International Art Exhibition

At the dawn of the 1970s, Italy was entering a new phase of modernity: a convulsive, dramatic, painful, and violent modernity. Art experiences recurring cycles of history: in the aftermath of the Unification, the *Scapigliatura* felt the urgency of describing the feelings of the individuals, exploring the psychological aspects that appeared for the first time in national art.<sup>40</sup> More than a hundred years later, the *Arte Povera* and Informal Art were just as scathing as their Lombard precursors and focused even more on the relationship between art and psychology, in the light of the new social climate. The Italian Pavilion of the 1972 Venice Biennale, curated by Renato Barilli, investigated the expansion of the boundaries of art that through the work enters the daily dynamics of the individual.<sup>41</sup>

The 36<sup>th</sup> Biennale was made up of different events held in different venues: in Piazza San Marco the exhibition *Capolavori della Pittura della Prima Metà del XX Secolo* (Correr Museum) was set up; at the San Basso School, in Piazza dei Leoncini, there was the exhibition of the *Arti Decorative*; in the Doge's Palace there was exhibition dedicated to *La Scultura Nella Città*; and in Ca' Pesaro they organised an extensive exhibition of *Grafica Internazionale*. Lastly, there was the traditional exhibition at Giardini with the usual pavilions of the different countries and, in the central one, Carlo Scarpa mounted an exhibition of Italian sculpture of the post-war period with tributes to Lucio Fontana and Fausto Melotti. In addition, there was a section called *Venezia, Ieri, Oggi e Domani*, a section on *Progetti Sperimentali per la Pagina Stampata*, edited by Erberto Carboni, Leo Lionni and Albe Steiner; video tapes of Gerry Schum's German Gallery, and the exhibition *Libro come Luogo di Ricerca* was set up by Renato Barilli.<sup>42</sup>

The organisers of the Biennale, under the guidance of the new Deputy Commissioner for the Visual Arts Mario Penelope, made an even more serious

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<sup>40</sup> N. Lucarelli, *Il Padiglione Italia del 1972 a Prato*, in "Artribune", 25 May 2017; <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2017/05/mostra-padiglione-italia-1972-renato-barilli-centro-pecci-prato/> [last accessed 6 June 2021].

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> F. Menna, *XXXVI Biennale d'Arte di Venezia*, in "Il Mattino", 13 June 1972; <http://www.fondazionemenna.it/menna-digit/xxxvi-biennale-darte-di-venezias-13-6-1972> [last accessed 18 June 2021].

effort to renew the structure of the Venetian exhibition: the Italian pavilion, in fact, curated by Carlo Valsecchi, Francesco Arcangeli, Pietro Cascella, Quinto Ghermandi, Giuseppe Marchiori, Mario Penelope, and Mauro Reggiani, was focused on a general theme (chosen with the collaboration of Barilli), which was the contrast between *Work and Behaviour*.<sup>43</sup> The topic aimed to identify an important aspect of artistic research, divided between an orientation that did not want to give up the work of art painting, sculpture, and the common tendency to encroach towards the ways of behaviour as an aesthetic action. So, the rigid structure of the Biennale, based on the division into completely autonomous pavilions reserved for individual countries and, clearly showed the difficulty or even the impossibility of a radical reform of the event.<sup>44</sup> The Italian Commissioners invited those in charge of foreign pavilions to take the theme into account, but the result did not (and could not) meet expectations: very few accepted the invitation. The problem was precisely this: since it was not possible to change the old structure of the pavilions, which originated more from a diplomatic choice than from an historical-critical one, it could not be possible to seriously think about a structural reform.<sup>45</sup> So, the theme of *Work and Behaviour* focused on a dialectical contrast between two ways of making art today, and therefore should have insisted on the contemporaneity of this research, comparing artists of the same generation. On the other hand, the heterogeneity of the Italian commission affected the heterogeneity of the representation of Italian artists, ranging from Pompilio Mandelli, Ennio Morlotti, Mattia Moreni, Giulio Turcato, Giuseppe Guerreschi (the “Work” section) to Vasco Bendini, Gino De Dominicis, Luciano Fabro, Mario Merz, Germano Olivotto and Franco Vaccari (the “Behaviour” section).<sup>46</sup>

Francesco Arcangeli, as already mentioned above, was part of the group people that chose the main theme of the exhibition. He wrote that, for proposing the dichotomy between work and behaviour, he took inspiration, among other things, from the debate about “the death of art” and *Arte Povera* that raged all over Italy.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> F. Arcangeli, *Sezione Italia*, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Fondo storico, Series: Arti Visive, b.205, envelope 5.

According to him, it was still possible to entrust the “work”, which he identified as canvas, wood panel, flat rectangular surface, with everything the artist was, everything the artists thought, everything the artist aimed to. However, there was, according to him, another way of being of art that should be considered, which was the “behaviour”, not meant as “attitude”.<sup>48</sup> Arcangeli could not even explain what the “behaviour” area would include, since it was unpredictable by definition. The audience could only understand the aim of the artists once they had seen their projects. Nevertheless, what mattered to Arcangeli was that the art of the “behaviour” section was a call to freedom, a new human proposal.<sup>49</sup>

Diversely, the section entitled the *Libro Come Luogo di Ricerca* was more unified and demonstrative: the presence of artists of different nationalities and the strongly unified “place” of their intervention gave considerable intelligibility to the whole, highlighting one of the ways of overreach from the traditional work pursued by the artists.<sup>50</sup>

The exhibition about Italian sculpture was focused on the issue of the linguistic evolution of plasticity research in Italy in the post-war period: indeed, the transition from sculpture, understood in the traditional plastic sense, to an examination of ways of behaviour appeared quite eloquent, because the passage from one generation to the next was tracked with more punctuality and with greater attention to the decisive turns (represented by Piero Manzoni, Paolo Scheggi, Flavio Lo Savio, Pino Pascali, Eliseo Mattiacci) compared to the sequence that comprehended Ettore Colla, Pietro Consagra, Nino Franchina, Leoncillo, Carlo Lorenzetti, Edgardo Mangucci, Umberto Mastroianni, Giuseppe Milani, Pierluca, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Carlo Ramous, Giuseppe Spagnuolo, Valeriano Trubiani, Alberto Viani.<sup>51</sup>

In San Marco there was the exhibition *Capolavori della Pittura della Prima Metà del XX Secolo*, where the organization focused on prestigious names, such as James Ensor and Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, Marc Chagall, Egon Schiele, Chaïm Soutine, Amedeo

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> F. Menna, *XXXVI Biennale d'Arte di Venezia*, cit.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Modigliani; Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla, Joan Mirò and René Magritte, Max Ernst and Victor Brauner, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Severinovič Malevič, etc. However, the exhibition was not convincing: apart from certain absences (Duchamp, Dali), the design was basic and the choice of many artists and, above all, the works were quite casual.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, this edition of the Biennale was an attempt to renovate the exhibition to also keep up with other thematic shows appearing in other international exhibitions like documenta, which, in 1972, organised the thematic show *Inquiry into Reality* curated by Harald Szeemann. The theme proposed by the scientific committee of the time for the Biennale had the dual intent of giving a signal of rejuvenation after the heated protests of the 1968 edition, and that of recognizing and showing the dichotomy existing in the visual arts of the time between *Work* and *Behavior*.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, Lucy Lippard's book, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, brought out that the period between the second half of the 60s to the early 70s was the golden era for Conceptual Art, which can be contextualised in the phase of upheavals and protests of the late 60s. One of the main ideas of this kind of art was to question given categories in society and to criticise the commodification of the arts that took place in exhibitions like the Biennale.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, this was the context in which *Second Solution of Immortality* by Gino De Dominicis was exhibited at the Biennale and caused stir.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, in "Piano B. Arti E Culture Visive", vol. 1, n. 1, 16 December 2016, pp. 296-320, here p. 303; <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2531-9876/6518> [last accessed 18 June 2021].

<sup>54</sup> L. R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Objects from 1966 to 1972* (1973), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

## 1.2. Gino De Dominicis: the irreverent artist



Ill. 3: Gino De Dominicis, *L'artista e il suo doppio*, anni '80, mixed media on photo, 23, 5 x 36 cm coll. privata, Tezze di Arzignano;  
[https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2011/10/de-dominicis-niente-o-tutto/attachment/97\\_1/](https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2011/10/de-dominicis-niente-o-tutto/attachment/97_1/)  
[https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2011/10/de-dominicis-niente-o-tutto/attachment/97\\_1/](https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2011/10/de-dominicis-niente-o-tutto/attachment/97_1/)

Gino De Dominicis was born in Ancona, in one of the central regions of the Italian peninsula, in 1947. He exhibited his works for the first time in his native city in 1965. After a period of travel, he moved to Rome in 1969. In 1972 and 1978, he was invited to exhibit at the International Exhibition for Visual Arts in Venice. In 1980, he showed his works at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and, even in this case, he managed to have his personal space. In 1985, he won the International Prize of the Paris Biennial. In 1986, he organised an exhibition at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples. In 1989, he took part in the exhibition *Italian Art in the Twentieth Century* at the Royal Academy in London. In 1989, he realised a solo exhibition at the Murray and Isabella Rayburn Foundation in New York, and in 1990 he organised another huge solo exhibition at the Centre National d'Art

Contemporain in Grenoble, France. Over the years, he exhibited his works in various Italian galleries.<sup>55</sup> He died in Rome on November the 29<sup>th</sup>, 1998.<sup>56</sup>

Gino De Dominicis was a remarkable artist, in the sense of the highest level of his work, but also in the sense of his conscious “eccentricity” with respect to the art world. He was a controversial protagonist of Post-War Italian art, he used different techniques and identified himself as painter, sculptor, philosopher, and architect.<sup>57</sup> His work was independent of both fashions and groups of the neo-avant-garde. Thus, it cannot be framed in a precise artistic movement: neither in *Arte Povera*, nor in *Transavanguardia*, nor in Conceptual Art, which he strongly rejected by mocking it.<sup>58</sup> He always thought, practiced, and demonstrated the highest conception of the role of the artist. He has always supported - against everything and everyone, despite an often-weak art system - the absolute centrality of art. The artist absolutely believed in painting, and he thought that he had found a language that was the high expression of a deeply unitary work; he paid an extreme attention to every detail.<sup>59</sup>

De Dominicis' artistic research can be divided into two periods. The first, between the late Sixties and the end of the Seventies, in which the artist expressed himself mostly through installations and sculptures; the second between the early Eighties and 1998, the year of his death, in which De Dominicis resumed his activity as a figurative painter, dedicating himself almost exclusively to it.<sup>60</sup> The first phase was mainly focused on the artist's theories on the relationship between time and eternity expressed in the *Lettera sull'Immortalità del Corpo* published in 1970, the second by the installation *Seconda Soluzione d'Immortalità (L'Universo è Immobile)* exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1972.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> N.d., *Gino De Dominicis*, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

<sup>56</sup> Sognirossi, *Gino De Dominicis – Vita e opere*, in “traccedistudio.it”, 16 December 2015; <https://traccedistudio.it/4291/gino-de-dominicis-vita-e-opere.html> [last accessed 16 September 2021].

<sup>57</sup> A. Bellini, and L. Cherubini, *Special Issue on Gino De Dominicis*, published on the occasion of the exhibition in Villa Arson in Nice; Fondazione Merz, Turin; PS1- MoMa, New York 2007-2008, Giancarlo Politi, Milan 2007, here p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> L. Cherubini, *Gino De Dominicis*, in “Flash Art”, 16 May 2016; <https://flash---art.it/article/gino-de-dominicis/> [last accessed 6 June 2021].

<sup>60</sup> A. Bellini, L. Cherubini, *Special Issue on Gino De Dominicis*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> D. Meo, *Reality Art. L'epoca del Nichilismo rganizzato e la sua Arte*, Milan: Mimesis Edizioni, 2011, here pp. 98, 152.

Gino De Dominicis was known for his extreme gestures, for his inclination, refined over the years, to surpass the physical limits of the work of art up to the point of making them fade into the blurry aura of an enigmatic character who managed to arouse and, even more, attract a magnetic, interest. This was his main ability as an artist.<sup>62</sup> The philosophy of the artist from Ancona was ambiguous and complex: he played on ancestral dichotomies such as life-death, existence-non-existence, presence-absence, visible-invisible.<sup>63</sup>

### 1.3. Second Solution of Immortality: the work at the heart of the scandal



Ill. 4: Gino De Dominicis, *Seconda Soluzione di Immortalità (l'Universo è Immobile)*, 1972, photo taken by Gislind Nabakowski, Courtesy Lia Rumma, Napoli-Milano; <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/2020/12/opere-arte-censura/9/>.

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<sup>62</sup> E. Coen, *Fu il mago degli atti irriverenti*, in “Archivio - la Repubblica”, 12 July 1999; <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1999/07/12/fu-il-mago-degli-atti-irriverenti.html?ref=search>. [last accessed 6 June 2021].

<sup>63</sup> D. Landoni, *Quando Gino De Dominicis coinvolse un ragazzo Down in una sua opera*, in “ArtsLife”, 26 March 2020; <https://artslife.com/2020/03/26/quando-gino-de-dominicis-coinvolve-un-ragazzo-down-in-una-sua-opera/> [last accessed 7 June 2021].



In 1972, in the room dedicated to Gino De Dominicis exhibited three objects under the name of *Seconda Soluzione d'Immortalità (l'Universo è Immobile)*, which, from the very first moment, caused stir at the Venice Biennale.<sup>64</sup> These three works had already been exhibited in other occasions (all exhibited for the first time in the gallery L'Attico in Rome in 1969<sup>65</sup>) and they were named: *Cubo Invisibile* (1967), represented by a square drawn on the ground; the *Palla di Gomma (caduta da 2 metri) nell'Attimo Immediatamente Precedente al Rimbalzo* (1968) and *Attesa di un casuale movimento molecolare generale in una sola direzione, tale da generare un movimento spontaneo della pietra*.<sup>66</sup> However, the element that combined all the objects together and gave substance to the work – scandalising an indignant press and public opinion, leading to the closure of the room – was the Paolo Rosa, a young man with Down Syndrome, observing the three objects sitting on a chair in front of the spectators.<sup>67</sup> In the room there also were two young people dancing, while other individuals were holding a conference in front of two people sitting on chairs hanging five meters high. Moreover, the atmosphere was made haunting by the repetition of a chilling, sadistic laughter.<sup>68</sup>

Simone Carella, Gino De Dominicis' assistant, recalled that: “Gino considered the room a *summa*, not an arithmetic one, of the things he had done until then”.<sup>69</sup> And, again, he said:

On the roof there were skylights that had been obscured, the first thing Gino does is ask, imposing himself in the discussion, to remove the darkening from the skylights to have daylight, so begins the adventure with himself in that room. Natural light, the door that opens on the outside: the work had to be in contact with the universe. Then he asks me to look for a person who has to represent this second solution of immortality, a young man who has preserved the air of a child.<sup>70</sup>

According to the artist, immortality was possible by blocking time and this was the main issue behind other works by De Dominicis, such as the cat presented with

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> D. Paolanti, *Gino De Dominicis: la ricerca dell'immortalità*, in “Quotidiano Culturale L'Altro”, 20 October 2018; <https://dasandere.it/gino-de-dominicis-la-ricerca-dellimmortalita/>. [last accessed 23 July 2021].

<sup>66</sup> D. Landoni, *Quando Gino De Dominicis coinvolse un ragazzo Down in una sua opera*, cit.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> V. Cossato, “*Espose*” alla Biennale il mongoloide: assolto, in “Il Giorno”, 12 April 1973, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

<sup>69</sup> Translation of the author L. Cherubini, *Gino De Dominicis*, cit.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

a caption tag presented in 1970 with the name *Seconda Soluzione d'Immortalità* at the Galleria Toselli in Milan, or as *Cosa c'entra la Morte?* Beyond the subtle distinction between immortality and eternity, what was interesting to the artist was the fixity of the present moment, the perception of the moment.<sup>71</sup> In his opinion, immortality was the necessary condition for things to cease being mere verifications of possibilities and for really to begin existing, but this eternal condition cannot be realized within our receptive, mental, mnemonic, and cultural systems.<sup>72</sup> According to De Dominicis, our *forma mentis* is entirely addicted to the conception of the present, past, and future, to the idea of birth, life, and death that people are unable to think of a condition of immortality. Consequently, since only the eternal exists, without the idea of immortality it is not possible to come to the definition of existence. The truth, therefore, requires the rejection of precariousness, the falling, the transient, the human, and requires the transcendent effort to think outside ourselves.<sup>73</sup>

The person chosen for the installation, Paolo Rosa, embodied a solution of immortality going against gravity and against mortality. Indeed, on opposite sides of the room, on two seats placed very high, the figures of *Il Giovane* (played by Simone Carella himself) and *Il Vecchio*.<sup>74</sup> In Carella's words, the rubber ball, in the moment immediately preceding the bounce, was an artificial element, filled with air and alludes to an attempt to fly; the stone instead was a natural element linked to the earth waiting for a movement adhering to it and in addition to these objects, in front of Paolo Rosa, there was the Invisible Cube.<sup>75</sup> Apparently, the room was a “magical territory” where a circularity of the gaze reigns, so that, in the only surviving photograph of the artwork (later named *Foto Ricordo* by De Dominicis himself) taken by Gisliind Nabakowski, a woman appears in the act of forging a pair of glasses.<sup>76</sup> It is remarkable that the *Foto Ricordo* features a woman beholding the scene. Her presence indicates that a co-identification with the gaze of the young man affected by Down syndrome is conceivable. Such a co-

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<sup>71</sup> L. Cherubini, *Gino De Dominicis*, cit.

<sup>72</sup> D. Landoni, *Quando Gino De Dominicis coinvolse un ragazzo Down in una sua opera*, cit.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> L. Cherubini, *Gino De Dominicis*, cit.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

identification is key to preserving the multidimensional integrity of the three works on the floor.<sup>77</sup> The famous photo with the lady looking at the installation, as emphasised by Giuseppe Garrera during a meeting about the artist, “for De Dominicis reproduces the vulgarity, the presumption and often the dullness of the viewer. And this is a work that reflects the prejudices of the world.”<sup>78</sup> That was the world that called the guy on the chair “mongoloid”, “handicapped”, “subnormal”.<sup>79</sup> The room itself is built as an interior, a situation that cannot be communicated. “The Second Solution aspires to create a situation in which everything is and remains as it is”, wrote Gabriele Guercio, because this was the power that De Dominicis attributed to the visual arts over other languages.<sup>80</sup>

The artwork vindicates the notion that the shifting position of the stone is spontaneous, the ball is just about to bounce, the cube is invisible, and the young man is an ineffable subject (and object) of a perception overcoming the irreversibility of time and energy. At stake in *Second Solution* is the awareness of a perpetually still universe to which, until humanity achieves physical immortality, works of art can bear special witness.<sup>81</sup>

The role, far from being denigrating, of Paolo Rosa was to invite the viewer to identify with his point of view, in his way of thinking and, above all, of perceiving time. From the perspective of the work, Paolo Rosa would have been beyond the consciousness of time as a succession of past, present, and future, immersed in an eternal moment while watching the audience looking at him. Even the other objects on display, which he observed, participated in this general state of instantaneous and eternal immobility before movement.<sup>82</sup> The invisible cube expressed the extreme regression of the form: De Dominicis tried to eliminate every dimension giving life to a work, not perceptible to sight and touch. If the cube had the function of resetting the spatial dimension, the rubber ball instead froze time in the instant that separates the fall from the bounce, making the movement-not-movement

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<sup>77</sup> G. Guercio, *Repositories of the Unconditional: Gino De Dominicis' "Mirror" and the Work of Art as Model of Immortality*, Res: Anthropology and aesthetics, n. 55-56, 2009, pp.308-323, cit., p. 314.

<sup>78</sup> M. Bombagi, *Lo scandalo della Biennale '72, Giuseppe Garrera analizza Gino De Dominicis*, in “Contrappunti”, 11 September 2020; <https://www.contrappunti.info/novita/lo-scandalo-della-biennale-72-giuseppe-garrera-analizza-gino-de-dominicis/> [last accessed 8 June 2021].

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> L. Cherubini, *Gino De Dominicis*, cit.

<sup>81</sup> G. Guercio, *Repositories of the Unconditional: Gino De Dominicis' "Mirror" and the Work of Art as Model of Immortality*, cit. p. 315.

<sup>82</sup> D. Landoni, *Quando Gino De Dominicis Coinvolse un ragazzo Down in una sua Opera*, cit.

everlasting.<sup>83</sup> In the same way the stone summarised the impossible hope that something immobile will come to life, underlining the similarities between absence of movement and immortality. In this context, Paolo Rosa's function was to sublimate the chance of conceiving a totally different reality, unrelated to any sensitive approach, and aimed at immersing visitors in a dimension almost difficult to imagine.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps his reflection can be contextualized in the cultural climate of the 70s, strongly influenced by the definitive loss of trust in the idea of progress, and therefore seen as a conceptual hyperbole meant to free people from the obsession with linearity, superstition of the new, favouring a moment in continuous return, eternally present, purely immortal.<sup>85</sup>

Rosa's position was that of the living agent, observer, and guardian of the works in front of him: he looked at them and he looked at visitors, and he encouraged the viewers both to return his look and to look at what he was looking at.<sup>86</sup> The action of looking resolved itself into a nonreflective seeing in that it cannot be translated into a knowing. Looking at Rosa, one had the same indefinable experience that one tends to attribute to his mysterious gaze.<sup>87</sup> Seeing becomes synonymous of freeing the image and the viewer from the limitations produced by firm distinctions between seen and unseen, perception and conception, idea, and vision. Rosa matched with their inclination to exist now and forever because his deep gaze both implies and generates a nonreflective seeing that undoes chronological progression along with any assumption of a subjectivity tied to specific historical sequences and natural courses ruled by entropy alone.<sup>88</sup> Resistant to interferences, projections, and any arbitrary charges of meaning impacting from the outside, *Second Solution* aims at making everything stay as it is.<sup>89</sup> So, Gino De Dominicis worked on rhetorical tipping, displacing, breaking, and reconstructing the relationship between meaning, word, and image.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> G. Guercio, *Repositories of the Unconditional: Gino De Dominicis' "Mirror" and the Work of Art as Model of Immortality*, cit., p. 314.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, cit., p.309.

#### 1.4. The Reasons of the Scandal and its Repercussions

During the first day of the exhibition, the presence of Paolo Rosa, affected by Down's Syndrome, in a corner of room 26, attracted a lot of attention and violent criticism. After less than an hour, De Dominicis was obliged to replace the young man with a little girl and then to close the room.<sup>91</sup>



Ill. 5: Gino De Dominicis, *Seconda Soluzione d'Immortalità (l'Universo è Immobile)*, photographed by Giorgio Colombo, picture of the modified installation, taken on July the 9th, the after the opening; <http://www.arengario.it/tag/gino-de-dominicis/>.

The artist understood that *Second Solution* was perceived as “an offense to good taste” and not as an “idea [...] the denunciation of certain human conditions” according to his initial intentions.<sup>92</sup>

The debate immediately spread at every level, among journalists, intellectuals, critics, and politicians. There were also numerous lawsuits and telegrams of indignation at the performance of a “handicapped person” from private individuals, political groups, associations of “handicapped” etc., denouncing the artist for

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<sup>91</sup> E. Charans, *Work (and) Behaviour: Gino De Dominicis at the 36th Venice Biennale. A case study and a methodology*, edited by Bernadette Dufrene, Jérôme Glicenstein, Hermann, 2016, pp. 45-54, here p. 46

<sup>92</sup> D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, cit., p. 306.

