

Rather Transitional than Transnational: The “meta-pavilions” of Germany and Russia at the 1993 Venice Biennale
Matteo Bertelé

Abstract

The 45th International Art Exhibition held in 1993 represents a watershed in the history of the Venice Biennale. This was due to the transitional historical moment from the end of the Cold War to the onset of globalization, but also to the contribution of appointed curator Achille Bonito Oliva. The article investigates from a comparative approach two much-debated national pavilions presented on that occasion: those of the reunified Germany and the temporary Commonwealth of Independent States, which respectively presented *Germania* by Hans Haacke, and the *Red Pavilion* by Ilya Kabakov. Among all national participations, the two pavilions earned an unrivalled exposure and favourable reviews in both general and professional press. Both artists created large-scale site-specific installations which, by intervening on the existing architecture, challenged their status as a showcase of the “national character”. Within an Exhibition dictated by buzzwords such as “cultural nomadism”, “coexistence” and “transnationality”, the two pieces eventually restated the relevance of the national pavilions, showing their potential as artistic and curatorial tools.

Keywords

1993; Venice Biennale; Achille Bonito Oliva; Ilya Kabakov; Hans Haacke; Pavilion; Germany; Russia; Soviet Union

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Introduction

In highlighting key-moments and debates that contributed to redefine national pavilions “from obsolete to contemporary” artistic and curatorial tools, Clarissa Ricci outlined the relevance of the 1993 Venice Biennale.¹ Dictated by key words such as cultural nomadism and coexistence, this exhibition finally opened up new possibilities for one of the eldest elements of the Venice Biennale, the national participations, reasserting their relevance and potential. The present article focuses on two much-debated national participations: those of the reunified Germany and the dismantled Soviet Union. By investigating common issues and essential divergences, the inquiry moves from a dual comparative approach which, as art historians Beat Wyss and Jörg Scheller have proved and practiced, lends itself as a relevant method for new scholarship in the studies of the Venice Biennale and an adaptable “principle” for further surveys in comparative art history. In 1993, a transitional period from Cold-war divisions to the onset of globalisation, the two pavilions experimented a practice of “constructing, inventing and representing concepts of (inter-, trans-) national or (inter-, trans-) cultural identities via inclusion or exclusion, rapprochement or distancing”.²

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Clarissa Ricci, “From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale”, *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 8-39, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00009_1; on the 1993 Exhibition, from the same author see: “Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale: Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition”, *OBOE Journal*, no. 1 (2020): 78-98, <https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/1.1.0007>; “Hi Tech Gondola. The Venice Biennale in an Advertisement”, *Predella*, no. 48 (2020): 133-151, <https://predella.it/clarissa-ricci/>, accessed November 2024; “La Coesistenza dell’Arte (1993), ovvero il transnazionalismo alla prova della caduta del muro di Berlino”, *Novecento Transnazionale. Letterature, Arti e Culture* 6, (2022): 74-88, <https://doi.org/10.13133/2532-1994/17916>; “Passage to the Orient (1993). Re-assessing the Role of the ‘Orient’ as ‘Avant-garde’ during the Rise of Globalisation”, *World Art* 13, no. 1 (2023): 101-124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2022.2150888>

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Beat Wyss, Jörg Scheller, “Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle”, in Clarissa Ricci (ed.), *Starting from Venice* (Milan: et. al., 2010), 50-61. Annika Hossain, Kinga Bódi, Daria Ghiu, “Layers of Exhibition. The Venice Biennale and Comparative Art Historical Writing”, *Kunsttexte.de*, no. 2 (2011): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2011.2.88032>

1. Cardinal Points of Art: Charting New Geographies

The 1993 art Biennale was the first Exhibition organised in an odd year since 1909, as the one scheduled for 1992 was postponed by one year to allow for the organisation, in 1995, of the so-called “Centenary Biennale”. In this way, the 1993 Exhibition is considered from its outset a transitional event from the 1990 iteration – the last to be held in Cold-war times – to the historic, self-celebratory 1995 art show. The 1990 Biennale was profoundly affected by the echoes of recent geo-political divisions: even though the Berlin Wall had already fallen, the German Democratic Republic was still presenting its national pavilion, hosted for the occasion in the vacant Venice pavilion, while the exhibition of the Federal Republic was displayed as per tradition in the German pavilion. At its last appearance in Venice, the Soviet Union presented a group show of young artists supported by the *Pervaya Galereia*, the first private gallery to open in Moscow in early 1989. Upon personal invitation of the artists, Robert Rauschenberg joined the exhibition with a monumental painting which occupied the central position of the group show, accordingly titled *Rauschenberg to Us, We to Rauschenberg*³. For the first (and last) time in the Biennale history, the Soviet pavilion was awarded an official prize: an honourable mention awarded by the international jury for the “obvious desire for rejuvenation of its artists”.⁴

The accommodating rhetoric of the 1990 Biennale was supplanted three years later by the ambitious programme set out by its newly appointed Director of the Department of Visual arts, hence curator of the 45th Exhibition, Achille Bonito Oliva. Biennale’s President Gian Luigi Rondi assigned him a two-year term, with the option of a second biennial renewal. Bonito Oliva was aware that with the 1993 exhibition not only would his international reputation be at stake, but also the opportunity to curate the Centenary Biennale.

Under the title *Cardinal Points of Art*, Bonito Oliva intended to map a new art geography in light of the recent geopolitical upheavals. He envisioned to show the plurality and diversity of worldwide artistic languages in the process of hybridisation and transmigration among the four cardinal points. In proclaiming this, he intended to subvert the generally accepted transnational trajectories: not only from the West to the East, but also from the East to the West, as well from the South to the North. In the name of ‘transnationality’ – defined in the curatorial statement as “an intertwining of nations capable of producing cultural eclecticism and necessary interracial unity”⁵ – participating countries were asked to break with the Biennale *raison d’être* of national (self)-representation by inviting artists of other nationalities. In two preliminary meetings held in Venice in July and November 1992 with national commissioners, traditionally held to establish dialogue and share views, Bonito Oliva had prompted them to invite artists from countries that had no pavilions yet.⁶

Besides the historical locations of Giardini and Arsenale, the 1993 Exhibition included fifteen venues scattered throughout the city following a mosaic structure, which laid the foundations for the present-day expanded Biennale

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Sandra Frimmel, “1990”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)* (Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2013), 500-515.

4

“Rauschenberg to Us, We to Rauschenberg, 1990”, in Kate Fowle, Ruth Addison (eds.), *Exhibit Russia. The New International Decade: 1986-1996* (Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015), 132-139.

5

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, in 45. *International Art Exhibition. Cardinal Points of Art. Theoretical Essays* (Venice-Naples: Marsilio-Ulisse, Calipso edizioni mediterranee, 1993), 9-27, here 10.

6

Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, La Biennale di Venezia, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (hereinafter ASAC), collection Fondo Storico (hereinafter FS), series Arti Visive (hereinafter AV), box (hereinafter b.) 518, Verbale della riunione. Minutes of the Second Commissioners meeting, November 13-14, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 520, fasc. 7.

format.⁷ Another implementation concerned the duration of the vernissage, now extended to several days of press and professional previews. Since the first day of the opening, the pavilions of Germany and Russia earned the attention of international critics and art professionals, obtaining an incomparable exposure thanks to positive reviews in both the general and professional press.⁸

2. *Germania aka Bodenlos: The Outrageous Nationhood*

Germany's appointed commissioner Klaus Bussmann invited two artists partially related to Germany: Hans Haacke, originally from Cologne, but a big-time New Yorker, and Nam June Paik, a native Korean based in the United States, but mostly active since the Sixties in West-Germany. These two nominees were intended to dispel concerns in Europe about a comeback – in the arts field also – of a *Großdeutschland* after its reunification. Bussmann considered the two artists evidence of the “extreme cultural willingness and open-mindedness” presented as the “best qualities of post-war Germany”, implying with that the Federal Republic alone.⁹

Haacke titled his piece *Germania* (Italian for Germany), a nomination rendered both on the façade and in the interior back wall of the building: the former as an architectural component of the pavilion, the latter as an element of his intervention. Associations were also made with *Welthauptstadt Germania* (World Capital Germania), the name that Hitler had preliminary assigned to Berlin as the centre of the new world in the event of its final victory in World War II.¹⁰ In his catalogue contribution, art critic Walter Grasskamp asserted that Haacke's installation was articulated along the two main coordinates shaping his overall work: timing and location.¹¹ The comeback of Germany as the new central European power dictated the historical timing, while its historical pavilion at Giardini provided the location. Originally erected in 1909 to host Bavarian art, the pavilion was acquired three years later by the German Empire; from 1920 to 1932 it hosted the art of the Weimar Republic. In 1938 it underwent renovation plans by architect Ernst Haiger in a neoclassical monumental style, intended to embody the imperial aspirations of the Third Reich. After World War II, Nazi heraldry was removed from the façade of the construction, which in 1950 was definitively seized by the Bonn Republic. In 1964 functional changes to both interior and exterior were

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New exhibition venues included external national pavilions, retrospective and group shows hosted in municipal museums and disused palaces, as well as open-air and site-specific installations. For an exhaustive overview, see Clarissa Ricci, “Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale”: 88-90.

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See, among others, Grace Glueck, “The Spotty, Irresistible 45th Venice Biennale Unfolds”, *The New York Observer*, June 30, 1993. Reviews and photo reportages published in the following weeks also foregrounded the German and the Russian pavilions as the most topical national participations (Peter J. Schneemann, “Die Biennale von Venedig: nationale Präsentation und internationaler Anspruch”, *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 4, no. 53 (1996): 313-322. “Biennale Venedig '93. Ein Foto-Rundgang von Wolfgang Träger”, *Kunstforum International*, no. 124 (November-December 1993): 242-331, Germany: 242-255; Russia: 256-259.