“vilification of the human person and abuse of the incapacitated”.<sup>93</sup> The artist and his assistant, Simone Carella, were reported to the Public Prosecutor's Office for abduction of the incapacitated, and then acquitted in April 1973 because “the fact did not subsist”.<sup>94</sup>

After the opening, the Biennale received many protest letters from various associations and private citizens... They all condemned Gino De Dominicis' choice to exhibit Paolo Rosa as part of his installation. They found it disrespectful for the young man's dignity, they thought that the artist exploited a person incapable of defending himself, and that the justification of art to hide the offence of an individual's right was absurd.<sup>95</sup> The artist was considered morally responsible of contempt and abuse of incapacitated; his work was considered socially offensive and an inhuman instrumentalization. The *Gruppo Spontaneo per Handicappati* in Milan even asked for clarifications about the logic behind his installation; they wanted to understand the connection between the title of the work, the chattering laughter, and Paolo Rosa, and how the responsible authorities could authorise such a project.<sup>96</sup> Many parents of children like Mr. Rosa felt disappointed and offended by the installation proposed by the artist and wondered how the Biennale could accept it. However, Dr. Antonio Mavilla showed his support to the artist and to Mario Penelope, saying that people should see “its true, intimate, unmistakable ultra-human meaning of this truly 'deaf-blind and sneering' humanity in a truly impressive way and all the more so as unconsciously sneering!”.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, Mr. Eduardo Gabillone, who supported De Dominicis' choice too, wrote to the Direction of the Biennale to ask the artist to take Paolo Rosa's place in the installation, under certain conditions.<sup>98</sup>

On April the 12<sup>th</sup> 1973, the Italian newspapers discussed the scandalous event occurred the previous June again, because the day before, the magistrate (*pretore*)

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<sup>93</sup> N. Martino, *Contro l'ideologia del progresso*, in “Doppiozero”, 4 April 2016; <https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/contro-lideologia-del-progresso-tempo-spazio-e-immortalita-in-gino-de-dominicis> [last accessed 7 June 2021].

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Translation of the author N.d., *Letters of Protest and Consent about the Exposure of a Mongoloid*, June 1972, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Fondo storico, Series: Arti Visive, b.205, envelope 3.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

of the city of Venice, Dr. Fojadelli, decided to acquit De Dominicis and Carella because the facts did not represent crime.<sup>99</sup> The defendants were represented by the lawyers Arturo Sorgato, from Venice, and Fabrizio Lemme, from Rome. Paolo Rosa's parents, Alberto Rosa e Angela Zane, were plaintiffs and were represented by the lawyers Marco Leone Biondi e Gian Paolo Cappelletti. Defence raised the objection of inadmissibility of the proceeding, since someone should have been named a "curatore speciale" for Paolo Rosa to file the lawsuit.<sup>100</sup> After the lawyers' summations, the attorney pronounced his sentence acquitting the artist and his assistant from the accusation of a mentally incompetent person's abduction.<sup>101</sup> The lawsuit was presented in June by Rosa's parents, and the mother declared that De Dominicis met her son for the first time in a bar in Castello, then he showed up at their house saying that he needed Paolo for just an hour to shoot a film.<sup>102</sup> Angela said that the artist never mentioned exhibiting her son with a sign around his neck at the Venice Biennale.<sup>103</sup> The day of the opening of the Exhibition De Dominicis and Carella picked Paolo up, even though his mother was a bit reluctant, and when the young man came home two hours later his presence at the Biennale was already considered a scandal.<sup>104</sup> However, the artist and his assistant declared that, before exhibiting Paolo at the Biennale, they explained everything to his parents and asked their consent, which Alberto and Angela gave. So, this was strongly contrary to statement made by the woman, supported by one of Paolo's brothers.<sup>105</sup> During her interrogation, the woman could not help herself and said: "If I had known that he intended to exhibit it because he is subnormal, I would have killed him."<sup>106</sup> The brother added: "as soon as I knew what happened, I had the impulse to run in the

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<sup>99</sup> N.d., *Assolto il "pittore" che espose il mongoloide*, in "Gazzetta di Modena", 12 April 1973, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), mediateca, 12864.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> N.d., *Il mongoloide alla Biennale: assolto l'artista*, in "La Provincia", 12 April 1973, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), mediateca, 12864.

<sup>106</sup> Translation of the author N.d., *Accusa i giornali lo "scultore" che espose il mongoloide a Venezia*, in "La Notte", 12 April 1973, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), mediateca, 12864.

Biennale and give him his own thing.”<sup>107</sup> Paolo’s family also stated that from that unfortunate day the young man did not want to leave the house. He was frightened and upset by something that, probably, he did not fully understand but that affected him. Moreover, they added that De Dominicis and Carella were lying about the fact that they mentioned the Biennale.<sup>108</sup> During his interrogation, the artist said that he even said Paolo’s parents that, if they thought it could help the young man being quiet, they could even send a relative to take part to the representation. So, there was no reason to invite someone who could control what he was doing all the time, if he had some secrets to keep; he was not doing anything scandalous.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, the attorney pronounced his sentence and there was no trace of the long legal procedure that was prevented at the opening of the trial.<sup>110</sup> For his part, De Dominicis argued, speaking to the journalists that Paolo Rosa was not and was not meant to be the main object of his behaviourist artwork, because all the people were involved, even Carella himself. It was the press that shifted the focus on the young man, De Dominicis aim was just to visually exemplify the meaning of illness and death.<sup>111</sup>

Among the innumerable violent reactions, there were some that instead supported its legitimacy. The curator of the Italian pavilion, Renato Barilli, specified that the motives for the scandal were not to be researched on a moral level but on the aesthetic and media. As a work of conduct, the *Second Solution*, was not understandable to most of the visitors because it exceeded the size of the “surfaces” and was also susceptible to “the same problems as theatre or cinema, including that of the use of minors or abnormal people”.<sup>112</sup>

While clarifying the divergence of opinions, Alberto Boatto pronounced a critical and aesthetic judgment accepting the legitimacy of the operation:

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> O. Carruba, *Assolto l’artista che espose il mongoloide alla Biennale*, in “Gazzetta del Popolo”, 12 April 1973, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), mediateca, 12864.

<sup>109</sup> G. Marchesini, *Assolto (non costituisce reato) il giovane artista che espose un minorato alla Biennale di Venezia*, in “La Stampa”, 12 April 1973 Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), mediateca, 12864.

<sup>110</sup> O. Carruba, *Assolto l’artista che espose il mongoloide alla Biennale*, cit.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, cit., p. 307.



To immortality I put the present before, preferring the instant, [...] a fleeting eternity [...] to the indefinite horizontal monotony. Instead of the *unconsciousness and negative object* represented by the subnormal, I am thus forced on my part to intervene an active, aggressive but conscious figure: death, which is the timely adversary of ecstasy and the present. [...] linguistically, I believe that in allegory the lightning centrality of a single idea – in De Dominicis, for example, the old and the young suspended in the vacuum of the room with an immediately physical sense of vertigo and fall – to any addition of ideas or their aggregate.<sup>113</sup>

For its part, the Venetian institution had reacted innocently distancing itself by declaring that it was not aware of the contents of the works in the preliminary phases and in fact freeing itself from any responsibility both of legal and artistic nature.<sup>114</sup> Mario Penelope stated:

The Biennale cannot exercise prior censorship on the work of artists. None of the examiners has the duty to inform themselves and to know what will be exposed. The guests are given the right to present what they want [...] The artists to be invited to the Biennale are chosen on the basis of their actions and their previous artistic behaviour. [...] If I had known before, I could have intervened [...] if only by appealing to good taste. [...] I did not even have time to see the incriminated exposition. On the same morning of the paint at 11.00 a commissioner showed up in my office and informed me of what had happened. The Mongoloid had already been taken away and that day the entrance to the exhibition was free otherwise they could have indicted me for having exhibited a handicapped person for a fee.<sup>115</sup>

Despite his very short exposure, the *Seconda Soluzione d'Immortalità* is generally identified and linked with Paolo Rosa, due also to the attention given to the incident by very influential voices. In fact, work was harshly criticized by Pier Paolo Pasolini, while, in 1975, it was defended, at least in part, by Eugenio Montale in his speech during the award ceremony for the Nobel Prize at the Swedish Academy. De Dominicis artwork was also the focus of Gabriele Guercio's last brilliant and excellent essay, *L'arte non evolve. Gino De Dominicis' Still Universe*, is entirely dedicated.<sup>116</sup>

An article by Pier Paolo Pasolini, dated 25 June 1972, in the newspaper *Il Tempo* suggested that the act of De Dominicis was a product of Italian

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<sup>113</sup> Translation of the author D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, cit., p. 307.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, cit. p. 308.

<sup>115</sup> Translation of the author M. Penelope in E. Charans, *Gino De Dominicis, 2a Soluzione di Immortalità (L'Universo è Immobile)*, 2012, Scalpendi Editore, Milano.

<sup>116</sup> N. Martino, *Contro l'ideologia del progresso*, cit.

subculture.<sup>117</sup> Pasolini, trying to understand the roots of the artist's gesture, which he defined as the product of the “Italian subculture”, summarized the rotation of political and cultural positions during the previous decade:

A dozen years ago there was the neo-avant-garde movement in literary Italy. It was a movement that reacted to the “commitment” that had been fashionable the previous decade: it reacted to it in the name of a new kind of life and relationship with society. Misery was gone, but there was well-being [...]. The great “internal” revolution of capitalism, which began in the early 1960s – in which bourgeois civilization was renewed, designing a kind of palingenesis – had found its servants – usually fools and thugs – in the literates of the neo-avant-garde. (...) Then came '68: the student revolt overwhelmed and destroyed this neo-avant-garde (although it, with its cynicism, joined and became confused with the student movement.<sup>118</sup>

The resulting merger, according to Pasolini, also allowed a reprocessing of people and ideas: the former disengaged neo-avantgarde could pass through the ranks of the students, allowing the latter to take advantage of ready-made topics to be thrown against the commitment of the “old”. The result, according to Pasolini, was a generalised devaluation of every segment of Italian culture: all this was justified in the name of a historical act of revision of the values that provided for its zeroing. The idea of a work of art attributable to this context was therefore the result of a fusion between the concept of neo-avant-garde, and the idea of the student movement. For Pasolini this fusion was simply outrageous because it is incompatible from a dialectical point of view and at the same time possible only for the provocateur who was born without colour and without a flag, and for this reason could be welcomed anywhere and by anyone. Pasolini called into question De Dominicis only in the last paragraph:

The case of De Dominicis is the typical product of such monstrous confusion: indeed, it can be considered a metaphor. He mixes the provocation of the neo-avant-garde -the "pop art" brought to the extreme consequences, etc.- and the neo-Marxist provocation of the groups, the wishful and verbal denunciation brought equally to the extreme consequences. The subnormal boy he exhibited is the living symbol of the idea of the work of art that at this moment determines the judgments of the Italian cultural (subcultural) world.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> P. P. Pasolini, *Il mongoloide alla Biennale e il prodotto della sottocultura italiana*, in “Il Tempo”, Milan, 25 giugno 1972.

<sup>118</sup> Translation of the author P. P. Pasolini, *Il mongoloide alla Biennale e il prodotto della sottocultura italiana*, cit.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

To understand what Pasolini meant with “subculture” one must, first consider that the industrialization brought to an increasing the number of workers and those employed in the tertiary sector, while the number of people that remained in the countryside was decreasing.<sup>120</sup> Other “misfits” were conceived - in addition to those who have left - among those who have remained. So, the “poorest of the poor” - orphans, children of unhappy families, etc. - coming from an already upsetting existence, which were previously considered, according to the writer, creatively popular “models of models”, became the “models of models” of a crisis in which the poorest people - an underclass that was no longer such – came into contact with the bourgeois culture (that is, the subculture).<sup>121</sup> Moreover, according to Pasolini it is only after the mid-60s that the first phase of the cultural and anthropological crisis begins that will lead to the “triumph of the unreality of the mass media subculture”, a subculture that in the 70s will establish itself as the dominant culture.<sup>122</sup>

In 1975, three years after the Exhibition, the event was even mentioned by the poet Eugenio Montale, in his lecture during the Nobel Prize’s award ceremony entitled *Is Poetry still Possible?*.<sup>123</sup> If the “media” scandal of the Biennale was due to the presence of Paolo Rosa, the most authentic scandal consisted of the deep conviction that moved De Dominicis along his path. Returning to the *Seconda Soluzione d’Immortalità*, Guercio quite justifiably pointed out that Paolo Rosa was not there to *épater le bourgeois* as a person that suffers from Down’s syndrome. In fact, the work had nothing to do with the syndrome, it was about a way of being in the world, as De Dominicis believed, about a state of being not linked to the progressive passage of time, and away from the modern and progressive conception of time, and therefore also beyond death.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> S. Squadrito, *Omologazione della cultura e morte della bellezza all’indomani del boom economico: Pier Paolo Pasolini tra cultura popolare e Michail Bachtin*, 10 October 2017, pp. 1 – 13, here p. 4; <https://www.kabulmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/KABUL-magazine-PASOLINI-DISTOPICO.pdf>. [last accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>121</sup> P. P. Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari di Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 1st edition, 1975, Milano: Garzanti, here p. 82.

<sup>122</sup> S. Squadrito, *Omologazione della cultura e morte della bellezza all’indomani del boom economico: Pier Paolo Pasolini tra cultura popolare e Michail Bachtin*, cit. p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> E. Charans, *Work (and) Behaviour: Gino De Dominicis at the 36th Venice Biennale. A Case Study and a Methodology*, cit. p. 46

<sup>124</sup> N. Martino, *Contro l’ideologia del progresso*, cit.

Montale, in his speech for the acceptance of the Nobel Prize, used these words:

At the great exhibition in Venice years ago the portrait of a mongoloid was displayed: the subject was *tres dégoûtant*, but why not? Art can justify everything. Except that upon approaching it, one discovered that it was not a portrait but the unfortunate man himself, in flesh and blood. The experiment was then interrupted by force, but in a strictly theoretical context it was completely justified. For many years art critics with university chairs had preached the absolute necessity of the death of art, waiting for who knows what palingenesis or resurrection, of which there was no sign. What conclusion can be drawn from all this? Evidently the arts, all the visual arts, are becoming more democratic in the worst sense of the word. Art is the production of objects for consumption, to be used and discarded while waiting for a new world in which man will have succeeded in freeing himself of everything, even of his own consciousness. The example I cite could be extended to the exclusively noisy and undifferentiated music listened to in those places where millions of young people gather to exorcize the horror of their solitude. But why more than ever has civilized man reached the point of feeling horror even of himself? <sup>125</sup>

This meditation was based on the modalities of some aesthetic trends that Montale, then almost eighty years old, faced. These were phenomena that emerged due to the development of mass communications and that had the power to annihilate the possibility of solitude and reflection in favour of a new art that placed all the emphasis on entertainment and performance, inevitably linked to the capitalistic logic.<sup>126</sup> From a solipsistic use of art, the focus switched to an open consumption: and what could be more receptive than the multisensory installation such as that made by De Dominicis for the 36<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, which combined image and sound? Or again: that managed to become a set-up whose elements changed in front the eyes of the visitors - such as the tag with title that the artist moved from Rosa's chest to his feet - as if it was a work still in progress?<sup>127</sup> Turning back to the Stockholm speech, Montale believed that, in the mid-1970s, with the growth of the civilization of well-being, the arts tended more and more to lose their distinctiveness, to become more and more confused. Since it was not possible to try to replicate the truth, the only way was to present it openly. Montale, therefore, seemed to link the motivations of De Dominicis' gesture with the emerging

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<sup>125</sup> E. Montale, *Is Poetry Still Possible?*, Nobel Lecture, 12 December 1975; [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1975/montale-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1975/montale-lecture.html) [last accessed 7 June 2021].

<sup>126</sup> E. Charans in *Segnalazione Editoriale*. Gino De Dominicis. 2° SOLUZIONE DI IMMORTALITÀ (*l'universo è immobile*) di Eleonora Charans, Ed. Scalpendi, in "Senzacornice (rivista onlide di arte contemporanea e critica)", n. 6, March/April 2013, cit. p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

consumerist society, in which man easily frees himself from both objects and morals, dehumanizing himself.<sup>128</sup>

Therefore, from an excerpt of Eleonora Charan's book *Gino De Dominicis. 2° SOLUZIONE DI IMMORTALITÀ (l'Universo è Immobile)*, it has emerged that the positions of Montale and Pasolini were quite convergent: De Dominicis' work, although the attention was always turned to the inclusion of Rosa and the project lost sight of its entirety, was interpreted by Montale as the paradigm of a degraded democratization. Artworks began to be seen as products of consumption. On the other hand, Pasolini saw it as an aggressive annihilation of the values and interpretative networks of the "old", a counterproposal that did not carry any proposal, a challenge to an institution -the Venice Biennale- which had reached its thirty-sixth meeting.<sup>129</sup>

This how Gino De Dominicis reacted to criticisms:

I'm sorry, and even outraged [...] not only by the press campaign that grew around the episode, but also that the performance of a person who was supposed to be only one element among many has been exploited by the press and by many other people who could not see with their own eyes whether the show could be in some way offensive to those exposed and in particular for the person in question, while the idea of the show was none other than a reflection on certain human conditions such as old age, the deterioration of the body, illness, and death [...]. As soon as I found that my work was given an interpretation that I do not hesitate to call false, about twenty minutes after, I withdrew him from the show [...].<sup>130</sup>

The rehabilitation of *Second Solution of Immortality* began almost immediately, sheltered from the direct involvement of Paolo Rosa, with the photograph with the little girl that replaced the young man. Although today *Second Solution to Immortality* is also recognised as one of the most significant artworks by Gino De Dominicis, who made immortality one of the privileged images of his poetics, the memory of the gesture remained lit for decades in public opinion.<sup>131</sup>

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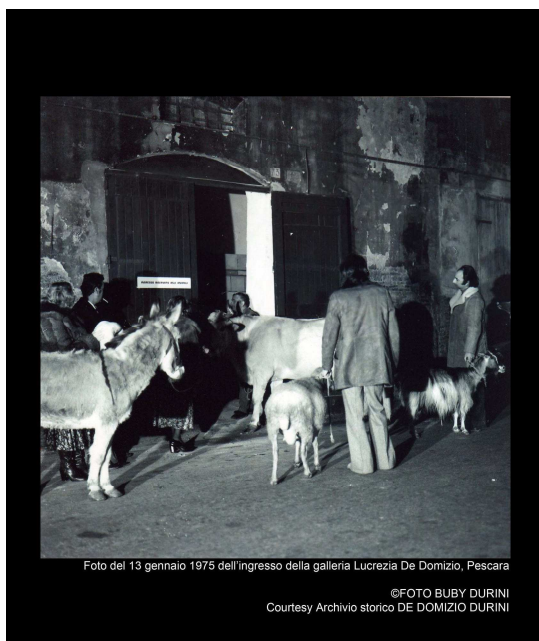
<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., cit. p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> E. Charans, "Work (and) Behaviour: Gino De Dominicis at the 36th Venice Biennale. A Case Study and a Methodology", cit., p. 47.

<sup>131</sup> D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, cit., pp. 308-309.

On Monday January the 13<sup>th</sup> 1975, in Pescara, there was his first exhibition after the scandal of the Biennale.<sup>132</sup> The presence of reporters was justified, since it was about Gino De Dominicis, and even this time he was true to himself.<sup>133</sup> He sent an invitation with the sentence “Quando non si parla più dell’immortalità dell’anima” (When no one talks about immortality of the soul anymore), a specific warning: “Ingresso riservato agli animali” (entrance reserved only for animals), and the opening time of the exhibition, which was fixed at 23.00.<sup>134</sup> However, when the audience arrived at the location the artist was not there, the only sign was a note that announced that “per ragioni tecniche la mostra si è svolta dalle 18.00 alle 20.00” (for technical reasons the exhibition took place from 18.00 to 20.00). Nevertheless, the women arriving with their furs and people arriving with Land Rovers, identified as protagonists of pornographic *fotoromanzi*, offered a good entertainment, and food for thought. The reporters saw people looking out of the windows of their crumbling houses, and this was an example of the dramatic contrast that characterised their modern society; it could make people reflect on the negative aspects of the consumerist society.<sup>135</sup>



Ill. 6: photo of the entrance of Lucrezia De Domizio Gallery, Pescara 1975, photo by Buby Durini, black and white photography in artist's frame, cm 129x104 (photo), cm 175x150x12 (frame), courtesy Archivio Storico De Domizio Durini; <https://www.blindarte.com/Home/CatalogLot/14999>.

<sup>132</sup> N.d., *Esposne a Pescara l'artista del mongoloide*, in “Il Tempo”, 13 January 1975, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

<sup>133</sup> N.d., *Mostra-beffa alla Jet society*, in “Il Messaggero”, 16 January 1975, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

<sup>134</sup> N.d., *Esposne a Pescara l'artista del mongoloide*, cit.

<sup>135</sup> N.d., *Mostra-beffa alla Jet society*, cit.

The Italian “subcultural” world, as Pasolini used to call it, responded, six years after the 1972 Biennale, with a film transposition of the scandal.<sup>136</sup> The scene in question is included in the famous episode *Le Vacanze Intelligentsia*, within the movie *Dove Vai in Vacanza?* (1978).<sup>137</sup> In the episode, the spouses Alberto Sordi, and Anna Longhi visit the Venice Biennale, under suggestion of their progressive children close to graduation. Tired from the long walk inside the Central Pavilion, Augusta (Anna Longhi) sits down as her husband walks away to look for some food. The woman is thus mistaken for living or hyperrealist sculpture and photographed by visitors; the husband returns and takes away his wife, being amused, astonished, and slightly irritated.<sup>138</sup>

Once the clamour of the scandal was gone, De Dominicis was invited again to the Biennale in 1978, which was the edition took up Sordi in the film, and his work was presented within the section *Six Stations for Artenatura* curated by Jean Christophe Ammann, Achille Bonito Oliva, Antonio Del Guercio and Filiberto Menna. De Dominicis exhibited *Il tempo lo sbaglio lo spazio*, a sculpture from 1969-70 that included a human skeleton with skates holding the skeleton of a dog on a leash. The work was exhibited in the same hall the artist used in 1972, it was placed near the desk behind which the disputed symbols were drawn.<sup>139</sup>



Ill. 7: Gino De Dominicis, *Il Tempo, lo Sbaglio, lo Spazio*, 1969, human skeleton, dog skeleton, leash, roller skates, variable size;

<https://www.farsettiarte.it/it/asta-0172-1/claudio-abate-gino-de-dominicis-il-tempo-lo-.asp>.

<sup>136</sup> E. Charans in *Segnalazione Editoriale. Gino De Dominicis. 2° SOLUZIONE DI IMMORTALITÀ (l'universo è immobile)* di Eleonora Charans, Ed. Scalpendi, cit. pp. 3-4.

<sup>137</sup> M. Bolognini, L. Salce, A. Sordi, *Dove Vai in Vacanza?*, 1978, Rome, Italy: Rizzoli Film – Cineriz.

<sup>138</sup> E. Charans in *Segnalazione Editoriale. Gino De Dominicis. 2° SOLUZIONE DI IMMORTALITÀ (l'universo è immobile)* di Eleonora Charans, Ed. Scalpendi, cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, cit., p. 4.

Six years later, the artist re-presented the same sculpture, adding a rod whose sharp end anchors a phalanx of the middle finger of the human skeleton to the ground. According to the catalogue, there were some takes that showed Sordi looking down and with an attitude of grief while observing the skeleton sculpture of De Dominicis. The artist, however, did not like that his work was included in the film the frames were not distributed. This tells us how much the artist was worried about the control of the reproduction of his works, whether they were fixed or moving.<sup>140</sup>



Ill. 8: Gino De Dominicis, *Il Tempo, lo Sbaglio, lo Spazio*, 1969, human skeleton, dog skeleton, leash, roller skates, painted metal spear, variable size, Lia Rumma Collection; [http://www.retidededalus.it/Archivi/2010/dicembre/SPAZIO\\_LIBERO/5\\_dedominicis.htm](http://www.retidededalus.it/Archivi/2010/dicembre/SPAZIO_LIBERO/5_dedominicis.htm).

In 1980, De Dominicis exhibited, in a solo-show, figures related to immortality, which, as already mentioned, was a recurrent theme in his works. Among the different projects collected by the artist there was also a photo of the installation for the 1972 Biennale.<sup>141</sup> Writing about this exhibition, Gianbattista Salerno made a comparison between De Dominicis and Jorge Luis Borges. The latter, in his short story *L'Immortale* refuted the doubt that the posthumous manuscript of an immortal was apocryphal.<sup>142</sup> The key to this short story is in this

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> J. L. Borges, *L'Immortale*, in G. Salerno, *Nella stanza vuota dell'arte, i fantasmi di Borges*, in "Il Manifesto", 10 June 1980, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.



two sentences: “essi sapevano che in un tempo infinito ad ogni uomo accadono tutte le cose”, and “esiste un fiume le cui acque danno l’immortalità; in qualche regione vi sarà un altro fiume, le cui acque la tolgono.”<sup>143</sup> Borges came to the conclusion that:

If everything happens to the inhabitant of an infinite time with infinite circumstances and changes, death is also included. Thus, the contradiction in terms is not the posthumous manuscript of an immortal, but to speak of optical illusions in relation to writing. When the end approaches, no more images of the memory remain; only words remain... uprooted and mutilated words, words of others.<sup>144</sup>

However, as Salerno specified in his article, the problem with art is always seeing. So, the journalist argued that De Dominicis projects must be seen as the manuscript in Borges’ short story, so as a posthumous work. If the latter does not appear as an *opera omnia*, it is because of the optical illusion, due to the fact that a variable and substantial part of the work lies beyond the visual horizon of the people subject to time that observe it. The photograph of the woman that lowered her glasses on her nose to see Paolo Rosa is an example of this difficult glance.<sup>145</sup> Borges wrote these words about looking at an immortal person named Argo:

Pensai che Argo ed io facevamo parte di universi differenti; pensai che le nostre percezioni erano uguali, ma che Argo le combinava diversamente e costruiva con esse altri oggetti, ma un vertiginoso e continuo gioco di impressioni brevissime. Pensai a un mondo senza memoria, senza tempo.<sup>146</sup>

And that was probably how the lady felt too, looking at the young man sitting on a chair for De Dominicis installation.<sup>147</sup>

In 1996, Franco Fanelli asked him in an interview for “L’Espresso”:

FF: [...] which is the thread that binds De Dominicis, who is confirmed today as a refined designer, to the sitting mongoloid on display at the Biennale of 1972?  
GDD: [...] I’ve never exposed a mongoloid. Instead, I created a work entitled *Second Solution of Immortality: the Universe is Still* composed of some works that were placed in front of Mr. Paolo Rosa (vulgarly called by everyone called “the Mongoloid”: it would be like calling “the short-sighted”, instead of using his name, a person who wears glasses) who observed them from his unique and particular point of view inside the work itself and opposite to that of the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Translation of the author J. L. Borges, *L’Immortale*, in G. Salerno, *Nella stanza vuota dell’arte, i fantasmi di Borges*, cit.: I thought that Argo and I were part of different universes; I thought that our perceptions were the same, but that Argo combined them differently and built other objects with them; I thought that for him there were no objects, but a dizzying and continuous game of very short impressions. I thought of a world without memory, without time

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

spectators. An excessive scandal for just two points of view! Then, the thread that binds my works together is myself.<sup>148</sup>

De Dominicis thus referred to the viewers and their “short-sighted” or “distracted” gaze as the reason for the scandal, and he continued to defend his choices and specifying that the presence of Paolo Rosa “created an interest... different from the one I wanted” i.e., an exhibition on some “human conditions, such as old age, deterioration of the body, disease, death”.<sup>149</sup> Walter Benjamin used the term “distracted gaze” too; according to him, reproduction spread the image to the masses, who absorbed it in a distracted manner, just as one of several images. The writer observed that the masses had come to favour a false reality to the real one. He argued that the predilection for images over reality came from the distracted way people in modern societies take in their world. Reproduction has created a new awareness, the need “to pry an object from its shell,” which is the mark of a perception that sees “the universal equality of things.”<sup>150</sup> “For Benjamin, distraction was the ability to register stimuli, to think and to act; for the psychologists, it was the refusal or resistance to do so.”<sup>151</sup> So,

Benjamin defines distraction by contrasting it with the immersion of traditional aesthetic contemplation; he sees the latter as passive and the former, in its dispersal of attention, characteristic of the cognitive state of the competent, experienced practitioner of a trade or profession. It is, in its lack of a fixed and fixing focus, “relaxed”.<sup>152</sup>

At the end of May 2010, MAXXI Museum in Rome presented a retrospective of Gino De Dominicis, entitled *L'immortale (The Immortal)* curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. The curator chose to install the monumental skeleton named *Calamita Cosmica (Cosmic Magnet)*, made by the artist at the end of the '80s, in front of the entrance of the segmented building designed by Zaha Hadid. The title of the show and the selection of the *Cosmic Magnet* were deliberate choices and demonstrated a remarkable insight into De Dominicis' production. “In fact, the

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<sup>148</sup> Translation of the author D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, cit., p. 309.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> R. Prouty, *The Distracted Gaze*, in “One-Way Street”, 15 October 2009; <https://onewaystreet495460999.com/2009/10/15/the-distracted-gaze/>. [last accessed 29 July 2021].

<sup>151</sup> F. J. Schwartz, *The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant Garde*, in “Art History”, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2011, pp. 401-444, here p. 421.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., cit. p. 420.

theme of the immortality of the body is a crucial theme in the artist's work, a *fil rouge* running through his output, ranging from video to sculpture, and from installations to drawings and paintings.”<sup>153</sup>

Fabio Sargentini, owner of the gallery L'Attico in Rome, wrote in a text that the ghost of Paolo Rosa haunted Gino De Dominicis for the rest of his artistic career, and an artwork De Dominicis realised twenty years after the Biennale scandal is the validation of this statement. It was a self-portrait named *Gino De Dominicis in Venice 1972*, today part of the Luigi Koelliker Collection in Milan. The painting has a neutral background showing a monstrous profile with the eye closed, but the mouth opened showing the teeth. The subject is a suffering, rather than an aggressive, or dangerous figure. “That event made the artist more vulnerable to the reception of his art and stimulated a neurotic impulse to control reproductions of his artworks in exhibition catalogues or art magazines.”<sup>154</sup>



Ill. 9: Gino De Dominicis, *Gino De Dominicis a Venezia 1972*, 1992, mixed techniques on glass, 42x37 cm, Coll. Luigi Koelliker (Milano), cat. rag. n. 430; <https://www.slideshare.net/aidi1984/sgino-de-dominicis-alla-biennale-del-1972>.

In 2011, Italo Tomassoni, art critic and close friend of the artist who founded the Archivio Gino De Dominicis, issued a catalogue raisonné<sup>155</sup> with more than sixty hundred works. The largest part was dedicated to the *Second Solution of*

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<sup>153</sup> E. Charans, *Work (and) Behaviour: Gino De Dominicis at the 36th Venice Biennale. A Case Study and a Methodology*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>155</sup> I. Tomassoni, *Gino De Dominicis*, catalogo ragionato delle opere, Milan, Italy: Skira, 2011, pp. 576.

*Immortality (the Universe is Motionless)* presented at the Venice Biennale in 1972.<sup>156</sup>

Forty years later, the episode was still a subject of interest in the UK: Claire Bishop, wrote about it in a paragraph entitled *Artists as Torturer*<sup>157</sup>. It was probably because New York's Wrong Gallery, led by Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, and Ali Subotnick, proposed the episode in London introducing a change by modifying the sex of the seated performer, presenting a female affected with that syndrome. The re-enactment highlighted once more the posthumous fortune of the *Second Solution of Immortality*.<sup>158</sup>

On September the 9<sup>th</sup> 2020 at Macro, the museum of contemporary art in Rome, the historian, musicologist, and collector Giuseppe Garrera analysed that episode of the art history, chronicle, customs, and culture with a timely and appealing story.<sup>159</sup> According to him, the installation was deep idea reduced to gossip by a naïve narrative. The scandalous aspect obscured the many meanings of the work: like the concept of time that, according to De Dominicis, had to be defeated to neutralize death. This idea was expressed by the rubber ball in front of Paolo Rosa, which was waiting to bounce in the moment when the universe is motionless. The immortality of the body is, for the artist, just as important as that of the soul.<sup>160</sup> And then there was the laughter that welcomed the visitors, the sneer of those who mock time and death, of those who have conquered eternity. All that was left of the participation of De Dominicis at the Biennale of '72, however, was “the exposed handicapped”, considered a monster to be hidden from view. Undeserving even to be defined with respect, with dignity. “The triumph of ‘Second Solution of Immortality’ is perhaps precisely this: to have exposed the inhumanity of the world. The hypocrisy of that goodness unable to love.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup>E. Charans, *Work (and) Behaviour: Gino De Dominicis at the 36th Venice Biennale A Case Study and a Methodology*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>157</sup> C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso Publisher, 2012, pp. 382.

<sup>158</sup> E. Charans, *Work (and) Behaviour: Gino De Dominicis at the 36th Venice Biennale. A Case Study and a Methodology*, cit. pp. 48-49.

<sup>159</sup> M. Bombagi, *Lo scandalo della Biennale '72, Giuseppe Garrera analizza Gino De Dominicis*, cit.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

Consequently, this episode allows to see a shift in common perception of everyday life and its assumption as public matter. The historical distance may make the level of debate that aroused then seem almost inexplicable today. This is evidence of the change in sensitivity of the spectator and in the artistic institutions, at the time really shaken by disruptive revealing interventions, while not affecting the sphere of conventional taboos, such as blasphemy or pornography.<sup>162</sup> This artwork was retrospectively recognized as cardinal point in the path of Gino De Dominicis' career. In the 1970s, the everyday object was already established as a fundamental part of the artistic landscape. New criteria for reading artworks had been defined, and the artwork should be considered in its autonomous statute, in a renewed connection between artist, image and viewer. Nevertheless, the public, critics and institutions of the time did not recognize the iconic gesture of De Dominicis, but they caused exclusion and, in fact, censorship.<sup>163</sup>

We cannot ignore the rift generated, the reaction of the institutions, the public, and the exclusion. So why was the installation censored? Censorship is a labile concept, based on taboos characteristic of certain historical, social, and cultural contexts, defined and circumscribed.<sup>164</sup> However, certain expressions are acceptable within the artistic or entertainment context. On the other hand, this is a field whose boundaries are still well defined and conceptual with respect to ordinary life, even though the lesson of the last century was to bring them down.<sup>165</sup> A premise could then be to shift the focus from the work and to the gaze, and from the gaze to the general context, or to make a distinction between presenting or representing reality, and how the latter is perceived within the poetic-visual context: to concentrate on the capability to understand marginal aspects of everyday life within the artistic environment.<sup>166</sup> Analysing De Dominicis' case, it can be noted that the controversy takes place with the encounter between the work and the viewers, when minor issues of everyday life are presented without formal intermediary between sight and object, even within a specific context. Perhaps,

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<sup>162</sup> D. Voso, *Arte, marginalità del quotidiano, censura. I casi di Hans Haacke e Gino De Dominicis*, cit., pp. 297-298.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, cit. p. 310.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

through the physicality of Down syndrome, De Dominicis wanted to highlight a sense of unexpressed embarrassment about something that had to remain in the private at the time?<sup>167</sup> If the image of a freak, not to say “the different” or “handicapped”, can be accepted, but his/her presence cannot, how can the parameters of censorship be identified in the artistic field?<sup>168</sup> If there is, indeed, no place or time when censorship never occurred, why was the installation with a disabled person prohibited and but his photographic image was not? De Dominicis' project was an artwork that was not accepted as such, since the focus was only on a single element.<sup>169</sup> De Dominicis' exclusion was encouraged by the press and the public, because the installation clashed with their competence to read the evoked image.<sup>170</sup> Admitting that the honest presentation of the object made the scandal and the following exclusion arise, because it lacked the comfort of a formal *medium*, the appreciation of a work or its plausible potential would then be, even in cases of censorship, firmly related to the structures of interpretation of the reader, to which all “the responsibility of his contextualizing choices”<sup>171</sup> would be referred. The characteristics that De Dominicis elevated to icons were perhaps still too marginal at the time within the daily discussions; as already said disabilities were something that had to remain private.<sup>172</sup>

In conclusion, the fact that Gino De Dominicis decided to exhibit a young man with the Down Syndrome as an aesthetical object did not represent a crime. However, there was a harsh debate between the people that supported the artist's decision and the ones that did not. The first group saw in the installation an act of protest against a cynic, and lazy society that defended people like Paolo Rosa just in words. However, De Dominicis' installation was more a “behaviour” than an artwork, an aesthetic behaviour. In fact, the theme of the Exhibition was *Work or Behaviour?* and with the interrogative form they probably wanted to underline that the contemporary artistic production tended to expand the concept of artwork. Indeed, the organisers did not specifically talk about artwork but only about work.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., cit. pp. 311-312.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., cit. p. 312

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., cit. pp. 312-313

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. cit. p. 313.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., cit., p. 314.

At the time, many of the projects made different artists could be configured as behaviour; the behaviour they produced, however, was not behaviour as synonym of attitude or conduct, rather it was a more autonomous, self-sufficient, behaviour, so aesthetic.<sup>173</sup>

Perhaps, during the 36<sup>th</sup> edition of the International Art Exhibition in Venice a new word was born: l'*indignarte*, which was more provocative than the predictable *irritarte*. In the second day of *vernissage*, l'*indignarte* has caused the wrath of critics, painters, gallerists...and the person to whom the merit belonged was namely Gino De Dominicis.<sup>174</sup>

After the De Dominicis' and Carella's acquittal, the "body art", which is the art of using one's own body or someone else's body as object and living subject of sculptures and paintings, was everywhere. Since this phenomenon benefited from the approval of the experts, the passive subjects of culturalization had educated themselves about that new artistic trend. The first question that arose was: were those artworks tradable? It was difficult to imagine a person with the sign "sold" around the neck. Then, where could those works be hung? Moreover, it could be a problem for collectors, since people, to live, need to eat. So, this kind of art did not fully convince the passive subjects of culturalization.<sup>175</sup>

Lastly, what must be highlighted of this chapter is the fact that the Biennale had to accept the decision of the police commissioner to bring Paolo Rosa back home and temporally close the room, which demonstrates that the Biennale institution is not as autonomous from politics and neutral as it claims to be. This is an issue that all the three examples I decided to analyse have in common.

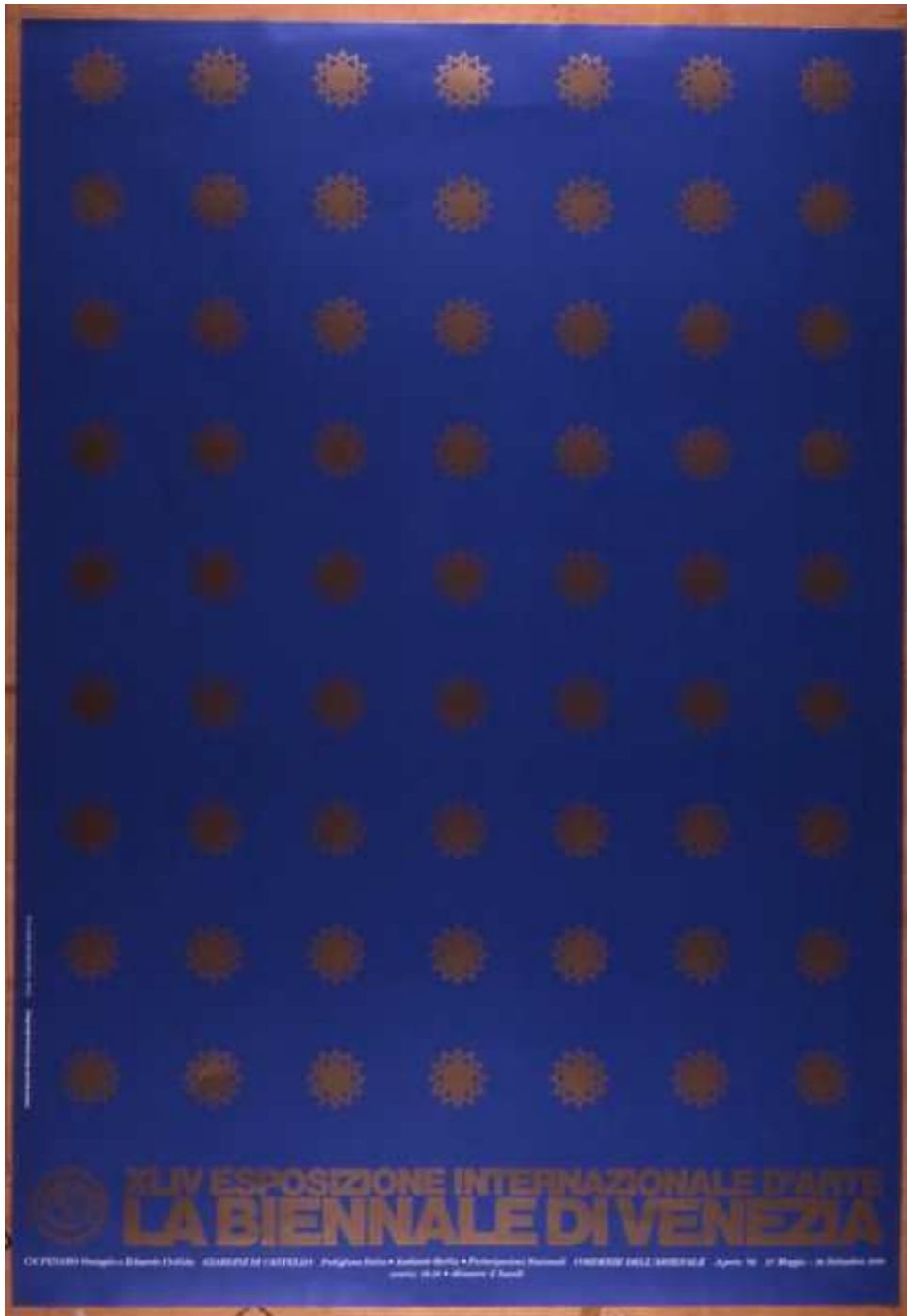
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<sup>173</sup> A. M. Cacciavillani, *L'arte come fatto estetico*, in "Tempo Libero", June 1973, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

<sup>174</sup> N. Aspesi, *Biennale: vernice in clima polemico*, in "Il Giorno", 9 June 1972, n. 134, p. 9, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

<sup>175</sup> Pollicino, *Intendere l'arte: ovvero l'arte di darla a intendere*, in "Marc' Aurelio", 18 May 1973, Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Mediateca, 12864.

## 2. The Pope and The Penis, Gran Fury (1999)



Ill. 10: Giorgio Zucchiatti, *Poster of 44th International Arts Exhibition: Dimensione Futuro - L'artista e lo Spazio*, digital format, original size 3412x4843;  
<http://asac.labiennale.org/it/documenti/fototeca/ava-ricerca.php?scheda=38389&p=1>.



## 2.1. The 44th Biennale: the edition of activism and political art

The Venice Biennale in 1990, directed by Giovanni Carandente, was entitled *Dimensione Futuro*.<sup>176</sup> At the beginning of the path, there was the exhibition *plurimi* with Emilio Vedova's 1964 *Absurder Tagebuch* cycle. While a tribute to Eduardo Chillida, a Spanish sculptor who was awarded with the Grand Prix for Sculpture in 1958, was set up in Ca' Pesaro. Achille Bonito Oliva organised a special exhibition at Giudecca, called *Ubi Fluxus Ibi Motus*.<sup>177</sup> Robert Rauschenberg, representative of the Pop Art in 1964, who exhibited his own project in the Soviet pavilion, stirred much curiosity. The works of the section *Aperto* in Corderie arouse much interest too, but also controversy.<sup>178</sup> Church leaders complained about the work on HIV, *The Pope and the Penis*, by the American group Gran Fury, while environmentalists protested against a work with living ants, which was *The World Flag Ant Farm Project* by Yanagi Yukinori. The exhibition was closed for health investigations after the formalin used for storage came out from the plexiglass container where the carcass of a cow that Damien Hirst was cutting was preserved.<sup>179</sup> There was also a life-size polychrome sculpture, where Jeff Koons was represented with his wife Ilona Staller. The Golden Lion for sculpture went to the photographs couple of industrial archaeology Bernd and Hilla Becher, thanks to the plasticity of their shots, and to the impressive installation by the artist Reinhard Mucha (1950), that was rich in associations and symbolism.<sup>180</sup> The marbles of Giovanni Anselmo, a widely admired Italian artist, were described as “pallid blocks of granite affixed to canvases nonetheless would seem to qualify him for the sculpture award”,<sup>181</sup> and were awarded for painting.<sup>182</sup> The American pavilion was the one that found the most success, since the first day, and that was identified as the most promising, in

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<sup>176</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Storia della Biennale Arte*, in “labiennale.org”; <https://www.labiennale.org/it/storia-della-biennale-arte> [last accessed 13 June 2021].

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, in “Storia dell’Arte Contemporanea 4: Atlante delle Biennali”, Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2019, pp. 213-226, here p. 217.

<sup>181</sup> M. Kimmelman, *Review/Art; Venice Biennale Opens with Surprises*, in New York Times, 28 May 1990, 28 May 1990, Section 1, p. 11.

<sup>182</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Storia della Biennale Arte*, cit.

fact it was the winner of the Golden Lion for the Best National Participation.<sup>183</sup> It was an impressive installation with advertising sentences in forms electronic displays by Jenny Holzer. The winner of the 2000 Prize for Young People was the English sculptor of Indian origin Anish Kapoor<sup>184</sup>, who created installations with sandstone, slate, or fiberglass.<sup>185</sup>

There were also notable, even if less remarkable, participants from other countries, comprising Toshikatsu Endo's weather-beaten wood sculptures in the Japanese Pavilion, Genevieve Cadieux's giant collage photograph of body parts in the entrance of the Canadian Pavilion, and Antoni Miralda's courageous installation of an outsize bridal suite, in the Spanish Pavilion.<sup>186</sup>

The 1990 Biennale was also remarkable for the sporadic piece of political art, such as the video installation, *k Colón Colonizado – Tutto è Mio – ¿De Quién?*, by Border Art Workshop, a group of artists from the United States and Mexico: the installation was part of the *Aperto '90* section<sup>187</sup>, which occupied the entire space at the Corderie dell'Arsenale, a place traditionally dedicated to the exhibition since the edition of *Aperto '86*. This section has always had a setup of significant size whose structure resembled art fairs, with the presence of stands of the same size, and has always hosted young emerging artists. The curators of the different editions of *Aperto* have always done their very best to create a show that could exemplify the most innovative and international trends.<sup>188</sup>

Moreover, there were many interesting events taking place around Venice during the Biennale exhibition. The most remarkable among these was a show organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in San Giorgio Maggiore, through September 2<sup>nd</sup>, called *Mondrian and De Stijl: The Modern Ideal*. The show encompassed architectural drawings, furniture and paintings that underscored the extent of the Guggenheim's holdings in early 20th-century modernism.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> *La giuria*, in “Biennale 44 1990”, p. 9.

<sup>184</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Storia della Biennale Arte*, cit.

<sup>185</sup> T. McEvelley, *Gran Bretagna*, in “Biennale 44 1990”, 1990, here p. 156.

<sup>186</sup> M. Kimmelman, *Review/Art; Venice Biennale Opens with Surprises*, cit. p. 11.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit. p. 218.

<sup>189</sup> M. Kimmelman, *Review/Art; Venice Biennale Opens with Surprises*, cit. p. 11.

The exhibition opened on May 23<sup>rd</sup> in 1990, with three days of *vernissage* dedicated to the press, critics and other insiders which anticipated the official inauguration with the Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti and the curator Giovanni Carandente held on May 27.<sup>190</sup> The art historian, director of the visual arts sector of the Biennale since 1988, intended to transmit the spirit of change and the tendency towards the future that distinguished the beginning of the last ten years of the 20th century.<sup>191</sup> As Carandente wrote in the catalogue, he wanted to emphasise, in particular, the relationship of the artists with the space: the artist and space was the other possible description that could be used for this Biennale, since the artists coming from the different countries of the world, were encouraged to make contact with the space assigned to them.<sup>192</sup> Carandente's curatorial strategy was to exhibit the most current trends of contemporary art, and therefore he intended to invite young artists operational on the international scene, limiting the retrospective or thematic shows that over the years have branded the editions of the Venetian event.<sup>193</sup> One of the most important sections of the edition of the Biennale was, without any doubt, *Aperto '90s*, which played the role of special interpreter of the essence of the Biennale, being the exhibition dedicated to emerging artists.<sup>194</sup> This edition was particularly significant for the introduction of a new discriminating factor for the choice of artists: for the first time an age limit to participate in the exhibition was established, it was set at thirty-five years.<sup>195</sup> Within *Aperto* it is possible to identify a deep-rooted heterogeneity of linguistic expressions:

in the *Aperto* section we can identify, on the one hand, artists who use “hard” means of expression such as photographic investigation and conceptual writings, giving manifestation to artistic experiences that remain linked to the “cold” practices of Neo-conceptualism, on the other hand, there is an address that should not be underestimated: it is a kitsch trend with which it is necessary to confront without trying to avoid it regardless, which gives rise to works that are not afraid of being excessive and redundant.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit. p. 215.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> G. Carandente, *La Biennale di Venezia. XLIV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte: Dimensione Futuro. L'artista e lo spazio*, Catalogo generale, 1990, here p. 16.

<sup>193</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit p. 216.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., cit. p. 218.

<sup>196</sup> Translation of the authors S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit. p. 219.

Neo-conceptualism was a movement or a style in which the concept behind a work of art was the most important aspect, frequently using unconventional or bizarre media and often in an ironic or shocking manner. This term was used from the mid-1980s to distinguish contemporary conceptual art from that of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>197</sup>

For this variety of linguistic expressions mentioned above, Barilli proposed a definition applicable to most young people exhibiting at the Corderie: *The Cold Baroque*.<sup>198</sup> This expression, which seemed to unite two opponents, was explained by the Commissioner in the general catalogue of the Biennale:

Baroque is the art of excess, complication, abundance, and therefore it would seem necessary to have to the connoted “warm”, to the exuberance of mind and feelings, of an organicity brought in some way to dialogue with nature. Instead, the fact of characterizing it with the “cold” means that today this accumulation operation for excess of must lead to elements and objects provided by the urban, artificial, and technological panorama of our current world scene. [...] this assembly operation [...] invades the third dimension of the environment with necessity.<sup>199</sup>

The exhibition *Ambiente Berlin* too, mounted in the Italian Pavilion<sup>200</sup>, was significantly important, it was curated by Jörn Merkert, Ursula Prinz, Hermann Raum, Werner Schmalenbach, and Carandente himself, which united and exhibited works by artists not only of German nationality, for whom Berlin had been a vital place for the artistic creations, documenting the lively cultural situation of the city which would then become the German capital, particularly in the light of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November the 9<sup>th</sup> 1989.<sup>201</sup> According to Kimmelman, the disjointed and pretentious show of art from East and West Berlin, which was displayed in the Biennale's main pavilion, turned out to be significantly less inspired than it might have been. France's architectural plans for the renewal of its pavilion, and Franz West's plain white sculptures for the Austrian Pavilion, were

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<sup>197</sup> Definition of Neo-conceptualism, in “Lexico.com”, Oxford University Press, 2021; <https://www.lexico.com/definition/neo-conceptualism?locale=en> [last accessed 19 September 2021].

<sup>198</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit p. 219.

<sup>199</sup> Translation of the author R. Barilli, *Verso un Barocco freddo*, in “Biennale 44 1990”, 1990, pp. 255-6, here p. 256.

<sup>200</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Storia della Biennale Arte*, cit.

<sup>201</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit. p. 216.

considered disappointing, since these countries were expected to make stronger showings.<sup>202</sup>

As for the Italian representation, the Italian Pavilion was curated by Laura Cherubini, Flaminio Gualdoni, and Lea Vergine, and it received an overall positive reaction, since it was considered capable of illustrating in a diversified way the artistic panorama of the country in the late eighties.<sup>203</sup> Respecting the spirit of the Biennale, most of the artists chosen are very young such as: Davide Benati (1949), Nicola De Maria (1954), Giuseppe Gallo (1954), Alberto Garutti (1948), Franco Guerzoni (1948) and Marco Tirelli (1956), who presented recent works characterised by a multiplicity of languages and techniques.<sup>204</sup> For Luciano Caramel, the Italian representatives were the liveliest of the Biennale thanks to artists engaged, although with greater openness and originality, with the traditional forms of painting and sculpture.<sup>205</sup> Considering the 56th Biennale as a whole, it can be seen how Carandente intended to express, with the event, the complexity of the artistic research of the time by displaying a broad and heterogeneous variety of works.<sup>206</sup>

From the first days of the exhibition, however, there were many criticisms. Some articles argued that the Biennale failed to maintain its promise, according to which it should have been an exhibition described as “young, provocative, rich in ideas, original”<sup>207</sup>, as the gallery owner Lucio Amelio said. After all, however, it can be stated that the Biennale was an accurate reflection of the postmodern art of the time, which often took inspiration from the past using revivalism and heterogeneous languages<sup>208</sup>; this concept can also be linked to the statements about the *Aperto* section made by Barilli.

The Biennale closed on September 30th with a result that was still decidedly unsatisfactory, registering “only” one hundred thousand paying visitors, a low threshold that the Biennale reached on a few other occasions.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> M. Kimmelman, *Review/Art; Venice Biennale Opens with Surprises*, cit. p. 11.

<sup>203</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit. p. 216.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> L. Caramel, *Ecco la Biennale '90 pochi quadri e molti audiovisivi*, in “Il Giornale”, 26 May 1990.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> L. Amelio, *La Biennale di Venezia 1990*, in “Domus”, July-August 1990.

<sup>208</sup> S. Portinari, and N. Stringa, *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, cit. p. 218.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

## 2.2. Gran Fury: the artists collective that rose awareness about the HIV epidemics



Ill. 11: Gran Fury with *The Pope and The Penis* at the 1990 Venice Bienale, image: artforum.com  
L to R: John Lindell, Donald Moffett, Mark Simpson, Marlene McCarty, and Loring McAlpin; <https://www.artforum.com/print/200304/gran-fury-4466>.

Gran Fury was an artists' collective committed to AIDS activism through agitprop art.<sup>210</sup>

Agitprop is political propaganda, especially in the form of art or literature, which is used to advance a political stance. The term originated in Soviet Russia and is an abbreviation of *agitacionnaia propaganda* (agitation propaganda.) Propaganda was a key aspect of Soviet governing strategy. In the west, the term “agitprop” is usually associated with artist and left-wing causes. The work of street artists like Banksy is often described as agitprop. Certain conservative pundits argue that the entire output of Hollywood amount to “pro-communist” agitprop. But the term isn’t restricted to the left. It’s also thrown around – usually in a derogatory sense – to describe anyone who tries to push a strong ideology.<sup>211</sup>

<sup>210</sup> L. Karas, *Gran Fury Collection 1987-1995*, 2009, New York, New York Public Library, MssCol 3648, pp. 1-13, here p. 5.

<sup>211</sup> Definition of *Agitprop*, in “Political Dictionary”; <https://politicaldictionary.com/words/agitprop/> [last accessed: 20 September 2021].

Named after the Plymouth automobile chosen by the New York City Police Department, Gran Fury found its affiliates in the ACT UP/NY (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, New York). The artists' collective began with the ACT UP/NY's involvement in the art installation *Let the Record Show...* at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in December 1987.<sup>212</sup> This group of artists simultaneously employed and condemned Madison Avenue language,<sup>213</sup> which is a way to identify the way of communicating of the advertising industry as a whole in the United States (once all or mostly located on Madison Avenue in New York City)<sup>214</sup>. Long before Facebook and Twitter allowed a mass audience to get a message in couple of clicks, the art/activist collective used a mixture of bold graphic design, guerrilla dissemination strategies, and art institutional support to raise awareness on the urgency of the AIDS issue, since the government and the politicians in general were not doing anything about it.<sup>215</sup> Bill Olander, curator for The New Museum, let ACT UP use the Broadway window of the museum, where a group of artists and their art chose not to be silent about the HIV issue. *Let the Record Show...* included images of six individuals with concrete plates engraved with their quotes regarding AIDS.<sup>216</sup> A neon "Silence = Death" sign was hung, while a LED sign unceasingly provided information about the AIDS emergency. The graphic was created as a response to the proposal, made by William F. Buckley, that all people with AIDS should have a tattoo in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the backsides, to warn the other homosexuals.<sup>217</sup> The neon piece became part of the New Museum's permanent collection, and the SILENCE =

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<sup>212</sup> L. Karas, *Gran Fury Collection 1987-1995*, 2009, cit. p. 5.

<sup>213</sup> N.d, *About - Gran Fury*, in "granfury.org"; <https://www.granfury.org/about> [last accessed 14 June 2021].

<sup>214</sup> *Definition of Madison Avenue*, in "McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions", 2006, McGraw-Hill Companies; <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/Madison+Avenue> [last accessed 20 September 2021].

<sup>215</sup> J. D'Addario, *AIDS, Art and Activism: Remembering Gran Fury*, in "Hyperallergic", 1 December 2011; <https://hyperallergic.com/42085/aids-art-activism-gran-fury/> [Accessed 15 June 2021].

<sup>216</sup> L. Karas, *Gran Fury Collection 1987-1995*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>217</sup> J. D'Addario, *AIDS, Art and Activism: Remembering Gran Fury*, cit.

DEATH graphic was widely spread through t-shirts, wheat pastes, and other printed ephemera.<sup>218</sup>



Ill. 12: Gran Fury, *Let the Record Show...*, 1987, New Museum, New York City. <http://magazine.art21.org/2012/02/03/notes-on-silence-a-collage/let-the-record-show-11-20-1987/>.

After this installation, some participants to the ACT UP group wanted to continue making their voice heard and created Gran Fury in January 1988.<sup>219</sup> Gran Fury tenaciously intruded into public and advertising spaces to interrupt the flow of common thoughts with their own program. Remarkably, most of their work was not displayed in traditional art spaces; they mainly used fliers, posters, and billboards.<sup>220</sup> They often reused their own images and texts to spread their message beyond its early spectators. The group created some provocative pieces, one of the

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> L. Karas, *Gran Fury Collection 1987-1995*, 2009, cit. p. 5.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.



most famous was the *Kissing Doesn't Kill* bus poster, for which they were awarded with the Municipal Art Society of New York's Brendan Gill Prize in 1990.<sup>221</sup>



Ill. 13: Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, 1989, bus poster, ink on vinyl; <https://artblart.com/tag/robert-mapplethorpe-x-portfolio/>.

Other disputed artworks were *The Pope Piece* and *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*, which were initially detained by Italian customs but then shown at the 44th Venice Biennale.<sup>222</sup> Through the debate that the artwork generated, the project was given another life thanks to the media, thus making the message circulate outside its primary space. Gran Fury also accepted the International Centre of Photography Design Award for their effort at the Seventh Annual Infinity Awards in 1991.<sup>223</sup>

By the mid-1990s the atmosphere encircling the AIDS epidemic was different and, according to Gran Fury's final piece, *Good Luck... Miss You* (created by group in 1995), their initial strategies were not able anymore to convey the intricacies of AIDS concern.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

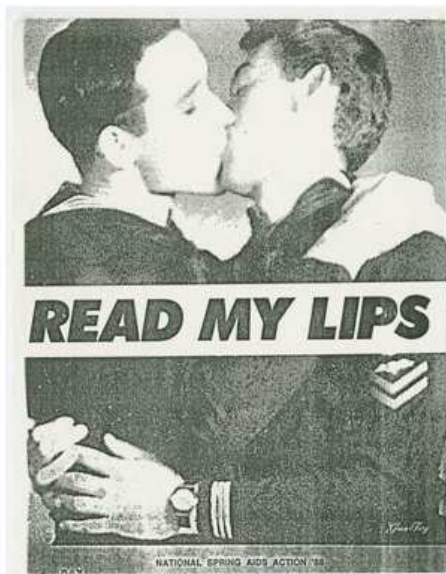
<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

Throughout, its existence, some of the main members of the group were: Richard Elovich, Avram Finkelstein, Amy Heard, Tom Kalin, John Lindell, Loring McAlpin, Marlene McCarty, Donald Moffett, Michael Nesline, Mark Simpson, and Robert Vazquez.<sup>225</sup>

In 2011, Gran Fury was given an Honorary PhD by the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. In 2012 Gran Fury affixed *Read my Lips*, the first public assessment of their effort, for 80WSE in New York City. In 2018, the collective re-proposed this event at London's AutoItalia.<sup>226</sup>



Ill. 14: Gran Fury, *Read my Lips* (Boys), 1988.  
<https://filthydreams.org/2019/06/03/twinks4trump-contrarianism-wilde-decadence-and-the-future-of-queer-politics/>.

Gran Fury issued several manifestos about the AIDS emergency and their answer to it over the course of their existence; the one published in 1995, just before they separated, served to both recall their ideas and practices as well as to investigate their complex connection with the art world at large.<sup>227</sup> A 2003 *Artforum* interview, which will be analysed in the following pages, with some of its members offered an excellent outline of the group's history and procedures, comprising a fascinating understanding of the challenges that the group handled making art as a collective and as part of a larger activist environment. The New

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> N.d., *About - Gran Fury*, cit.

<sup>227</sup> J. D'Addario, *AIDS, Art and Activism: Remembering Gran Fury*, cit.

York Public Library also preserves a broad digital archive of Gran Fury's pieces online.<sup>228</sup>

Gran Fury's work was also influenced by the Situationist International<sup>229</sup>, since the latter was a movement that harshly criticised capitalism<sup>230</sup> and Gran Fury mainly blamed the capitalist society for the handling of the HIV crisis.<sup>231</sup> However, Gran Fury can easily be identified as part the field of politically engaged art.<sup>232</sup> Their work has been featured in public art commissions for The Whitney, The New Museum, The Venice Biennale, Creative Time, and The Public Art Fund, in publications like ArtForum, Bomb, and The New York Times, and was, and still is, in the permanent collections of MoMA, The Whitney, and The New Museum.<sup>233</sup> Much of their projects were created in the 80's and 90's and have an enduring and lasting quality in both design and message and have had a central role in improving the efforts to use art as a tool for social change.<sup>234</sup> Tom Kalin labelled the way in Gran Fury worked as "bullet-style", which assembled political issues made by innumerable people and whatever stuck became the subject they decided to deal with in a specific work.<sup>235</sup> It was an additive process, everyone made available the abilities and resources that they could, and they ended up merging together coherently. There were a few significant explanations for the success of this method: "most of it came from the willingness of the participants, but there were always the looming goals of ACT UP motivating the creative process."<sup>236</sup> The combination of activism and creativity was a big part of the success of the Gran Fury.<sup>237</sup>

AIDS activism was significant in its emphasis on question of representation, in its incisive understanding that the epidemic would be faced through visual

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> N.d., *About - Gran Fury*, cit.

<sup>230</sup> Tate, *Art Terms: Situationist International*, in "tate.org.uk"; <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/situationist-international> [last accessed 20 September 2021].

<sup>231</sup> H. Lemmey, *Gran Fury*, in "Tribune", 20 January 2019; <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2019/01/gran-fury> [last accessed 17 June 2021].

<sup>232</sup> N.d., *About - Gran Fury*, cit.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> E. Lovengood, *Gran Fury: Art, Design, & Activism*, in "Medium", 30 April 2018; <https://medium.com/silence-death-2-0/gran-fury-art-design-activism-42e3b84c28e> [last accessed 15 June 2021].

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

culture, and through the struggle over the important terminology of disease – encouraging the use of the term, “Person With AIDS” rather than, “AIDS victim,” for example. AIDS activism realised that concerns about representation were ones of life and death.<sup>238</sup> This is, possibly, one of the most remarkable qualities of the epidemic’s legacy: “the sense that representation and identity can matter in determining who will live and who will die.”<sup>239</sup> As Stuart Hall once said, the reply to the question: “against the urgency of people dying in the street, what in God’s name is the point of cultural studies?”<sup>240</sup> should be that representation is fundamental, and that, in the case of AIDS, the problem of who lives and dies was also, a problem of who got represented and who did not.<sup>241</sup>

The archiving of ACT UP and Gran Fury was quite paradoxical. The NYU exhibition of Gran Fury tactically made the work present through a gallery aesthetic - the street aesthetic of the work was translated into the art context of the gallery. The show included images printed huge and bold, outlining each room like an enormous tabloid.<sup>242</sup> In a certain sense, this use of scale renovated some of the importance of the graphics’ original message - the extreme images and text appeared to scream from the walls:

*“Kissing Doesn’t Kill*

*Read My Lips*

*Art is Not Enough*

*You’ve Got Blood on Your Hands*

*AIDS: 1 in 61”*<sup>243</sup>

The use of scale in the exhibit was extremely effective. Yet, to some extent, that aesthetic proved the new status of Gran Fury’s work. “Gran Fury was born on the street - transformed into a gallery decades later, it could no longer carry its original shock and urgency.”<sup>244</sup> So, the images became nostalgic, moving symbols of a previous time, evocative of grief and sadness. They thus become images of

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<sup>238</sup> M. Sturken, *AIDS Activist Legacies and the Gran Fury of the Past/Present*, in “E-Misférica”, 2012, volume 9, n. 1-2; <http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/es/e-misferica-91/sturken> [last accessed 22 June 2021].

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

melancholy in what they remind of the clarity of goal of their time and of the idea that their message was a revolutionary intervention in its time.<sup>245</sup>

Gran Fury's voice of indignation was not gone.<sup>246</sup> One of the main works in the Gran Fury show was the exhibition of thousands of copies of 100- and 50-dollar bills with some furious responses on their reverse side:

*"Fuck Your Profiteering.*

*People are dying while you play business.*

*Why Are We Here?*

*Because your malignant neglect KILLS.*

*White Heterosexual Men Can't Get AIDS....*

*Don't Bank on It."*<sup>247</sup>

The strong sense of indignation in the critique of the system in these works continued to be perceivable, even in an art gallery background. While the deliberate obliteration of the AIDS epidemic and its people was the focus of Gran Fury and ACT UP, their condemnation of the financial industry and the discrimination of capitalism lives on in the Occupy Movement<sup>248</sup>, which protests against capitalism and economic inequality, incited in particular by what are now called *austerity measures*, official actions taken by governments in order to cut public spending in light of the economic problems. Starting in Wall Street in New York, the *Occupy* protests have spread right across the world, including important cities like Frankfurt, Rome, Sydney, Hong Kong, London, and other cities in the United Kingdom.<sup>249</sup> Occupy has produced a massive number of posters and images, presenting a broad variety of discussions and discourses through visual culture. As some of Occupy's catchphrases have captured broad constituencies - the 99%, the flexible connotation of "occupy" - its obligation to AIDS political

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> K. Maxwell, *Occupy*, in "macmillandictionary.com", 31 October 2011; <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/buzzword/entries/occupy.html> [last accessed 20 September 2021].

action is increasingly present. The record of AIDS activism resides on in the street.<sup>250</sup>

### 2.3. The Pope and the Penis: a harsh critique to the Catholic view on contraception



Ill. 15: Gran Fury, *The Pope and the Penis*, 1990, vinyl wall poster, 10x25 ft. (left); Gran Fury, *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*, 1988, vinyl wall poster, 10x25 ft. (right). Courtesy of Auto Italia and Gran Fury; <https://go.distance.ncsu.edu/gd203/?p=28186>.

In 1990, the artists of Gran Fury participated with their work in the *Aperto* section of the Venice Biennale. They used this opportunity to condemn the stance of the Catholic Church towards the AIDS crisis with a project named *The Pope and the Penis*. The work is composed of two enormous posters hung next to each other. The first poster showed images and slogans already used by the group for other works, such as “Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head,” which includes an erect penis as the main visual focal point, as well as “Men, Use Condoms or Beat It” and “AIDS Kills Women.”<sup>251</sup>

The second poster was an image of Pope John Paul II with a statement made by Cardinal O’Connor, the archbishop of New York, at the first Vatican conference

<sup>250</sup> M. Sturken, *AIDS Activist Legacies and the Gran Fury of the Past/Present*, cit.

<sup>251</sup> E. Laney, *The Pope and the Penis* | *GD 203*, in “Go.distance.ncsu.edu”, 8 April 2019; <https://go.distance.ncsu.edu/gd203/?p=28186> [last accessed 16 June 2021].

on AIDS in 1989, which says “The truth is not condoms or clean needles. These are lies...good morality is good medicine.”<sup>252</sup> The part of the quotation equating morality and medicine was frequently used by Ronald Reagan in his distortion of the AIDS crisis.<sup>253</sup> That image was surrounded by Gran Fury’s reply:

The Catholic Church has long taught men and women to loathe their bodies and to fear their sexual natures. This particular vision of good and evil continued to bring suffering and even death. By holding medicine hostage to Catholic morality and withholding information which allows people to protect themselves and each other from acquiring Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the Church seeks to punish all who do not share in its peculiar vision of human experience and makes clear its preference of living saints and dead sinners. It is immoral to practice bad medicine. It is bad medicine to deny people information that can help end the AIDS crisis. Condoms and clean needles save lives as surely as the earth revolves around the sun. AIDS is caused by a virus and a virus has no morals.<sup>254</sup>

The work also included panels on the surrounding walls giving evidence in English and Italian about AIDS prevention campaigns in different countries, like street performances in Cameroon and clean needle distribution in Germany.<sup>255</sup> In fact, “at the end of the room a display of newspaper headlines and demonstration photographs shrewdly arranged in an inverted cross shape provided historical context for these works.”<sup>256</sup>

The eleven artists chose to counterpose the image of Pope John Paul II, who was identified as supporter of a repressive morality and of the ban of protection during the sexual intercourse, and a photo of a masculine phallus that calls for the use of condoms to protect oneself and the others from the disease.<sup>257</sup>

Combining anger with education was at the main mission of Gran Fury’s collective. Their work, as can be also seen in the two posters presented at the Biennale, used clear text and bold colours to ensure their messages arrived at the public, making the conversation about AIDS part of everyday life rather than the whispered.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> T. Burk, *From the Streets to the Gallery: Exhibiting the Visual Ephemera of AIDS Cultural Activism*, in “Journal of curatorial studies”, 2013, vol. 2, n. 1, pp. 32 – 53, here p. 47.

<sup>257</sup> G. Pietrobelli, *Scandalo alla Biennale*, in “Il Gazzettino”, 25 May 1990.

<sup>258</sup> H. Lemmey, *Gran Fury*, cit.



Furthermore, in this project cultural activism's use of mass culture and advertising techniques was obvious in those graphic visual claims that were created with layered visual effects juxtaposed on different walls.<sup>259</sup>

The collective had a long debate about whether they should be in the Venice Biennale at all. They wanted to hang banners in the street, but they could not do that. However, they doubted whether was enough for them to be inside an art institution, but they agreed that the popularity of the event was worthy of doing it. It was also an occasion to talk about condom use in the “belly of the beast”, to tackle the Catholic Church on its home territory.<sup>260</sup>

#### **2.4. The Criticisms and the Press Echo**

The artists collective Gran Fury, according to Giuseppe Pietrobelli, was, perhaps, the only participant in the 1990 edition of the Biennale that did have the conceit of considering their project a work of art. In fact, to avoid any misunderstanding they wrote “L’arte non basta (art is not enough)” in big letters. Their panels probably generated more stir than Jeff Koon’s self-portrait during an embrace with Cicciolina, Ilona Staller, a porn star.<sup>261</sup>

The work by Gran Fury seemed to be intentionally provocative, since it showed Pope John Paul II next to an erect penis, and it humorously mocked the Church’s historical failure to accept science by referring to the earth revolving around the sun. However, Gran Fury used these provocations to focus the attention on the exhibit and on the AIDS issue.<sup>262</sup>

The work was so provocative that initially the custom officials did not allow the poster into the country at the Italian border. So, Gran Fury made the story widely circulate on the media, encouraging other artists to withdraw their work and causing a firestorm of publicity.<sup>263</sup> As a result, the group asked for a press

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<sup>259</sup> T. Burk, *From the Streets to the Gallery: Exhibiting the Visual Ephemera of AIDS Cultural Activism*, cit. p. 47.

<sup>260</sup> D. Crimp, *Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp*, in “ArtForum”, April 2003; <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=4466> [last accessed 17 June 2021].

<sup>261</sup> G. Pietrobelli, *Scandalo alla Biennale*, cit.

<sup>262</sup> E. Laney, *The Pope and the Penis | GD 203*, cit.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.



conference involving newspapers from around the world. Within 48 hours, the entrance of the posters was authorized and mounted in the exhibition.<sup>264</sup> However, Carandente initially suspended the installation of the panels, which seemed a critique to the Church's policy about the 2000s plague, but Gran Fury decided to hang a sign with the inscription "grazie per la censura (thank you for the censorship)".<sup>265</sup>

The group of artists was not even able to finish the setting-up of the panels that Bruno Siciari, attorney of the city of Venice, was already asked to intervene. Then, the magistrate informed Antonio Fojadelli, assistant attorney of the Republic, who immediately went to the Corderie del Arsenale with a couple of policemen.<sup>266</sup> The judiciary, which was accustomed to violations on the limit of the penal code, was called to action. The first hypothesis was even to sue the group for offense to the honour of a head of state.<sup>267</sup> However, to seize the artwork the judge had found explicit evidence of this offence; Fojadelli even looked at the panels for a few minutes, but he concluded that there was a neat separation between the image of the Pope and the one of the male member, so it was not necessary to remove the them.<sup>268</sup> However, they also asked to be informed in case the group would decide to change the layout of the panels.<sup>269</sup> Carandente openly stated, before the exhibit, that the work was not deemed as art, and that the Biennale was not a space "to fight in ideological and political battles"<sup>270</sup>, which is a crucial point of this controversy, and he even said he would quit if the panels were to be included.<sup>271</sup> Moreover, he declared that he had not seen the project before its preparation for the exhibition<sup>272</sup>, and he put out a press release where he stated:

Even though I do not want to express any concept of censorship, I dissociate myself from the inclusion in the *Aperto '90* section of the work of the group of

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> M. Lollo, *Scandalo alla Biennale*, in "La Stampa", 26 May 1990.

<sup>266</sup> L. Ferraro, *Papa e AIDS: Biennale in Tilt*, in "Il Resto del Carlino", 25 May 1990.

<sup>267</sup> G. Pietrobelli, *Scandalo alla Biennale*, cit.

<sup>268</sup> L. Ferraro, *Papa e AIDS: Biennale in Tilt*, cit.

<sup>269</sup> G. Cecchetti, *Quel pannello troppo osé: un manifesto anti-AIDS offende Giovanni Paolo II?*, in "La Nuova Venezia", 25 May 1990.

<sup>270</sup> E. Laney, *The Pope and the Penis | GD 203*, cit.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> G. Cecchetti, *Quel pannello troppo osé: un manifesto anti-AIDS offende Giovanni Paolo II?*, cit.

American artists “Gran Fury” which constitutes an offense to the person of the Supreme Pontiff.<sup>273</sup>

So, the work nearly got the group arrested. The Venice Biennale is one of the most prestigious international art exhibitions, and Gran Fury took this opportunity to export its provocative brand of art activism to Europe. The collective's infamous *Pope Piece* stabbed the Pope for his anti-safe-sex convictions. Italian authorities, including Biennale workers, considered suing the group for blasphemy; only the last-minute mediation of sympathetic magistrates avoided an international incident.<sup>274</sup> However they had to defend their own actions in court, the magistrate read the charges made by the group:

the Catholic view of sexuality continues to cause pain and even death, holding medicine hostage to morality and blocking information on the means to protect oneself and protect others against AIDS. [...] The Church wants to punish those who do not accept its version of human experience and prefers living saints and dead sinners.<sup>275</sup>

These accusations were also written on their panels. The magistrate then looked at the artwork and decided to absolve the collective and that the panels could remain in their place with the apology by Carandente to the Pope.<sup>276</sup> The director criticised the position of the magistrate saying: “the magistrate did not find them offensive but he will deal with his conscience.”<sup>277</sup> Despite this, Giovanni Valmassoi, assistant attorney of the city of Venice, seemed inclined to ask the judge of the preliminary investigations for the archiving of the case, since there was no evidence of the crime of insulting a religious belief.<sup>278</sup> After he saw the panels, just as his colleague Fojadelli, he was convinced that no crime was committed by the artists collective.<sup>279</sup> Carandente did not resign even after the magistrate’s decision, indeed he found their atheist view extremely superficial, and he was not sure that it could get to the public. He was even prepared for the

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<sup>273</sup> Translation of the author L. Ferraro, *Furia che offende: Carandente contro un’opera che attacca il Papa*, in “La Nazione”, 25 May 1990.

<sup>274</sup> C. Kaczorowski, *AIDS Activism in the Arts*, in “glbtq”, 2015, pp. 1-4, here p. 2.

<sup>275</sup> Translation of the author G. Pietrobelli, *Scandalo alla Biennale*, cit.

<sup>276</sup> L. Ferraro, *Papa e AIDS: Biennale in tilt*, cit.

<sup>277</sup> G. C., “Via quel fallo dalla Biennale” e il direttore chiama il giudice, in “La Repubblica”, 25 May.

<sup>278</sup> N.d., *Biennale, chi può giudicare?*, in “Il Tempo”, 26 May 1990.

<sup>279</sup> G. Cecchetti, *Tutta la Chiesa è contro la Biennale*, in “La Nuova Venezia”, 26 May 1990.

complaints to the judiciary that could have come from the public or from Catholic associations.<sup>280</sup>

The Biennale should grant artists freedom of expression and ideas, for this reason, despite the guise of the scandal, the Board of Directors decided to avoid taking a specific stance on the issue.<sup>281</sup> However, some members of the Board signed a document stating that they agreed with the firm position taken by Carandente. Those members were namely: Paolo Portoghesi, the president of the Biennale at the time, Ulderico Bernardi, Enzo Cucciniello, Fabrizia Gressani Sanna, Gian Luigi Rondi, Giorgio Sala, and Dario Ventimiglia.<sup>282</sup> They considered the project unfairly disrespectful to the Catholic Church, which, according to them, was particularly active in promoting human values in those days.<sup>283</sup> In this document, it was stated that:

considering the materials exposed by the Gran Fury group and the distorted attempt to transmit a message, which appears unjustly disrespectful towards the Catholic Church, it fully shares the vigorous position taken by the director Carandente, who dissociated himself from the inclusion in the section *Aperto 90* of the work that constitutes an offense to the person of the supreme pontiff.<sup>284</sup>

The president of the Biennale, Portoghesi, reinforced the message declaring that he could not bear the thought of artists exploiting the Biennale to fight ideological or political battles.<sup>285</sup>

Further criticisms came from the Bishop Clemente Ciattaglia (national assistant of the Unione Cattolica Artisti Italiani), who stated that: “whoever insults the Pope on the pretext of art is an animal.”<sup>286</sup> He also referred to the extreme violence with which the group of artists attacked the image of the Pope about the position of the Church on contraception. Moreover, he appealed to the common sense of State authorities and to the sensitivity of a politician and intellectual as the Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti.<sup>287</sup>

The Patriarchy of Venice wrote a note where it declared:

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<sup>280</sup> G. C., “*Via quel fallo dalla Biennale*” *E il direttore chiama il giudice*, cit.

<sup>281</sup> N.d., *Biennale, Chi può giudicare?*, cit.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Translation of the author G. Cecchetti, *Tutta la Chiesa è contro la Biennale*, cit.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> N.d., *Biennale, Chi può giudicare?*, cit.

The press has highlighted the presence at the Art Biennale of some panels related to AIDS; they sound like a vulgar insult to the Pontiff and to the moral teaching of the Catholic Church. Turning dissent into insult is incivility and indifference. The ecclesial community rejects this disrespectful way of dealing with such serious problems and protests vigorously, while reconfirming affectionate solidarity with the Pope and his moral teaching. With the mockery and with the provoked resonance of squalor and scandal, the moral values that are the basis of civil coexistence are not promoted in consciences.<sup>288</sup>

On the other hand, communists, and republicans, such as Gaetano Zorzetto, who represented the Venice municipality, did not agree with Carandente position. Zorzetto himself stated that: “he cannot dissociate, if anything, he must resign.”<sup>289</sup>

Avram Finkelstein observed that the event transformed a work that might otherwise have been “shrouded by the insularity of an international art event into arguably one of [Gran Fury’s] most public projects.”<sup>290</sup> In addition, on Saturday (June the 1<sup>st</sup>), the Vatican was reportedly considering whether to ask the Italian Government to have the artworks removed.<sup>291</sup>

Gran Fury employed censorship as a tool for political propaganda. The group created a work which purposefully went beyond the limits of what was considered suitable and deliberately leaned on blasphemy, bringing the AIDS crisis in every Italian newspaper.<sup>292</sup>

Their popular activism in the context of this most elite art world milieu may be hard to square until one realises that Gran Fury skilfully took the prestige of inclusion in the event, which was used to laud participating artists and nations, and drew attention on organised religion’s useless notion of concern in the matter of AIDS.<sup>293</sup> Gran Fury’s use of an image of Pope John Paul II triggered an uproar which forced Vatican officials to physically come and read Gran Fury’s message that the Church’s disapproval of needle exchange and safe sex practices was an immoral condemnation to death for those whose lives could be saved by these simple acts.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Translation of the author G. Cecchetti, *Tutta la Chiesa è contro la Biennale*, cit.

<sup>289</sup> M. Lollo, *Scandalo alla Biennale*, cit.

<sup>290</sup> J. Callaghan, *After Silence, a Ringing Reminder*, in “Catholics for Choice”, 29 April 2018; <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/resource-library/after-silence-a-ringing-reminder/> [last accessed 17 June 2021].

<sup>291</sup> M. Kimmelman, *Review/Art; Venice Biennale Opens with Surprises*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>292</sup> E. Laney, *The Pope and the Penis | GD 203*, cit.

<sup>293</sup> P. Moreno, *Gran Fury Art*, in “Newartexaminer.org”, July, August, September 2020; <http://www.newartexaminer.org/gran-fury-art.html> [last accessed 17 June 2021].

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

Moving past the almost ridiculous attempts by the Vatican to suppress an artwork that condemned its stance on AIDS prevention, the Venice episode served as a strong reminder of how erroneous that position in fact was (and still is). Should there ever be a moment of broad truth and understanding when the church hierarchy admits to its sins and search for forgiveness of those it has sinned against, we will certainly see AIDS consciousness at the fore.<sup>295</sup> In the name of safeguarding family moral standards, church dogma caused families to despise their children and reject their children's loved ones; church fathers coldly lied about how the disease spread, and that caused estimated thirty million dead worldwide.<sup>296</sup>

It cannot be forgotten how much the media wrote and talked about that piece, which made the work much more public than a billboard would have been. They were being insincere when they said that they were concerned that no one would notice their work; they knew very well what they were doing.<sup>297</sup> Typical of media indifference to the core issue, in a May 28 New York Times' article on the piece was written:

In fact, much of the talk about the *Aperto* among the hundreds of artists, curators, dealers, and critics who have converged on this city during the last week has focused on two entries from the United States that have stirred interest more for their apparent capacity to shock than for anything else. Mr. Koons' entry is the first. The other, and for political reasons more important, is a set of posters by Gran Fury, a collective dedicated to issues involving AIDS.<sup>298</sup>

In 2013 the Vatican participated for the first time at the Venice Biennale, and Gianfranco Ravasi, head of the Pontifical Council for Culture, led the effort. He also carefully stressed that the works are not liturgical, but it was clear that he saw the art as serving a religious purpose. The objective was, perhaps, to offer a counterbalance to blasphemous iconic works of contemporary art like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, the Austrian artist Alfred Hrdlicka's representation of the *Last Supper* as a gay bacchanal, or *The Pope Piece* by Gran Fury.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> D. Crimp, *Gran Fury Talks to Douglas*, cit.

<sup>298</sup> M. Kimmelman, *Review/Art; Venice Biennale Opens with Surprise*, cit. p. 11.

<sup>299</sup> S. Faris, *For the First Time the Vatican Enters Prestigious Venice Biennale*, in "Time", 16 May 2013; <https://world.time.com/2013/05/16/for-first-time-the-vatican-enters-prestigious-venice-biennale/> [last accessed 24 June 2021].

However, the most important achievement of Gran Fury, according to Nina Felshin, amongst all the news about the scandal was information included as side stories or additions about the spread of the HIV virus in Italy. As a result of the scandal, a debate emerged about the facts the artists were trying to spread. As one of Gran Fury members observed, the event allowed them to “break outside the cloistered territory of the Biennale” and deliver information about the AIDS outbreak to the Italian public.<sup>300</sup>

In conclusion, this controversy split an institution that was already characterised by hundred cracks.<sup>301</sup> From the different witnesses collected from reviews and articles and from the remarks made by the people involved has emerged that the Biennale is an institution full of contradictions; the most important being its concern for neutrality. The contrast between Carandente’s statement, when he asserted that the Biennale was not the place for activism and political battles, and the position he firmly maintained regarding the panels makes evident that the institution is not so neutral and apolitical as it claims to be. With the next case study this affirmation will be further supported.

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<sup>300</sup> N. Felshin, *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Seattle: Bay Press, Inc., 1995, p. 77.

<sup>301</sup> M. Lollo, *Scandalo alla Biennale*, cit.

### 3. The Mosque, Christoph Büchel (2015)



Ill. 16: Poster of 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition in Venice: All the World's Futures; <https://www.pinterest.co.kr/pin/320318592227594569>.

### 3.1. 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition: a game of overlapping filters

The 56th Venice Biennale (2015) entitled *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, organised by *La Biennale di Venezia*, and chaired by Paolo Baratta, opened to the public from May 9th to November 22<sup>nd</sup>, at the Giardini della Biennale and at Arsenale. The preview took place on May 6th, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>. The inauguration and the award ceremony were celebrated on May 9th at Ca' Giustinian, with the Golden Lions for Lifetime Achievement bestowed on El Anatsui, and a Special Golden Lion for Services to the Arts given to Susanne Ghez; “the official awards were assigned by the international Jury composed of Naomi Beckwith (USA), Sabine Breitwieser (Austria), Mario Codognato (Italy), Ranjit Hoskote (India), Yongwoo Lee (South Korea).”<sup>302</sup>

There were 89 National Participations exhibiting in the historical Pavilions at the Giardini, at Arsenale, and in the whole city of Venice.<sup>303</sup> The countries joining the exhibition for the first time in were Grenada, Mauritius, Mongolia, Republic of Mozambique, and Republic of Seychelles. Other countries were participating after years of absence, and these were Ecuador (First time since 1966, then with the IILA, the International Italian-Latin American Organisation created in 1966 to strengthen the relationship between Europe and Latin America<sup>304</sup>), the Philippines (1964), and Guatemala (1954, then with the IILA).<sup>305</sup>

The Holy See joined the 56<sup>th</sup> edition of the Biennale for Visual Arts with an exhibition organised at the Sale d'Armi, in the areas that the Biennale renovated for new permanent pavilions. *In the Beginning... the Word became flesh* was the title that Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi (President of the Pontifical Council for Culture) gave to the exhibition, which was curated by Micol Forti (Director of Contemporary Art Department of the Vatican Museums).<sup>306</sup>

The Italian Pavilion at the *Arsenale*, coordinated by the Italian Ministry for the Cultural Heritage and Activities, Ferdinando Facchiano, and the Direzione

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<sup>302</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Biennale Arte | Biennale Arte 2015 - All the World's Futures*, in “labiennale.org”; <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2015/biennale-arte-2015-all-worlds-futures> [last accessed 29 June 2021].

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> <https://iila.org/it/chi-siamo/>

<sup>305</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Biennale Arte | Biennale Arte 2015 - All the World's Futures*, cit.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.



Generale Arte e Architettura Contemporanee e Periferie Urbane, was curated by Vincenzo Trione. There were 44 Collateral Events, authorized by the curator of the international exhibition and sponsored by non-profit national and international institutions, in different areas within the city of Venice.<sup>307</sup>

The 56th International Art Exhibition followed a specific itinerary that started at the Central Pavilion (Giardini) and continued at Arsenale, with more than 136 artists from 53 nations, 89 of whom were presenting their artworks for the first time. Among the works on display, 159 were expressly realized for that year edition.<sup>308</sup>

The opening took place earlier than usual, as clarified by the President of the Biennale Paolo Baratta, because the organisers wanted to connect the historic Venetian event with the next EXPO 2015 that opened in Milan on the same days.<sup>309</sup>

Paolo Baratta introduced 2015 edition with these words, recalling that:

Bice Curiger brought us the theme of perception, of ILLUMInation or light as an autonomous and revitalizing element, and Massimiliano Gioni was interested in observing the phenomenon of artistic creation from within and turned his attention to the inner impulses that drive mankind and the artist to create images and bring representations to life.<sup>310</sup>

Bice Curiger, Massimiliano Gioni and Okwui Enwezor represented three chapters of a research process initiated by la Biennale di Venezia to investigate the benchmarks that can help to express aesthetic judgments on contemporary art.<sup>311</sup> Baratta also said that he was glad that he did not listen to the unwelcome complaints, made in 1998, stating that the exhibition with national pavilions was outdated and that they should have been replaced by, perhaps, a white cube, a neutral space in which to delete history, exercise abstract presumptions, or undergo the dictatorship of the market.<sup>312</sup> In a game of “overlapping filters”, as the president clarified, the Venice Biennale could rightly affirm its own “return to the future” where the very idea of nation pavilions - once considered an obsolete depiction of

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> P. Muscarà, *L'angelo della storia e tutti futuri dal mondo*, in “Arte.it”, 22 October 2014; <http://www.arte.it/notizie/venezial-angelo-della-storia-e-tutti-i-futuri-del-mondo-9835> [last accessed: 05 July 2021].

<sup>310</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Biennale Arte | Biennale Arte 2015 - All the World's Futures*, cit.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

a reality by the Society of Nations that would no longer represent the global world - seemed instead to live a new life.<sup>313</sup> The *Giardini* themselves were the symbol and trace of an impossible attempt to capture the contemporary. Therefore, they found, precisely in the perpetual renewal of those same spaces, the ideal new form to present events.<sup>314</sup>

This edition of the Biennale focused on the correlation between art and the advancement of the human, social, and political spheres, threatened by external forces, and phenomena. The aim of the exhibition was to examine how “the tensions of the outside world acted on the sensitivities and the vital and expressive energies of artists, on their desires, and their inner song.”<sup>315</sup> One of the reasons the Biennale designated Okwui Enwezor as curator, as Baratta stated, was his special sensitivity about this issue.<sup>316</sup>

The 56<sup>th</sup> Biennale was characterised by three “filters” that the curator decided to apply. The theme of modernity and vitality, in a context of not only spatial but also temporal engagement, is the first “filters” chosen by the Nigerian born art critic, writer and journalist.<sup>317</sup>

The second pillar, or filter, of the exhibition was the *Angelus Novus* (monoprint, 1920) by Paul Klee, which watched over the event: the work represented, according to Walter Benjamin<sup>318</sup>

an angel, with wide eyes, open mouth, spread wings, the angel of history... He has his face turned to the past, but a storm that blows from heaven pushes him irresistibly into the future.<sup>319</sup>

And while Benjamin reread art with the eyes of history, artists at the Venice Biennale observed history with the eyes of art.<sup>320</sup> The Angel of History may be read as a metaphor for the devastating, but at the same time regenerating, time and

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<sup>313</sup> P. Muscarà, *L'angelo della storia e tutti futuri dal Mondo*, cit.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Biennale Arte | Biennale Arte 2015 - All the World's Futures*, cit.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> P. Muscarà, *L'angelo della storia e tutti futuri dal mondo*, cit.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> W. Benjamin, *Angelus Novus*, translated by R. Solmi, Torino, Giulio Einaudi editore, 1961, here p. 80.

<sup>320</sup> P. Muscarà, *L'Angelo della storia e tutti futuri dal mondo*, cit.

as an encouragement to revive the *clairvoyance* in art, the ability to anticipate time, to be an interpreter of the future.<sup>321</sup>

Moreover, the Nigerian curator proposed the issue of the capital as the third “filter” (with the lowercase “c”). The theme was precisely that of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. On this occasion, it was no longer reread, interpreted, or translated by Marx's 19th-century supporters, but read, line by line, in all its influential original format composed of 4 tomes. The idea was that throughout the Biennale marathon there would have been a performance, based on reading Marx's words, combined with other readings, theatre, events. The capital had to be seen as a symbol for our time and keyword to investigate the role – in history – that art and the arts can have in understanding the planet in which we live and offer, according to President Baratta, an International Exhibition project inspired by the determination to “offer the world a *sounding board of the world*”.<sup>322</sup>

The curator also wanted to bring together arts and artists from different parts of the world and from different disciplines, to establish a Parliament of Forms, a Parliament therefore for a Biennial of varied and intense vitality.<sup>323</sup> In his speech, the president of the Biennale said:

In each Biennale, the presence alongside our curator of the different voices of the curators in the different pavilions contributes to realizing an important value, the pluralism of voices.

"Parliament of Forms". Nothing more than a parliament must provide for a plurality of voices.

Both in the most intimate Biennials and in those more dramaturgically involving history, it is important that the Exhibition is always lived as a place of free dialogue.<sup>324</sup>

Considering Enwezor's desire, in this global exhibition people could question or at least listen to artists coming from 53 countries, many of them from geographical areas that paradoxically people insist on defining as peripheral. This could also help to discover the latest trends about the geography and routes taken by contemporary art, thanks to a particular project concentrating on the *curricula* of

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> P. Baratta, *Intervento di Paolo Baratta: presidente della Biennale*, in “labiennale.org”, 2015; <https://www.labiennale.org/it/arte/2015/intervento-di-paolo-baratta> [last accessed 16 September 2021].

<sup>324</sup> Translation of the author P. Baratta, *Intervento di Paolo Baratta: residente della Biennale*, cit.

the artists working around the world. Therefore, a Parliament for a Biennale of varying and intense energy.<sup>325</sup>

If there is an element of irony in Okwui Enwezor's curatorial approach, it can be possibly found in the exhibition's title, *All the World's Futures*, and the fact that the exhibition condensed together the least visionary scenarios one could think about a worldview developed through visual art. *All the World's Futures* does not indicate any future; neither for art nor for the planet in which art occurs and to which it bears witness. It offered no future explainable as the product of a positivistic progression of history or an "improvement" due to modernisation.<sup>326</sup> Fragments of the past of various kinds could be found in every corner of the exhibition, given the fact that the Biennale promotes on a regular basis specific events dedicated to Art, Architecture, Dance, Theatre, Music, and Cinema.<sup>327</sup> The show presented the future as an inevitable repetition of scenarios that constitute our past and present. *All the World's Futures* nurtured a single truth: "entropy is the defining dynamic of the world. For every force there is an opposing force, often more powerful: for wealth there is poverty; for work, alienation; for justice, injustice; for good, evil."<sup>328</sup> Exactly 100 years after the outbreak of the First World War and 70 years after the end of the Second World War, the world seemed to be plunged into chaos again: from this, followed the urgency, the need, as Enwezor himself explained, to "gather", in this international exhibition, the creative and critical forces of artists and thinkers, to reflect on the current "state of affairs"<sup>329</sup> and look, if possible, at new semantic horizons.<sup>330</sup>

The Venetian exhibition returned to witness the bond between art and human, social, and political reality. In this Biennale, in which artists face memory (that of the past centuries and the most recent), the nine large white fiberglass statues at

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> M. D'Aurizio, *All the World's Futures / 56th Venice Biennale*, in "Flash Art", 21 May 2015; <https://flash---art.com/2015/05/all-the-worlds-futures-56th-venice-biennale/#> [last accessed 29 June 2021].

<sup>327</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, *Biennale Arte | Biennale Arte 2015 - All the World's Futures*, cit.

<sup>328</sup> M. D'Aurizio, *All the World's Futures / 56th Venice Biennale*, cit.

<sup>329</sup> S. Sperandio, *La Biennale di Venezia guarda la storia con gli occhi dell'arte*, in "Il Sole 24 Ore", 9 May 2015; <https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2015-05-09/al-via-56ma-biennale-veneziana-all-the-world-s-future-s-leone-d-oro-all-armenia-e-all-artista-adrian-piper-152058.shtml> [last accessed 3 July 2021].

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

the entrance of the Giardini (*Coronation Park* (2015) by the Indian artists Raqs Media Collective) had an almost emblematic value: “they depict heroes, kings and powerful of the past who stand imposingly on the pedestals, peering at the horizon.”<sup>331</sup> Their monumental character is only mere appearance. They were, in fact, injured figures, without head or arms, or with a broken chest, images of power reduced to tatters.<sup>332</sup>

Are they, therefore, the ruins of the past, the effigies, to be demolished to create new opportunities? This enquiry seemed to echo in the Norwegian pavilion, encircled by large and bright windows. Inside, there was broken glass on the floor, “while a dozen square and white maxi corns seem to be hurled forcefully in bulk by a mysterious giant in the grip of a raptus.”<sup>333</sup> In the meantime, the deep vibration transmitted by Camille Norment's installation, *Rapture*, seemed to invade the entire space. “Voices, noises, hisses, vibrations: the sounds of the world were often co-protagonists of the artworks on display”<sup>334</sup>, and this was an element that distinguished this edition from the previous one, curated by Massimiliano Gioni and devoted to the Encyclopaedic Palace, scattered with dense silences. Images, objects, sounds, and texts from this exhibition were the bare essential, so that this exhibition could take a position in these times of change.<sup>335</sup>

In 2015 the Biennale had 500.875 visitors over almost 7 months, 24.065 of whom only during the opening, 8100 media accreditations, 5450 from international press.<sup>336</sup> Since the 2015 edition of Venice Art Biennale was a unique one because of its earlier opening, this has made the comparison with the previous editions slightly more complicated than usual. However, *All the World's Futures* proved the positive trend of increasing attendance that was evident in the previous editions.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> P. Bisello, *Venice Biennale the Day After: how All The World's Futures Affect Local Future*, in “Conceptual Fine Arts”, 23 November 2015; <https://www.conceptualfinearts.com/cfa/2015/11/23/venice-biennale-the-day-after-how-all-the-worlds-futures-affect-local-future/> [last accessed: 05 July 2021].

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

The optimism characterising the roundups at the end of giant events of international relevance, such as Biennale, is also due to the appreciation of the “enhancements” the event has brought to those who hosted it. For example, the key word, coming from mainstream reporters, in the case of the International Expo held in Milan the same year (in fact the very reason of the earlier opening of Venice Art Biennale) was “growth”. In this context, growth mostly meant impact on the GDP of the city of Milan and Italy, with striking figures pointing to the great economic results. On the other hand, not enough attention was given by the media and institutions to what kind of human and cultural effect EXPO had on the community that hosted it.<sup>338</sup>

An important observation to make is that because it has a yearly occurrence (including the event devoted to architecture) and it lasts for seven months, the Biennale has become a regular presence for the Venetian art world. Yet, the prevalent comment among some artists and curators was that *All the World's Futures* was somehow unique for the community.<sup>339</sup> It felt like the central shows were especially inspiring because of the accuracy of the political issues on display, even if they were not addressing directly to the Venetian local.<sup>340</sup> An example was *Hope!*, the group exhibition of young Ukrainian artists set up in a provisional glass structure located between Giardini and Arsenale in the Ukrainian pavilion, along the Riva dei Sette Martiri. It was the symbol of a new Ukraine that was opening up to the world, an exhibition that addressed issues related to the ongoing conflict and the latest history of the country and gave voice to the hopes of its inhabitants.<sup>341</sup> During the last few years, there was a substantial increase of protest movements that began, in particular, in November 2013 with the occupation of Maidan Square, one of the main squares in the centre of Kiev, which has become the symbol of the Ukrainian anti-government protest against the then-President Viktor Yanukovich. Hundreds of people were killed during the demonstrations.<sup>342</sup> A few months later,

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> N.d., *Hope!*, in “arte.it”, 2015; <http://www.arte.it/calendario-arte/venezia/mostra-hope-16277>. [last accessed 17 September 2021].

<sup>342</sup> P. Bommarito, *HOPE! National Pavilion of Ukraine*, in “roots-routes.org”, 2015; <https://www.roots-routes.org/hope-national-pavilion-of-ukraine-di-paola-bommarito/>. [last accessed 17 September 2021].

in the wake of the annexation of the Crimean region to Russia, pro-Russian protesters seized public buildings in the cities of Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Lugansk. The secessionists proclaimed the “Sovereign Republic” in Donetsk, starting a conflict that is still ongoing nowadays in the regions of eastern Ukraine and that has so far caused thousands of deaths and over a million refugees.<sup>343</sup> In this context, cultural production can only focus on those artistic practices that reflect on the current crisis of the country, which address issues related to territorial integrity and the creation of national identity, which seek to establish an eloquent cultural dialogue between East and West.<sup>344</sup> The exhibition was curated by Björn Geldhorf, and supported by Victor Pinchuk, a Ukrainian entrepreneur that for years had been creating and supporting, among many difficulties, artistic projects in his country with an autonomous practice and centred on a critical reflection without compromises. The eight Ukrainian artists proposed a critical and above-parties understanding of the conflict while showing a deep personal commitment and solidarity towards their country.<sup>345</sup>

Unquestionably, there was a broad pedagogical attention paid by the Biennale, and this is also shown by the figures: 31 percent of the visitors were students, almost 11 percent of people took part in the educational programs, over 7000 teachers were involved. The institution also paid attention to the local community by offering schools from the region discounts, and 17 percent of the total number fell under this category.<sup>346</sup>

For those who hoped to see more drastic changes coming from *All the World's Futures*, there was not that much satisfaction. Venice Art Biennale continued to be an event and business that reflects the city's private nature, and even to its past as one of the capitalistic centres.<sup>347</sup> However, the event's cultural or human components “could survive parallel to the institutional politics, a sort of representation that often and unconsciously manages to reterritorialize locals and their issues to a global matter of concern.”<sup>348</sup> In fact, most of the projects presented

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> P. Bisello, *Venice Biennale the Day After: how All The World's Futures Affect Local Future*, cit.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

for the central exhibit dealt directly with “issues of space, territoriality, borders and the transforming geographies of cities under late capitalism”<sup>349</sup>, mainly concentrating on the challenges of expressing the “shape-shifting contemporary realities”.<sup>350</sup> Many of the projects at the 2015 Venice Biennale were conceived exactly as “machines of spatial order and disorder”<sup>351</sup>, though one exhibit, that I am going to discuss in the next chapter, definitely more than any other.

### 3.2. Christoph Büchel: an artist for social issues



Ill. 17: Christoph Büchel, Courtesy Piccadilly Community Centre, London; <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/232919/christoph-bchel-s-piccadilly-community-centre>.

Christoph Büchel was born in 1966 in Basel, Switzerland. His works include complex installations and actions, often unlicensed (frequently he does not have any authorisation for occupying the space used for the project), and not going on record, with a conceptual nature.<sup>352</sup> The artist usually occupies pre-existing spaces

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<sup>349</sup> L. Bialasiewicz., *That which is not a Mosque*, cit. p. 367-368.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Palazzo Grassi, *Christoph Büchel*, in “palazzograssi.it”; <https://www.palazzograssi.it/it/artisti/christoph-buchel/> [last accessed: 07 July 2021].



and, using them for purposes different from those for which they were conceived, redefines not only the architecture, but also the meaning and history, superimposing them on the original ones.<sup>353</sup> The artist won the “Hugo Boss Prize” for contemporary art in 2008, and is mostly known for works addressing war, immigration, poverty, criticizing consumerism, American hegemony, and globalization.<sup>354</sup>

With his projects Büchel questions the standard relationship between the viewer and his works. The latter, indeed, because of their chameleonic nature, are often mistaken for reality and the viewers find themselves experiencing them without knowing that what they are seeing is, in fact, an artwork. For instance, with the *Piccadilly Community Center* (2011), Büchel transformed the headquarters of the London gallery Hauser und Wirth into a functioning leisure centre, whose artistic matrix remained invisible, as it was a component of the life of a community disguised as a service.<sup>355</sup>



Ill. 18: View of Christoph Buchel's, Piccadilly Community Centre, Hauser and Wirth, London, 2011. Image Courtesy of Piccadilly Community Centre; <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/232919/christoph-buchel-s-piccadilly-community-centre>.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> N.d., *Biennale: la provocazione religiosa di Büchel, chiesa trasformata in moschea*, in “Adnkronos”, 7 May 2015; [https://www.adnkronos.com/da-chiesa-a-moschea-alla-biennale-la-provocazione-religiosa-di-buechel\\_3QfMZ8D4egPxUo0FP89UFb?refresh\\_ce](https://www.adnkronos.com/da-chiesa-a-moschea-alla-biennale-la-provocazione-religiosa-di-buechel_3QfMZ8D4egPxUo0FP89UFb?refresh_ce). [last accessed 2 August 2021].

<sup>355</sup> Palazzo Grassi, *Christoph Büchel*, cit.

Büchel is known worldwide for his conceptual works and complex large-scale installations, which are often committed to recent events and politics, “re-appropriating mass media sources and everyday life situations.”<sup>356</sup> His accurate depictions of reality appears to be more real than reality itself.<sup>357</sup> The world he produces is often totally operational, and people forget that they are in an art installation, physically projected into other contexts and community settings that constitute the modern world.<sup>358</sup> These realistic works, which often also require to interface and communicate with specific groups, are often scrupulous creations that illustrate “the inner workings and pyramid of hierarchies capitalist societies, contexts we pretend not to see or consciously refuse to acknowledge.”<sup>359</sup> These kinds of works carry heavy criticism from the institutions, especially about the ways in which people and consumers, businesses and communities are managed and led.<sup>360</sup>

In Büchel’s work, complexity is found in the complicated detail developed for each project. A feature of the artist’s work is layers of social and political analysis. Büchel detects ambiguities and social inequities in the ideological forces governing society today and finds a way, through his art, to discredit and resist these forces by revealing them as constructed realities subject to change.<sup>361</sup>

He also almost bankrupted the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) with a project that never came to light and was eventually taken to court.<sup>362</sup> The project was called *Training Ground For Democracy* and it was a cooperation between the artist and the museum, whereby its vast main exhibition

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<sup>356</sup> News Editor, *Project Initiated by Artist Christoph Büchel in Collaboration with the Muslim Communities of Venice and Iceland. - Biennial Foundation*, in “Biennial Foundation”, 1 May 2015; <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/2015/05/project-initiated-by-artist-christoph-buchel-in-collaboration-with-the-muslim-communities-of-venice-and-iceland/>. [last accessed: 12 July 2021].

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> G. Yahav, *Venice Biennale's Mosque-in-a-church Draws Kudos and Ire*, in “Haaretz.com”, 19 May 2015; <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/.premium-venice-biennale-s-mosque-in-a-church-draws-kudos-and-ire-1.5363568>. [last accessed 30 July 2021].

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> J. Baumgardner, *What’s Been Missed in the Heated Debate around Christoph Büchel’s Venice Biennale Mosque*, in “Artsy.net”, 2 June 2015; <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-venice-biennale-iceland-pavilion-debate>. [last accessed 22 July 2021].

space, Building 5, was to become a village built from found objects and ephemera that the judge, who visited the installation, defined as:

an old movie theatre, a Saddam area with a replica of a spider hole, a propaganda van, a jail, a sniper atop a gas station, a looted convenience store, a police car, and a hippie van, all creating an atmosphere of torture and despair and an overwhelming sense of portentousness.<sup>363</sup>

Under Büchel's instructions the museum had "gathered and assembled many of the disputed components for Büchel at its own expense, and the artist and museum had worked together in an organic collaboration on the installation".<sup>364</sup> Subsequent debates between the artist and museum about funding (the preliminary budget of \$160,000 had been progressively increased to over \$300,000) and the selection of the assembled material, Büchel abandoned the project in December 2006.<sup>365</sup> The museum asked Büchel to remove the materials and refund the museum its expenditure on the project, to which appeal he did not accede. For this reason, the controversy was taken to court.<sup>366</sup>

In, conclusion it can be said that Christoph Büchel has always been a controversial artist and in the next subchapter another divisive artwork is going to be analysed.

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<sup>363</sup> H. Lydiate, *Christoph Büchel v Mass MoCA*, in "artquest.org.uk", 2007; <https://www.artquest.org.uk/artlaw-article/christoph-buchel-v-mass-moca/> [last accessed 19 September 2021].

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3. A Mosque in the Lagoon



Ill. 19: Christoph Büchel, *The Mosque*, 56th Biennale (2015), Icelandic Pavilion; <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/christoph-buechel-art-mosque-iceland-pavilion-venice-biennale-shut-down-301246>.

In the animated political environment that encircled international conflicts, not to mention the Italian (and, at large, European) debate about immigration from Syria, Lebanon and other regions in North Africa and the Middle East, the chances for a proper Islamic worship place seemed very low.<sup>367</sup> However, the Venice Biennale changed this picture, as the Swiss-born, Iceland-based artist Christoph Büchel opened his installation named *THE MOSQUE: The First Mosque in the Historic City of Venice* in the Icelandic pavilion.<sup>368</sup>

The artist collaborated with the Muslim Communities of Venice and Iceland, and with Nina Magnúsdóttir, who curated the pavilion. *The Mosque* involved many Muslim inhabitants of Venice who came from 29 different countries, and opened the gates to Venetian residents as well as tourists, together with the thousands of Muslims that travel to Venice every year.<sup>369</sup>

On May the 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, heads from the Muslim communities of Iceland and Venice, joined by a few dignitaries, local and foreign, and a band too, gathered to

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<sup>367</sup> D. Creahan, *Venice – Christoph Büchel: ‘THE MOSQUE’ at the Icelandic Pavilion During the Venice Biennale Through November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015*, in “Artobserved.com”, 16 May 2015; <http://artobserved.com/2015/05/venice-christoph-buechel-the-mosque-at-the-icelandic-pavilion-during-the-venice-biennale-through-november-22nd-2015/>. [last accessed: 10 July 2021].

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> News Editor, *Project Initiated by Artist Christoph Büchel in Collaboration with the Muslim Communities of Venice and Iceland*. - Biennial Foundation, cit.

introduce the project.<sup>370</sup> There were many people in the large building for the ceremony. Men and women - Muslims and some art-world travellers too - left their shoes near the doorway and sat to listen to speeches and music.<sup>371</sup> The atmosphere was festive. It was a long show, and some took breaks in an adjacent room, drinking iced tea and orange Fanta, eating cookies.<sup>372</sup> During the ceremony Nandino Capovilla, a Venetian catholic priest, said: “the richer the cultural difference in a city, the better the city is.” and drew a heavy applause.<sup>373</sup>

Traditionally, there have never been mosques in Venice. Despite the city’s past as an open access to the East and a point of trade that encouraged new cultural, artistic, and scientific progresses, Venice has never allowed the construction of a site of worship for its Muslim inhabitants.<sup>374</sup>

Choosing the location for the installation was a very delicate issue, as it is documented in the e-mails that Manuela Lucà-Dazio, the Organisational Manager for Visual Arts and Architecture, and Björg Stefánsdóttir, Director of the Icelandic Art Centre, exchanged. In February 2014 Iceland was interested in having a space in the Arsenale,<sup>375</sup> while in February 2015 the artist, Christoph Büchel asked the architect Marco Truccolo, from the Visual Art & Architecture Department, to present to the public authorities his project for the use of a public space, since their proposal was rejected by Father Gianmatteo Caputo from the Patriarchate, who refused to rent San Samuele Church out for the nature of the project.<sup>376</sup> The Icelandic delegation also asked Istituzione di Ricovero e di Educazione, a Venetian public institution for assistance and charity, to host their project, but they changed their mind after the Paris attack<sup>377</sup> in January the 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, when some armed men

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<sup>370</sup> A. Russeth, *Breaking the Mystique of the Mosque: Christoph Büchel’s Icelandic Pavilion Opens*, in “ARTnews.com”, 8 May 2015; <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/breaking-the-mystique-of-the-mosque-chrisoph-buchels-icelandic-pavilion-opens-4104/>. [last accessed 21 July 2021].

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> D. Creahan, *Venice – Christoph Büchel: ‘THE MOSQUE’ at the Icelandic Pavilion During the Venice Biennale through November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015*, cit.

<sup>375</sup> Björg Stefánsdóttir to Manuela Lucà-Dazio, February 2014, Venice Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee di Venezia (ASAC), Fondo Storico, Series: Arti Figurative, b.991, envelope 8.

<sup>376</sup> Christoph Büchel to Marco Truccolo, 15 February 2015, Venice Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee di Venezia (ASAC), Fondo Storico, Series: Arti Figurative, b.991, envelope 8.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

attacked the editorial office of the satirical weekly French Charlie Hebdo.<sup>378</sup> The same thing happened with the Catholic School in the Santi Apostoli parish. However, the public authorities did not accept the project for safety reasons, and they suggested to find a private and closed space.<sup>379</sup> It was only at the beginning of April 2015 that the Commissioner of the Pavilion managed to sign the contract for the church Santa Maria della Misericordia.<sup>380</sup>

Using the interior of the deconsecrated Santa Maria della Misericordia church in the city's Canareggio district, Büchel's installation has turned the site back to a place of spiritual devotion and community unification.<sup>381</sup> The building was rent from a lighting company that has owned it since its closure years ago.<sup>382</sup> Büchel, represented by Hauser und Wirth, cooperated with Iceland, a country recognised for its remarkably homogenous population, not only to create a shared place of worship, but to show the long history of cultural and religious oppression and restriction that had long guided the city's policies, even if it benefited from the strength of its trade with the East.<sup>383</sup> Illugi Gunnarsson, Minister of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland, stated:

From the beginning of the settlement of Iceland in the 9th century, to well into the 20th century, the Icelandic nation was a homogeneous people, living off the natural resources of the country in a harsh environment in the North Atlantic. In recent decades Iceland has been enriched by immigration from all over the world, stimulating a creative dialogue on various issues, based on the religious tolerance upon which our society puts great emphasis. The Muslim Community in Iceland is an important voice in this dialogue, and it is my hope that the Icelandic contribution of *THE MOSQUE* to La Biennale di Venezia 56th International Art Exhibition, initiated by Christoph Büchel, will be a positive contribution to this dialogue on the international stage.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> A. P., *Una cronologia degli attacchi terroristici in Europa*, in "Internazionale", 7 January 2015; <https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/2015/01/07/una-cronologia-degli-attacchi-terroristici-in-europa> [last accessed 17 September 2021].

<sup>380</sup> Björg Stefánsdóttir to Manuela Lucà-Dazio and Micol Saleri, 7 April 2015, Venice Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee di Venezia (ASAC), Fondo Storico, b.991, envelope 8.

<sup>381</sup> D. Creahan, *Venice – Christoph Büchel: 'THE MOSQUE' at the Icelandic Pavilion During the Venice Biennale through November 22<sup>nd</sup>*, cit.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> News Editor, *Project Initiated by Artist Christoph Büchel in Collaboration with the Muslim Communities of Venice and Iceland. - Biennial Foundation*, cit.



The church stopped being used for religious functions in 1969.<sup>385</sup> The building became, since then, a rentable venue, of “type SU”, so

with pre-nineteenth-century special building unit with a unitary structure we mean the original pre-nineteenth-century building unit in which the presence of a unitary compartment, more or less large, is absolutely prevalent compared to the accessory compartments possibly associated, as in churches, in “scolae”, in monumental rooms, in meeting rooms and for shows, in theatres.<sup>386</sup>

As it is recorded within the zoning regulations of the old city of Venice, rules that allow spaces to be used as:

Museums; exhibition venues; libraries; archives; association facilities; theatres; community places; religious facilities, provided that the entire building unit is used as one of the aforementioned uses exclusively or overwhelmingly, with one or more other uses occurring as auxiliary and/or complementary use.<sup>387</sup>



III. 20: Church Santa Maria della Misericordia, Iceland Pavilion;  
<https://www.exibart.com/speednews/venezia-padiglioni-lislanda-resuscita-la-chiesa-di-santa-maria-della-misericordia-con-una-moschea/>.

Büchel’s location chosen for *The Mosque* was historically meaningful itself. The Cannaregio district is situated near the city’s old Jewish Ghetto, where, in the Middle Ages, political oppression was part of the city’s law, limiting movements

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<sup>385</sup> J. Baumgardner, *What’s Been Missed in the Heated Debate around Christoph Büchel’s Venice Biennale Mosque*, cit.

<sup>386</sup> Translation of the author Venice Municipality, *DRGV n. 3987 del 09/11/1999*, Norme Tecniche di Attuazione per la Città Antica: Appendice 1, scheda 20, p. 4-5.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

and avoiding worship beyond this neighbourhood in the city.<sup>388</sup> When Muslim dealers arrived in the city to take part in its profitable trade markets, they were forced into these city spaces too. This depth of history featured Büchel’s actions, working in place where religious oppression was as old as the large-scale commerce bringing these peoples into contact.<sup>389</sup>

Inside, *The Mosque* was instantly recognisable to any person who had ever walked inside an Islamic Mosque. Green prayer rugs on the floor, and the items of worship, the qibla wall, and the mihrab were all there.<sup>390</sup> Possibly one of the best critiques that emerged from this work was the sheer ordinariness of the space.<sup>391</sup> It was like any other mosque, and except for the remarkable Christian architectural characteristics, and it seemed “comfortable in its new role as an Islamic institution.”<sup>392</sup> Indeed, the religious mooring is almost identical from faith to faith. In terms of its appearance, the viewers that expected something different had to face their own prejudice, while they were at the same time received into the building.<sup>393</sup>



III. 21: Timetable for prayers in Santa Maria della Misericordia, Catalogue of the LVI Biennale.

<sup>388</sup> D. Creahan, *Venice – Christoph Büchel: ‘THE MOSQUE’ at the Icelandic Pavilion During the Venice Biennale Through November 22<sup>nd</sup>*, cit.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.



*The Mosque* was so conceptual - there was, to the inexperienced eye, not that much “art” to be observed - that it attracted a flow of Muslims who adopted it as a regular place of worship; they were not the typical visitors of the Biennale.<sup>394</sup> At a first glance, the aim of Büchel’s installation was not that clear. Was it a reference to the growing anti-immigrant attitude in Europe? Or was he referring to Europe’s distancing from religion, in contrast to the inflow of religious immigrants?<sup>395</sup>

However, according to Tommaso Montanari, Christoph Büchel’s project was definitely art because it forced people to think.<sup>396</sup> In his article for “La Repubblica” Montanari wrote that *The Mosque*: “does everything except entertain us, or distract us: it reminds us that, for millennia, art has been a powerful tool to change the world, not an irrelevant elsewhere of convenience in which to escape.”<sup>397</sup> Büchel, argued Montanari, showed people the possible uses cultural heritage could have; it is not true that the only available options are closure, or getting an income. An ancient church turned into a mosque makes the nexus between culture and equality clear playing with the short-circuit between fiction and reality.<sup>398</sup>

Büchel explained that *The Mosque* was a straightforward statement on the difficulty of European countries at adapting to the religious practices of Muslim immigrants. In fact, across Europe, people and governments have established a complicated set of rules and regulations focusing on Islam.<sup>399</sup> In 2009, voters in Büchel’s home country of Switzerland supported a ban on the building of new minarets. Austria had recently prohibited foreign funding of mosques and required imams to be familiar with German. Italy too saw several limitations about new mosques building, while France’s national prohibition to wear the full-face veil was replicated in several Italian towns.<sup>400</sup> So, Christoph Büchel connected the concept behind the installation to both the historical background of Islamic

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<sup>394</sup> M. Moynihan, *A ‘Mosque’ at the Biennale*, in “POLITICO”, 25 May 2015; <https://www.politico.eu/article/a-mosque-at-the-biennale/>. [last accessed 10 July 2021].

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> T. Montanari, *Venezia, lo strano caso della chiesa-moschea ecco perché l’arte torna a fare scandalo*, in “La Repubblica”, 12 May 2015, pp. 24-25, here p. 24.

<sup>397</sup> Translation of the author T. Montanari, *Venezia, Lo strano caso della chiesa-moschea ecco perché l’arte torna a fare scandalo*, cit. p. 24.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> M. Moynihan, *A ‘Mosque’ at the Biennale*, cit.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

culture's profound impact on the City of Venice, and the socio-political effects of the ongoing global migration.<sup>401</sup> In fact, Venice was

enriched for centuries by trade with the East and shaped by Arabic art, architecture, and language, Venice was home to a Muslim prayer room (though not a mosque), established in 1621 in a space inside the 13<sup>th</sup> century palazzo today known as the Fondaco dei Turchi.<sup>402</sup>

The building of mosques was, and still is, a source of debate in various places around the globe. As the Venice Biennale contribution of Iceland, a nation with a low immigration level, *The Mosque* also became a reference point for the Muslim Community of Reykjavik. The Iceland Muslim Community was progressively integrating in the local society, and after years of political debate and media controversy, the construction of the first purpose-built mosque in the history of the nation's capital was finally planned.<sup>403</sup>

With these issues as its background, *The Mosque* highlighted the political institutionalisation of discrimination and prejudice, and to settlement policies that are the centre of the global ethnic and religious disputes.<sup>404</sup>

*The Mosque* emphasised topics that linked Venice and Iceland and shaped the debate about their respective expectations. Venetian issues such as the commodification of culture, complete saturation by tourists, and an ongoing abandonment of Venice by local people that threatens to reduce the city to inertia, find equivalents in Iceland because of substantial increases in tourism, the commodification and exploitation of nature, and low immigration rates.<sup>405</sup>

Mohammed Amin Al Ahdab, who was the President of the Muslim Community of Venice at the time, observed:

Recently, several encouraging signs of openness and understanding have come from the government of our city, from local authorities both civic and religious. But through its depth, truth, and wisdom, the Biennale project of our Icelandic friends is the greatest indicator thus far that a bright new page can be written into the history of the City of Venice through a new form of art – art that is not limited

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<sup>401</sup> News Editor, *Project Initiated by Artist Christoph Büchel in Collaboration with the Muslim Communities of Venice and Iceland. - Biennial Foundation*, cit.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

to painting and sculpture only, art that needs today all the way, the art of dialogue.<sup>406</sup>

*The Mosque* was dedicated to fostering mutual support between the Muslim Communities of Venice and Iceland. Its program of programs included lessons in the Icelandic language, and *The Mosque* could provide helpful information to Venice-based citizens that were interested in moving to Iceland.<sup>407</sup>

During the Biennale di Venezia, *The Mosque* wanted to invite visitors, including the Icelandic citizens, to understand the different cultural, historical, and socio-political systems characterising the modern world, and inspire conversation about the chances and challenges presented when these diverge. *The Mosque* is an expression of the layering of traditions and beliefs that has affected Venice and, more broadly, generated to some of the most important societal questions of our contemporary age.<sup>408</sup>

The installation was based on creating three different thresholds: those who walk through the door entered a church, which contained an art installation, which in turn contained a mosque. The invitation to take off the shoes to enter highlighted the implosive paradox of the three boxes. The result was a contrast between Christianity and Islam through a typical mimetic crisis: the desire for possession of one increased the desire of the other in an escalation that, usually, has its aftermath in violence.<sup>409</sup>

The work was based on a theoretical system typical of modernity as perceived from Descartes onward: everything is representation.<sup>410</sup> In fact, Luigi Codemo argued that the human intellect categorises and disposes everything it encounters, because everything that passes in front of it does not exist except for the subject. Therefore, reason does not come out of the representation: all that one sees is nothing more than a great theatre and the subject is the entrepreneur.<sup>411</sup> As Codemo wrote in his article:

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> L. Codemo, *Portando Christoph Büchel all'estremo*, in "Del Visibile", 17 May 2015; <https://delvisibile.com/2015/05/17/portando-christoph-buchel-allestremo/> [last accessed: 15 July 2021].

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

In the case of the installation carried out in the Chiesa della Misericordia, the artist emptied the place but did not take himself off. Instead, he cut himself off. He reserved for himself, like a God, the corner from which to look at the scene that comes alive. The artist's point of view is the one that initiated and now dominates the representation. He is the theatrical entrepreneur. As a result, there is nothing more violent than visitors who politely take off their shoes and as spectators start looking, photographing others praying. If prayer is relationship and surplus, here it is instead canned and made available in an exotic packaging. In the eyes of the spectators there is the reduction of reality to representation, there is objectification, reduction to an object. Even if it is unconscious, there is the typical desire for domination of modern reason.<sup>412</sup>

But this was only a first consequence, there was also a further stage. In fact, not only the artist staged prayer, but he staged thresholds that came into conflict, indeed if *The Mosque* was a mere installation, the visitors would not have been asked to take off their shoes. So, it can be concluded that the heart and purpose of the installation was the trigger of the conflict.<sup>413</sup>

The realisation of this work of art was purposely realistic, so realistic that, with the artist's authorization, within a few hours it really turned into a functioning mosque. Since several Muslims live in the district of the lagoon city and that they have no place to pray, it is clear why even during the inauguration the site was full of people gathered in prayer, kneeling towards Mecca. A visitor to the Biennale who asked to enter with his shoes received a negative answer from the custodians that managed the flow and preserving the integrity of the place. The man, very resolutely, then called some policemen, who verified the fact. With immediate concern, the local curia expressed strong disappointment because, it was asserted, the church, owned by a private individual, was not, according to their sources, deconsecrated. The municipal police took care of the situation, ordering the closure of the pavilion within a few days, considering that the church was used as a place of worship without authorizations.<sup>414</sup>

On May 22<sup>nd</sup> Christoph Büchel said:

My site manager told me that they deposited a three- or four-page document saying that there were violations and that it's not approved for occupation anymore.

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<sup>412</sup> Translation of the author L. Codemo, *Portando Christoph Büchel all'estremo*, cit.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> D. Scudero, *Effetti collaterali*, in "Unclosed.eu", 7 July 2015; <https://www.unclosed.eu/rubriche/sestane/esplorazioni/102-effetti-collaterali.html>. [last accessed: 16 July 2021].

So, they had to close the doors of the installation, while he was trying to take legal action.<sup>415</sup> The Icelandic Institute turned to the Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale of the Veneto region to look for a way that would lead to reopen its pavilion at the Biennale, also asking for a figure close to 400 thousand euros for the damages experienced, but the Regional Administrative Court pronounced a “no” that was the definitive one.<sup>416</sup>

The work was visually very appealing, created with scrupulous attention to every detail, creating an optical illusion generated by immersing one space into another. Moreover, it responded to a real need: a proper place of worship for the Muslim community.<sup>417</sup>

### 3.4. The Critiques and the Resonance of the Scandal

*The Mosque* was closed on Friday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, by the Venetian police.<sup>418</sup> However, before closing the pavilion, the Icelandic delegation was given an ultimatum: if by May the 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the commissioner of the Iceland Pavilion could not present an authorisation from the *curia* to use the space for something different than Catholic worship, then *The Mosque* would be closed, and so they did.<sup>419</sup>

Since the ideation of the project, the Venetian officials tried to warn the people involved in the Icelandic Pavilion organisation and hinder the setting up of the installation, suggesting it would stir violence from anti-Islamic extremists, or

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<sup>415</sup> R. Kennedy, *Police Shut Down Mosque Installation at Venice Biennale*, in “The New York Times”, 22 May 2015; <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/23/arts/design/police-shut-down-mosque-installation-at-venice-biennale.html>. [last accessed 19 July 2021].

<sup>416</sup> M. Mattioli, *Resterà chiusa la chiesa-moschea allestita da Christoph Büchel a Venezia per il padiglione islandese alla Biennale. Il no alla riapertura arriva dal Tar del Veneto*, in “Artribune”, 14 August 2015; <https://www.artribune.com/tribnews/2015/08/restera-chiusa-la-chiesa-moschea-allestita-da-christoph-buchel-a-venezias-per-il-padiglione-islandese-alla-biennale-il-no-alla-riapertura-arriva-dal-tar-del-veneto/>. [last accessed 2 August 2021].

<sup>417</sup> G. Yahav, *Venice Biennale's Mosque-in-a-church Draws Kudos and Ire*, cit.

<sup>418</sup> Y. Underwood, and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation In Venice*, in “The Reykjavik Grapevine”, 6 June 2015; <https://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2015/06/06/life-imitating-art-icelands-mosque-installation-in-venice/>. [last accessed: 16 July 2021].

<sup>419</sup> M. Pettinau, *A rischio chiusura la chiesa convertita in moschea in occasione della Biennale. Ultimatum del comune di Venezia per il provocatorio padiglione islandese*, in “Artribune”, 15 May 2015.

Islamic extremists.<sup>420</sup> This was due, according to the officials, to the present international situation.<sup>421</sup> However, the curator and the artist decided to open the installation. They anticipated that there would be some reaction, but that was a lot more than what they expected.<sup>422</sup> “It was integral from the start to integrate the Muslim communities in Iceland and Venice and totally necessary for the project to be able to happen.”, said the curator of the pavilion.<sup>423</sup>

The project was thought to highlight the immigration problems in Iceland, which were a relatively new occurrence in the country, and to bring up the issue of Muslim integration in Europe.<sup>424</sup> Moreover, it also aimed to “draw attention to the political institutionalisation of segregation and prejudice in society and to provide a platform for dialogue about communication between different cultural positions.”<sup>425</sup> So, the debate surrounding the installation, and the intersections of politics, art and religion, has only increased the piece’s efficacy.<sup>426</sup>

The small Muslim community in Iceland had problems having a mosque of their own built. In fact, it finally obtained the permission to build a mosque only after years of fighting. The starting point for this piece was precisely the fact that, despite the connection between Venice and the East and the influence of the latter on the city’s architecture, there has never been a mosque in Venice.<sup>427</sup>

Nína Magnúsdóttir said:

Before the Charlie Hebdo attacks, we came to Venice and had some discussions with privately owned churches and they were quite positive, but after the attacks all the doors were closed [...]. Nobody wanted to get involved. The Muslim community in Venice was the opposite. When we approached them initially they were a bit suspicious. What do you really want with us? Why are you approaching us for this? After the Charlie Hebdo attacks, they made a decision within their

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<sup>420</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> C. Ruiz, and L. Panzeri, *It's official: Christoph Büchel's Venice Biennale Mosque Is Closed to the Public*, in “The Art Newspaper”, 22 May 2015; <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/it-s-official-christoph-buechel-s-venice-biennale-mosque-is-closed-to-the-public-z20h1tn>. [last accessed 8 September 2021].

<sup>426</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

community that this was a very timely project and they wanted to participate. They just went full force and got into this project.<sup>428</sup>

As already mentioned, it was very difficult for Büchel and Magnúsdóttir to find the space for the project. As the curator said:

It had to be a space of worship to overlay the history and culture and religion in a public space or a church. The Muslim elements had to visually speak to us - finding this place was very hard.<sup>429</sup>

The church, Santa Maria della Misericordia, has not been used since it became privately owned in 1973. The Venetian ecclesiastical district stated that the church was not formally deconsecrated, and authorisation was necessary for anything other than “Christian worship.” However, the curator said that the Catholic church’s claim that the building was still a religious space was ridiculous. They found a document that declared the church officially deconsecrated; the paper was signed by Albino Luciana, who later became Pope John Paul I.<sup>430</sup> On the other hand, the Patriarchy replied that the church was not deconsecrated, but simply closed for worship which is a totally different situation.<sup>431</sup> Moreover, the Patriarchy also wrote in a note that:

The intervention implemented in this way falls to components of the city that should have been more involved to better share an experience that has social, cultural, and religious implications, also with a view to increasing cordial relations and serene coexistence between those who live and frequent Venice, par excellence the city of encounter between different cultures and faiths.<sup>432</sup>

At the opening ceremonies, Pakistan’s ambassador to Italy openly showed gratitude to Mr. Büchel and to the project’s curator, Nina Magnúsdóttir, for a place for prayers, a place of art, a place where people could gather and talk. Iceland’s Muslim community was behind the project from the beginning, with the President of the Muslim community in Iceland, Salman Tamimi, guiding visitors throughout

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> N.d., *Montano le polemiche per il padiglione-moschea alla Biennale. L’Islanda: “Tutto in regola”, e produce i documenti. Ma la chiesa ribadisce: “non è sconsecrata, ma semplicemente chiusa al culto”*, in “Artribune”, 19 May 2015.

<sup>432</sup> Translation of the author N.d., *Montano le polemiche per il padiglione-moschea alla Biennale. L’Islanda: “Tutto in regola”, e produce i documenti. Ma la chiesa ribadisce: “non è sconsecrata, ma semplicemente chiusa al culto”*, cit.

the installation in Venice.<sup>433</sup> The idea was to have language courses with Arabic teachings and, Icelandic too - if there was an interest for it - mosques, within Muslim communities, are known as Islamic Cultural Centres.<sup>434</sup> There is a lot more than just prayer done within these institutions; they are also places of teaching and lectures. The organisers wished to have inter-faith discussions as well. The installation ran for weeks without any unpleasant incident, but, since it was not reopened, none of these plans for language instruction, inter-faith dialogue, or general education was possible.<sup>435</sup> Moreover, Ibrahim Sverrir Agnarsson, the chair of the Association of Muslims of Iceland, was supposed to attend the mosque throughout the summer; and he said:

we basically want to show that mosques are not military bases but places of peace. We want to show that we can have an interfaith dialogue and that anybody can come here and talk to us at any time.<sup>436</sup>

Nevertheless, the concerns with the pavilion-mosque began even before the opening to the public on May 9.<sup>437</sup> In fact, a few weeks before the opening of the project, during the Biennale preview week, authorities in Venice informed the Icelandic Art Centre that local police thought the installation was a “threat to public safety”.<sup>438</sup> As a matter of fact, the mosque was situated near a bridge: a position that, police argued, “made it difficult to provide the safety surveillance required due to the terrorist threat from extremists.”<sup>439</sup> However, the Venice Biennale hoped that a resolution could be found to allow the reopening of the pavilion, even though it could not make any remark on the choice taken by the competent authorities concerning the security and administration of the city, nor concerning autonomous artistic expression, independent as part of each national participation.<sup>440</sup> After the closure, the Icelandic Art Centre asked the city of Venice for € 360,000 as

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<sup>433</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> C. Higgins, *Artist Draws Controversy Turning Church into Venice's First Mosque*, in “The Guardian”, 8 May 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/08/biennale-artist-turning-church-into-venices-first-mosque>. [last accessed 21 July 2021].

<sup>437</sup> L. Muños-Alonso, *Icelandic Pavilion Mosque Shut Down by Authorities*, in “Artnet News”, 22 May 2015; <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/christoph-buechel-art-mosque-iceland-pavilion-venice-biennale-shut-down-301246>. [last accessed 20 July 2021].

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.



compensation, as well as an unspecified amount of money for damages.<sup>441</sup> In addition, on July 31<sup>st</sup>, the court in Venice that examined the case refused to fast-track the legal claim file by the IAC for the reopening of the installation. The IAC added in a statement that, since the standard process could take months, it was clear that the court would not decide until after the closure of the Biennale, so continuing the appeal would have addressed only a compensation for damages due to the closure of the pavilion, which was never re-opened.<sup>442</sup>

The Icelandic Art Centre, after the closure of the pavilion, expressed its frustration at Venetian officials for shutting down the installation after only two weeks.<sup>443</sup> However, what the IAC found even more upsetting was the attitude of the Biennale itself; they stated:

the administration of the Venice Biennale, an institution within the City of Venice, has not supported the artistic endeavour in the way that would have been expected for an organisation of its stature and proclaimed advocacy of contemporary art.<sup>444</sup>

The IAC also added that, after this decision, it was clear that the Biennale, which has always been a primary stage for the visual arts, was not a place for free artistic expression. The artists that chose to take part to the exhibition appear only to be able to address problems that are tolerable by the local authorities.<sup>445</sup>

When the mosque was ultimately closed, the main complaint was that the project was not art, but a place of worship<sup>446</sup>. The Venetian officials requested the Icelandic Arts Centre to reapply to use the building as a place of worship. Björg Stefánsdóttir replied that the installation was a mosque, but it was not a mosque at the same time; it looked real and was real, but it was not real.<sup>447</sup> However, it was art, since at the end of the exhibition it would have been dismantled and the installation would have been over.<sup>448</sup> People entering the mosque were never

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<sup>441</sup> N.d., *Venice Court to Decide Fate of the Biennale "Mosque"*, in "The Art Newspaper", 27 July 2015.

<sup>442</sup> G. Harris, *Venice Court Rejects Fast-track Request to Re-open Biennale "mosque" by Christoph Büchel*, in "The Art Newspaper", 11 August 2015.

<sup>443</sup> C. Ruiz and L. Panzeri, *It's Official: Christoph Büchel's Venice Biennale Mosque Is Closed to the Public*, cit.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

obliged to take off their shoes or, in the case of women, wear veils. These things were recommended, and veils were available, but it was not compulsory.<sup>449</sup> It was also an educational place, the Muslim community and other organisations engaged in a dialogue, and Mohamed Amin Al Ahdab, head of the Islamic Community of Venice, encouraged each nation to perform and present their culture.<sup>450</sup> Al Ahdab was pleased by the fact that project could not only benefit Venice's Muslim workers and students, but serve, as already mentioned, as place of interfaith dialogue.<sup>451</sup>

No one here could have believed that this could have been made to happen from outside the Mediterranean world, from outside the Islamic world, thanks to a small island in the north. This is an invitation to other people, to other cultures, to exchange positive ideas.<sup>452</sup>

There were various claims about this installation, however, the strangest one by Venetian functionaries was that the mosque was being attended by too many people simultaneously, exceeding legal restrictions. The Icelandic Arts Centre replied in a press release that occupancy of the Pavilion has been followed regularly by the staff and has, after the inauguration day, never gone beyond 100 people at one time.<sup>453</sup> They had counters at the entrance the whole time, said Björg Stefánsdóttir, director of The Icelandic Arts Centre. When the police came to check, they never gave the organisation a fine. The guard was called to the police station for an interrogation, and when he asked for something that could confirm that he had been interrogated the police answered him they did not need to give him anything.<sup>454</sup> Another objection made to the project was the risk of terrorist attack from some religious extremist that could consider the combination of Muslim and Christian symbols on the outside offensive.<sup>455</sup>

Bruce Leimsidor, a professor of immigration and asylum law at Ca' Foscari University at the time, argued that if Büchel "really wanted to pour salt in the

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> C. Higgins, *Artist Draws Controversy Turning Church into Venice's First Mosque*, cit.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> M. Pettinau, *A rischio chiusura la chiesa convertita in moschea in occasione della Biennale. Ultimatum del Comune di Venezia per il provocatorio padiglione islandese*, cit.

wounds” he should have proposed this project in cities like Rome or Milan, where the anti-Islamic feelings were much higher.<sup>456</sup> He also claimed that Venice, in his opinion, was the most tolerant city in Italy and that it was not the right city for this kind of provocation. On the other hand, the artist argued that he had not seen such tolerance while dealing with the authorities for *The Mosque* and he added that Venice was the right place for his work, since it has always been “one of the premier tourist-driven showplaces of European culture, never more during the Biennale.”<sup>457</sup>

On the other hand, according to Magnúsdóttir, there was no political reason behind having this project in the historic city of Venice. Furthermore, the request to apply a temporary relief on the exterior of the building reading “Allahu akbar” (God is great) was explicitly refused.<sup>458</sup> To circumvent official restraints on prayer in public places, those who wish to worship in the mosque were first asked to become members of an association. So, the project was not just for Muslims, said Magnúsdóttir: “It is a work of art, and the public are welcome to come and visit.”<sup>459</sup> As the curator of the Icelandic Pavilion said to the correspondent for the “Corriere del Veneto” on May the 13<sup>th</sup>, they did not expect to generate such a controversy with their project, even though she admitted that the installation could be considered provocative. However, she added that the genesis of the installation was totally different from the one reconstructed by the media in those days, indeed the idea for Büchel’s project originated from the fact that, after twelve years, it was decided to build the first mosque in Reykjavik and when the artist saw that Venice lacked a worship place for Muslims too, he decided to build one himself and to present it to the Biennale. He wanted to demonstrate to the local authorities that, with the right will, things could be done even in a short time.<sup>460</sup>

Another issue that emerged, as already mentioned, was the fact that Christoph Büchel is Swiss. However, he lived and still lives in Iceland, his wife is Icelandic,

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<sup>456</sup> R. Kennedy, *Mosque Installed at Venice Biennale Tests the City’s Tolerance*, in “The New York Times”, 6 May 2015.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> A. D’E., *La curatrice dell’opera: “A Reykjavik 12 anni per costruire il tempio. Così è nata l’idea”*, in “Corriere del Veneto”, 13 May 2015, p. 8.

his son is Icelandic and at the time he had been living there for the previous eight years. So, he was commissioned by the Icelandic Arts Centre to represent Iceland in Venice.<sup>461</sup> About this issue the “Corriere del Veneto” asked for clarifications directly to the Icelandic embassy in Paris, since there are only some Icelandic Consulates in Italy, and the Icelandic Minister for Education, Science and Culture stated that the Ministry was not involved in the process of choosing the artist that would represent Iceland at the Venice Biennale; The Icelandic Art Centre was responsible for this task.<sup>462</sup> So, Gunnarsson concluded that Büchel could not be considered an official representative of the Icelandic Government, rather he represented himself and himself only.<sup>463</sup>

In Venice, strong hostility to Büchel’s project came from the Venetian mayoral candidate Luigi Brugnaro. He described the work as a mistaken initiative, which was done without considering how Venetian citizens would feel.<sup>464</sup> Moreover, the right-wing party “Fratelli d’Italia” held a protest outside the building, and quite a few visitors refused to remove their shoes at the entrance, arguing that there was only an artistic display inside, not a real mosque.<sup>465</sup> Furthermore, they requested the permission to share informational material in the square outside Santa Maria della Misericordia, so that citizens knew what was happening there.<sup>466</sup> Emanuele Prativiera, a member of the “Lega Nord” party, was equally reluctant to admit that *The Mosque* was just a piece of art; he said: “it is not art [...] it is a forgery [un falso artistico].”<sup>467</sup> That in the space of a few days has been transformed into a place of worship. As a non-authorized space, it should have been made disappear within 24 hours.”<sup>468</sup> In addition, self-proclaimed “spontaneous citizens’ committees” protested against *The Mosque* in the streets near the installation

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<sup>461</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>462</sup> G. Viafora, *Il ministro della cultura islandese: “Quell’artista non rappresenta il Paese. Solo lui responsabile”*, in “Corriere del Veneto”, 13 May 2015, p.8.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>465</sup> G. Yahav, *Venice Biennale's Mosque-in-a-church Draws Kudos and Ire*, cit.

<sup>466</sup> L. Bialasiewicz., *That which is not a Mosque*, cit. p. 375.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

through pickets and leafleting. One of such leaflets, covered the fences of a construction site facing the Santa Maria della Misericordia, stated:

Iceland, as part of the 2015 Venice Biennale, created a mosque in the Church of the Santa Maria della Misericordia, violating and desecrating a symbol of our Christianity, culture and historical memory. Let us all stand up to this offensive and provocative act by a nation that appears to have still remained barbarian! **BOYCOTT ALL OF THEIR PRODUCTS AND TOURIST BUSINESS** (do not buy any “Made in Island” [sic] products or in the case of fish, those with the label “fished or raised in the North Sea”).<sup>469</sup>

The flyers showed, in their centre, what was meant to be the Icelandic flag, with a large X across it, but the flag chosen was erroneously the British one, generating curious stares and then laughs from many of the tourists passing by.<sup>470</sup>



III. 22: "No to Iceland" flyer; L. Bialasiewicz., *That which is not a mosque*, p. 376.

Another group of flyers on the streets surrounding the installation addressed a different set of imagined historical geographies in opposing *The Mosque*. These showed the Nicopeja Madonna, the icon of the Santa Vergine Nicopeja that, since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, hangs in St Mark's Cathedral, arrived in Venice from

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

Constantinople as part of the winnings of the Fourth Crusade.<sup>471</sup> Venetian citizens, since that time, have been particularly devoted to the Madonna, and the icon is said to have safeguarded the city from war and pestilence through the centuries. Like the other flyer, this too demanded divine protection against the profanation of a Christian space.<sup>472</sup>



Ill. 23: Madonna of Nicopeja flyer; L. Bialasiewicz., *That which is not a mosque*, p. 377.

Luigi Corò, president of the “Comitato Marco Polo a difesa del cittadino”, visited the church of Santa Maria della Misericordia bringing many photos along to see if the building was exactly like it used to be.<sup>473</sup> According to him, one of the proofs that confirmed that the church was still consecrated was the fact that there no sign of sign of removal of the relics that are often hidden in the altars’ stone and sealed with marble block.<sup>474</sup> So, he stated that the church was desecrated, while the technicians argued that it was just cleaned up and settled for the installation. The president of the “Comitato Marco Polo” added that behind this project lied the intention of humiliating the Catholic belief, profaning one of the most important

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid, cit. pp. 375 - 376.

<sup>473</sup> V. M., *Corò denuncia la Biennale: “Profanato luogo sacro”*, in “La Nuova Venezia, 13 May 2015, p. 19.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

places in Venice for this faith.<sup>475</sup> In fact, Santa Maria della Misericordia is one of the most ancient churches in Venice and the first hospital. Corò wanted to sue the Biennale, the Pavilion and Reggiani Lighting Enterprise, asking to restore the site.<sup>476</sup>

On the other hand, Felice Casson, who was the left-wing candidate, supported *The Mosque* by stating that praying in public spaces is totally legal, for instance, people can pray in any faith right in St. Mark's Square.<sup>477</sup>

The lawyer Marco Ferrero, professor of Immigration Law at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, said that the curator was right when she said that they could not force people not to pray.<sup>478</sup> However, when the Icelandic delegation asked him for advice, he said that the presence of religious garments and furniture and being open to all faithful people are two key characteristics of places of worship. He added that the public administration could not prohibit using a private building, even for activities that differ from its intended use, as long as there is no urbanistic impact.<sup>479</sup> So, the prayers could be done in a private space, in a room or in a space delimited by panels. The lawyer stated that things would have been different in case of an association of social promotion, which has the aim of compensating the welfare that the public administration cannot cover with initiatives to benefit the members of the association. However, according to Ferrero, in Italy, the Islamic religion did not have the same rights established by the EU Directive 43/2000 about direct or indirect discrimination.<sup>480</sup>

Julie Baumgardner reported in her article two contrasting points of view about the installation:

while Hrag Vartanian argues that *The Mosque* has not “done much to promote understanding, but it is part of a troubling trend in contemporary art...to create pieces that end up being amateur adventures into the highly specialized field of

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

<sup>478</sup> V. Mantengoli, *L'avvocato Marco Ferrero, docente di Diritto dell'Immigrazione: "Arredi sacri e apertura ai fedeli così diventa luogo di culto"*, in “La Nuova Venezia”, 12 May 2015, p. 3.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

social work,” Andrew Russeth makes the claim that “it felt like a rare, inspiring example of art actually getting something done. But now that is over.”<sup>481</sup>

Andrew Russeth also added that what made the whole situation even more disappointing was the reactionary response in the international art press to the closure, and the dispiriting silence of the curator of that year’s Biennale, Okwui Enwezor, whose aim was to organise an exhibition filled with art linked to high-minded political idealism.<sup>482</sup> According to Russeth, all of this was made worse by how un-provocative Büchel’s work actually was a Muslim place of worship in a part of the city that did not have one. The artist perceived a need and acted to fill it, he helped make the real thing.<sup>483</sup> The writer went further by writing that Büchel’s art was:

an art without apologies. [...] On a more fundamental level, the notion that adherents to a religion of around 1.6 billion people should have to engage in a community outreach to legitimate their presence in a major European city borders on insulting.<sup>484</sup>

Hrag Vartanian, on the other hand, stated that, according to him, the project was meant to be exactly the type of short-term work that could give many art world liberals an exaggerated sense of superiority at the expense of those who did not get the meaning of the installation or share their point of view.<sup>485</sup> Real change, stated Vartanian in his article, comes from persistent and hard work, and there was no sign that Büchel was ever committed to that. Moreover, he declared that the experience of visiting *The Mosque* was not particularly notable, compared to other mosques he had visited around the world (some of which in repurposed churches).<sup>486</sup> What Vartanian did not appreciate was the absence of information on who the faithful were. They did not specified whether the mosque was Sunni or Shia, and there was any insight into the people who used the institution.<sup>487</sup> So, the journalist thought that Büchel’s project did not do much to encourage

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<sup>481</sup> J. Baumgardner, *What’s Been Missed in the Heated Debate around Christoph Büchel’s Venice Biennale Mosque*, cit.

<sup>482</sup> A. Russeth, *Reopen Christoph Büchel’s Mosque Project in Venice*, in “Artnews”, 27 May 2015.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> H. Vartanian, *Why I Don’t Buy the Premise of Christoph Büchel’s Icelandic Mosque Pavilion*, in “Hyperallergic”, 22 May 2015; <https://hyperallergic.com/209399/why-i-dont-buy-the-premise-of-christoph-buchels-icelandic-mosque-pavilion/>. [last accessed: 01 August 2021].

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.



understanding, but, according to Vartanian, it was part of a disturbing trend in contemporary art -mainly those projects that can be included into the group of social practice – “to create pieces that end up being amateur adventures into the highly specialized field of social work.”<sup>488</sup>

Another opinion Baumgardner mentioned was John Updike’s one: “Try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt.”<sup>489</sup> In this case, Büchel clearly stated that his project was one of upheaval. It is an era where boundaries and limits of art are not a relevant debate anymore.<sup>490</sup> According to Updike, if for *All the World’s Futures*, Enwezor could ask artists to just read Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, with no additions, modifications, or explanations, then certainly Büchel’s pavilion was as much a work of performance art.<sup>491</sup> The journalist added that, thinking back to Enwezor’s initial premise for the Biennale raised with the question “how can the current disquiet of our time be properly grasped, made comprehensible, examined, and articulated?”<sup>492</sup>, it can be noted that all that disquiet was neutralized in Büchel’s work. It was actionable, peaceful, and ordinary, since it was about daily life and rituals. It was the opposite of many of the works exhibited in the *Arsenale*, most of which almost literally and figuratively hit the visitors with brutality and destruction.<sup>493</sup>

Anna Somers Cocks, on the other hand, thought that Büchel “played frivolously with fire”, because the project caused many hurtful statements by xenophobes and ignorant people, the authorities became hostile, and the Muslim community ended up without a place for their prayers.<sup>494</sup> However, she agreed with the declaration made by Mohamed Amin Al Ahdad, who said that:

the Icelanders have shone a light on the problem of the demographic changes here, they have dusted off this jewel and made it a living place. It was once a

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> J. Baumgardner, *What’s Been Missed in the Heated Debate around Christoph Büchel’s Venice Biennale Mosque*, cit.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

<sup>494</sup> A. Somers Cocks, *Artist Christoph Büchel’s “Mosque” Played Frivolously with Fire*, in “The Art Newspaper”, 23 May 2015.

church, it is now a mosque, but once again a place to pray to the same God that He may grant us peace.<sup>495</sup>

The journalist also reported in her article that, at the opening ceremony of the pavilion, a Moroccan man, who had been in Italy for 20 years, told her how glad he was that he was that Venice could finally have a mosque, even though there were already some of them on the mainland. She also added that, in the moment people began to pray, a delicate transformation from secular to religious space took place, whether you wanted it or not.<sup>496</sup>

According to Galia Yahav, the installation was ingenious, far from just being an artifice. It was art created in reaction to a real need, based on a deep sense of history and on the aspiration to help generate no less than a better future.<sup>497</sup>

Even the art critic Vittorio Sgarbi said that a church transformed into a mosque was nothing new, he cited Santa Sofia in Istanbul as an example, and that Pope Bergoglio would not have any objection to the installation.<sup>498</sup> In Sgarbi's words: "dato che esiste una comunità musulmana, è giusto che vi sia una moschea. [...] E poi, dire di no mi sembra più rischioso: meglio il dialogo."<sup>499</sup>

On the other hand, Father Gianmatteo Caputo, a delegate of the Patriarchy, argued that the project:

appears as a great forcing and a substantial instrumentalization of all the subjects involved, including in the first place the Muslim community. [...] In this situation, two planes and areas that are – and must remain – well distinguished for their seriousness and complexity have been confused and superficially mixed.<sup>500</sup>

The Patriarchy believed even the Muslim community should have distanced itself from this provocation and renewed the request for a worship space in Venice. Doing so, they would have dropped the provocation of the artist depriving the place of its artistic meaning, because, without prayers, the project was little worth, since it lacked life.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> G. Yahav, *Venice Biennale's Mosque-in-a-church Draws Kudos and Ire*, cit.

<sup>498</sup> Il Critico, *L'opinione di Sgarbi: "il Papa direbbe sì"*, in "La Voce di Rovigo", 13 May 2015, p.26.

<sup>499</sup> Translation of the author Il Critico, *L'opinione di Sgarbi: "il Papa direbbe sì"*, cit.

<sup>500</sup> Translation of the author N.d., *La Diocesi replica all'iniziativa della Biennale di Büchel: "Moschea dentro la chiesa come opera d'arte? Forzatura"*, in "Il Giornale di Vicenza", 13 May 2015, p.7.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

To try to negotiate a *détente*, Omar Al Hnati even invited the Patriarch Francesco Moraglia and the rabbi Rav Bahbout to visit the pavilion, before it was closed, hoping to overcome the controversy and to send a message of peace and dialogue. He also added that Islamic community did not want to underestimate the historic, theological, and cultural implications for recreating a functioning mosque in a church, rather it was firmly convinced that, starting from this project, history can be made, and perhaps perform a “miracle”.<sup>502</sup> Al Hnati also stated that the mosque was not meant to be a place for Muslims only, but to welcome faithful people of every religious belief. Moreover, he said that:

This place will be the proof of a sincere coexistence between us. As Muslims, Christians, and Jews we must give a concrete example of coexistence based on love and respect so that in the world it is said that the inhabitants of Venice have given a magnificent example of coexistence between religions. [...] No outrage, but a chance to take a positive step and collaborate. We must know each other and cooperate.<sup>503</sup>

So, the issues surrounding the installation ranged from security risk to religions colliding to building licenses and fire codes. Moreover, in Iceland, there were nationalistic comments about the ethnic identity of the artist, Christoph Büchel: was he Swiss or Icelandic?<sup>504</sup> Many newspapers have described the installation as “provocative”, “contentious” or as “shocking artwork.”<sup>505</sup> On the other hand, the local Muslim community was not upset by the transformation of the building, or with praying in a church. The artwork was endorsed by the community, with extensive participation in prayers and in other activities.<sup>506</sup>

Björg Stefánsdóttir said that they were essentially dealing with censorship, and that there were many things influencing this controversy. The city of Venice was left without a mayor for the previous year, and the approval depended on who was about to become mayor.<sup>507</sup> The artist wanted to emphasise hypocrisy and

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<sup>502</sup> M. Artico, *L'Invito degli islamici: Patriarca e rabbino visitino il Padiglione*, in “La Nuova Venezia”, 13 May 2015, p. 19.

<sup>503</sup> Translation of the author M. Artico, *L'Invito degli islamici: Patriarca e rabbino visitino il Padiglione*, cit. p. 19.

<sup>504</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation In Venice*, cit.

<sup>505</sup> G. Yahav, *Venice Biennale's Mosque-in-a-church Draws Kudos and Ire*, cit.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>507</sup> Y. Underwood and V. Grettisson, *From Iceland — Life Imitating Art: Iceland's "Mosque" Installation in Venice*, cit.

intolerance in Iceland but ended up causing the same in Venice; a municipal election and right-wing contender exploiting local insecurities about Islam for political gain. As an art project *The Mosque* achieved something: Life imitating art.<sup>508</sup>

The forced closure of *The Mosque* was in some ways distinctive in that the complaints addressed the presence of an Islamic space of worship related to an artistic copy of a mosque, not the proposed construction or use of a real one. Yet even though *The Mosque* was not real, it triggered an emotional excess, a set of popular and political reactions, becoming a fetish object of Islamic spirit to be eliminated.<sup>509</sup> However, the installation, in many ways, did achieve the objective encouraging an encounter between the stranger and the neighbour, though not the “ethical sort of confrontation” that Enwezor projected.<sup>510</sup> The exhibition did create a space of public confrontation, albeit not completely of the emancipatory kind, meaning with spaces of encounter: “spaces in which social absence and social presence attain a visible structuration”; they are areas that “enable public discourses, public conversations” and that allow “people to collectively [...] publicly define themselves”.<sup>511</sup>

Lastly, the idea of using a sacred place for an exhibition or an artistic operation was not new, many artists have done so. It was not unusual for an unconscious audience to consider a work only in its indirect function, many other times an audience not informed about what was happening took part to an artistic event. However, Büchel, as the Imam stated the day after the closure of the Church, played with fire in a haystack.<sup>512</sup> The artist said he hoped that his project would illuminate the contradictions of the Venice International Art Exhibition, “along with a growing social crisis facing Europe”.<sup>513</sup> However, it is unlikely that the artist did not understand exactly where he was placing his installation, nor that he did not know what tensions could generate the contrast between different faiths, especially in a territory such as the Venetian one and specifically in the Cannaregio

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> L. Bialasiewicz., *That which is not a mosque*, cit. p. 378.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., cit. p. 383.

<sup>512</sup> D. Scudero, *Effetti collaterali*, cit.

<sup>513</sup> R. Kennedy, *Mosque Installed at Venice Biennale Tests the City's Tolerance*, cit.

district, known, as already mentioned, for the Jewish Ghetto.<sup>514</sup> The feeling that emerges from this whole story is that the artist got carried away and did not accurately evaluate the outcomes of his gesture. Firstly, on the trustworthiness of those who managed the place. Secondly, the explanation of the art object was possible only to those who had been informed of it, while the unwitting visitors and the faithful could have known nothing about this except that a space dedicated to worship had finally opened.<sup>515</sup>

On the other hand, it was hard for the artist to clarify to the neighbourhood, or even to the Catholics, that a church had been used as a mosque without permission. It was also difficult to explain to the visitors, to a group of non-experts, why a project that was thought to be an installation became a place of worship within which there were rules that were not precisely those of the work of art.<sup>516</sup> Büchel was cunning enough to reveal the open supposition of a dominance of European culture, free, open, egalitarian, in a world that is not. If the artist's idea was to provoke, moreover, it is easy to do so with these topics, if it was to express solidarity instead it was a failure.<sup>517</sup>

In conclusion, what caused the controversy seemed to be the extreme realism of the project not its artistic value.<sup>518</sup> The most frequent question people asked about the artwork were, as written in an article for "Der Tagesspiegel" by Christiane Peitz: "Does an art space turn into a sacred space when someone prays in it, to whomever God? Does art become a religious act when, as in this case, the artist cooperates with the Muslim community of Venice?".<sup>519</sup> However, considering all the different points of view analysed in the chapter, it can be concluded that the artist threatened the city's *status quo* setting up a place of worship for Muslims in a disused building, but most of all he threatened the *status quo* of the Biennale as an institution that claimed to be devoted to the arts and extraneous to political issues, but that even in this case failed to take art's side remaining silent, using the

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<sup>514</sup> D. Scudero, *Effetti collaterali*, cit.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

<sup>518</sup> G. Pradolini, *Moschea, non si fermano le polemiche*, in "Il Gazzettino", 11 May 2015, p. 1.

<sup>519</sup> Translation of the author C. Peitz, *Stadt verbietet Moschee-Kunstprojekt in Kirche*. In "Der Tagesspiegel", 23 May 2015; <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/biennale-in-venedig-stadt-verbietet-moschee-kunstprojekt-in-kirche/11819288.html>. [last accessed 2 September 2021].

pretext of not being able to intervene in decisions taken by the municipality's authorities. Moreover, it can be also seen how the exhibition is still heavily anchored to the idea of national representation from the fact that one of the arguments raised against the installation was whether Büchel could be considered a proper representative for Iceland, since he has Swiss origins. To conclude, arguing on the realism of the installation was perhaps a way to cover the contradictions of the Biennale as an institution.

So, even though the pavilion was never opened again Büchel managed to rekindle the debate about the lack of proper places of worship for Muslims in Venice and in Italy in general.<sup>520</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that the scandal made the artist achieve his goal of highlighting an important social issue that characterises Venice and the whole Europe.

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<sup>520</sup> M. Pettinau, *A rischio chiusura la chiesa convertita in moschea in occasione della Biennale. Ultimatum del Comune di Venezia per il provocatorio padiglione islandese*, cit.

## Conclusions

The Venice Biennale has always been a worthwhile event. It makes people interested in the art world discover works of contemporary art that in any other way they would have not seen, it renews the commitment to the knowledge of the contemporary. On the other hand, the visit to the Biennale, which is also the oldest perennial exhibition of contemporary art, generates questions that involve not only the specific exhibition in question but the very identity of the institutions. It can be stated that the Venice Biennale is the main example of a whole exhibition model. From its beginning as a means for investigating the national state of figurative culture, the Biennale structure in pavilions is now a more compound and globalised exhibition.<sup>521</sup>

The first question that can arise may be about the need and the real quality of an exhibition like this. After a careful observation, it will be clear that the Biennale's craving for internationality is one of the possible sources of interest; however, it is also true that the division into pavilions and the consequent over-stratification of an overall exhibition, usually curated by an important contemporary figure, complicates the general understanding.<sup>522</sup> The pavilions are a legacy of the nineteenth-century colonial society. However, the accomplishment of a space directed by a single curator, overall causes disarray in the critical thinking about the manifestation.

To answer the first question, or what is the identity of a major international perennial exhibition about contemporary art, it will be sufficient to start from the statement that it is a testament to a certain historical period. This characteristic of the exhibition as a record and identification of a time specifically synchronic to our experience is true even if the exhibition shows works and contexts that are not

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<sup>521</sup> D. Scudero, *Effetti collaterali*, cit.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*

precisely contemporary, using some examples that generate important references in culture from time to time.<sup>523</sup>

The Biennale is, still today, a model of reference that can be considered as a cultural symbol of a specific work area and time. The uniqueness of a great exhibition like the periodic ones, however, lies in the interest in a significant sector of the contemporary art system, but not in everything. The international periodic exhibitions have consequently become this: a discussion on some meanings expressed by artistic culture and on its questions and answers.<sup>524</sup>

Another issue that can emerge is about the beneficiaries of such an exhibition structure and the possible users interested in it. Identifying the beneficial effects of such an impressive exhibition structure is hard and uncertain on the one hand, and plain and comforting on the other. Nowadays, large events are mostly autonomously managed entities, subject to the same subsistence constraints as any commercial enterprise.<sup>525</sup> The models developed, of which the Venice Biennale is the major example, have the specific desire to guarantee earnings, and consequently generate profit as any other company, using techniques, marketing, and suitable tools so that between promotion, sponsorships, and merchandising the event is also transformed into an economically beneficial occasion, supporting the tourist industry and other commercial activities connected to it.<sup>526</sup>

The interest of the corporate organization is not to guarantee cultural meanings, but to ensure that cultural meanings generate profit or at least subsistence and autonomy. What is defined as autonomy of choice is nothing more than autonomy from politics, since it manages the nature of the exhibition making it grow, so the word “autonomy” must be understood as financial autonomy. So, financial autonomy exists, provided that the starting point must be an art that produces income, an art that is represented, an art that thanks to this economic representation can help bearing the costs, and count on a functional usage of its own participation.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.



The result is clear. The main artistic manifestations about contemporary art have stopped being mainly a space of recognition of the meanings of its time and its culture, they have become events that can be successful or determine failures depending on the public visibility, the number of visitors, the tickets paid, and the earnings generated. Critical writing has no dwelling in the interests of those who manage and esteem the result, and plan the future developments, of major exhibitions. Years ago, vernissage were occasions, the few that mattered, to encounter a field, while they became the planetary showcase of a world made of gossip.<sup>528</sup>

Good evidence of what I have illustrated above can be found in the fact that all the three works I chose to analyse are testimonies of their own time. In fact, *Second Solution of Immortality (The Universe is Still)* (1972) was conceived in a period where provocations were an everyday occurrence; *The Pope and the Penis* (1990) rose awareness about an urgent issue that characterised the 80s and 90s; *The Mosque* (2015) highlighted the importance of cultural integration in period were Muslims were not well seen because of the various terrorist attacks in Europe. In the case of Christoph Büchel, it was also evident how the Biennale was still attached to the idea of national representation, because the question about whether the artist was a proper representative for Iceland given his Swiss origins arose in the controversy about the installation.

Moreover, from these three cases it was possible to see how the Biennale reacts to scandals, which is usually by removing the work that causes it. The only exception among the three were the panels by the group Gran Fury, which were not removed only because the court decided that they were not offensive and obscene, but the curator of that edition of the Biennale was extremely disappointed by this verdict. Both *Second Solution of Immortality (The Universe is Still)* and *The Mosque* were closed because of the intervention of the Venetian authorities. In the first case the Commissioner Mario Penelope innocently said that they did not know what the works consisted of before the exhibition otherwise he would have intervened beforehand. In the second case the Biennale as institution was particularly silent about the stir caused by Büchel's installation, the only thing they

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<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

said was that they could not make any remark about decisions taken by the municipality's authorities. So, a common thread that connects the three examples is the fact that the scandals brought to light one of the major contradictions of the institution, which is the fact that it should be an autonomous institution, as stated above, where artists could freely express themselves, but that is not really how it is. Despite the much-vaunted neutrality of the Biennale institution, all the three artists were dealing with censorship, because this is how the Biennale reacts when the media argue that a certain artwork is scandalous.

With these three case studies it was also possible to see how the concept of scandal has changed during time. In 1972, the simple involvement of a young man with Down Syndrome in an installation caused a huge scandal to which people refer still nowadays. This may be due to the fact that, although the Biennale has always been characterised by scandals, people were less accustomed to scandals, so the latter resulted more aggressive than they should have been. In 1990, the image of the Pope next to an erected penis caused stir because sex was still a taboo even more so if associated to the Catholic religion. In 2015, the fact that a church was transformed into a mosque was considered offensive towards the Catholic faith and it made the issues about immigration and integration resurface.

Perhaps, despite what their respective authors say, the works were intentionally provocative; considering the information collected during the research process, it is difficult to believe that the three artists were not aware of what their projects could cause. Moreover, they had more than an ephemeral mediatic effect because after De Dominicis' case body art became more and more popular, the legacy of Gran Fury and ACT UP movement was taken by the Occupy Movement that carries on the fight against capitalism, and Büchel's installation made the debate about building a mosque in the island of Venice rekindle. However, I am not sure whether it can be exactly determined whether these scandals brought economic profit to the Biennale as institution or to the artists, but what is sure is that they made the media talk about the authors and about the exhibition. As Oscar Wilde

wrote: “There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1992, Ware: Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Edition Limited: Wordsworth Classics.

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