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Klaus Bussmann, “Repubblica Federale di Germania”, in *45. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Punti Cardinali dell'Arte* (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, June 14-October 10, 1993), exh. cat. (Venezia: Marsilio, 1993), vol. 1, 172. All translations in the text from German, Italian and Russian are by the Author.

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See Anja Osswald, Katia Reich, “Art after Postmodernism. The German Contributions from 1993 to 2007”, in Elke aus dem Moore, Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany's Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895-2007* (Cologne: DuMont, 2009), 147-163, here 147.

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Walter Grasskamp, “No-Man's Land” in Klaus Bussmann, Florian Matzner (eds.), *Hans Haacke. Bodenlos*, (German Pavilion, La Biennale di Venezia, June 14-October 10, 1993), exh. cat. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1993), 51-64, here 57.

made, yet without questioning its national socialist legacy.¹² As a result, its overall structure had remained almost unaltered ever since. As Bussmann recalled in the first commissioners meeting held in Venice, after the reunification heated debates had emerged in Germany about the appropriateness of such a legacy, including the possibility – if not to tear down the pavilion – at least to confer upon it “a somehow less fascist appearance”.¹³ Due to lack of time and funding, it was not possible to restyle the pavilion before the opening of the 45th Exhibition. Hence, the decision to invite Haacke, the “Politikünstler” *par-excellence*, was intended to meet the needs to challenge the historical implications associated with the national pavilion of Germany.¹⁴

Indeed, Haacke questioned the pavilion’s troublesome legacy, perceived as an eloquent incarnation of repressed national taboos. After the Nuremberg Trials, the partition of Germany and the following policy of coexistence (and connivance) had deferred any shared in-depth debate on recent German history. Now, in the premises of the reunified pavilion, it was time to come to terms with the past. Haacke intervened in the very structure of the building, deconstructing its national socialist foundations and gutting the interior flooring. The planned itinerary started at the main entrance of the pavilion, dominated by a plastic, oversized replica of a 1 *Deutschmark* coin from 1990, the year of the monetary union, mounted where the swastika-emblazoned imperial eagle was once placed. Visitors were then forced to walk by a photograph of Hitler during his visit to the 1934 Exhibition, and thus be confronted face to face with the history of the nation here represented. The catalogue of the German pavilion was titled *Bodenlos*, a term with multiple relevant semantic associations, meaning both “groundless” and “outrageous”.

Through his pervasive interventions, Haacke addressed not only the architectural stratifications of the German pavilion, but also the shifting political agendas of its host institution, the Venice Biennale. In his thoroughly documented contribution for the catalogue titled “Gondola! Gondola!”, the artist outlined the Biennale’s transformation from a propaganda stage for Fascist Italy into a showcase for globalised art commodities, dictated by private stakeholders and lobbies, implanted in a city downgraded into a global hub for mass tourism.¹⁵

The multimedia installation by Paik, entitled *Electronic Super Highway: Bill Clinton stole my idea!* acted as a counterbalance to Haacke’s piece and as a connection between the inside and the outside of the pavilion.¹⁶ It comprised indoor video installations on monitors and projections, and outdoor anthropomorphic video sculptures of historical figures such as Catherine the Great, combining, in her case, celebratory equestrian statuary with the “network

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Annette Lagler, “The German Pavilion”, in Elke aus dem Moore, Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany’s Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895-2007*, 51-61. On the exhibitions held in the German pavilion during the Cold War see Annette Lagler, “Biennale Venedig. Der deutsche Pavillon 1948-1988”, *Jahresring* 36 (1989): 78-133, and the dedicated contributions in Jan May, Sabine Meine (eds.), *Der deutsche Pavillon. Ein Jahrhundert nationaler Repräsentation auf der Internationalen Kunstausstellung “La Biennale di Venezia” 1912–2012* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2015).

13

Klaus Bussmann, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 48.

14

Twenty years before, Gerhard Richter faced the problematic architecture of the pavilion with his painting series *48 Portraits*, created *ad hoc* for the ambience. On the analogies between the two installations see Cristina Baldacci, “Memoria sovvertita. Hans Haacke e Gerhard Richter nel padiglione tedesco”, in Francesca Castellani, Eleonora Charans (eds.), *Crocevia Biennale* (Milano: Scalpendi, 2017), 247-256.

15

Hans Haacke, “Gondola! Gondola!”, in Klaus Bussmann, Florian Matzner (eds.), *Hans Haacke: Bodenlos*, 27-35.

16

Commissioner Bussmann informed Bonito Oliva about Paik’s intention to use the four side halls of the pavilion as well as the outdoor area around the building since “it is in close interconnection to the pavilion itself”. Klaus Bussmann to Achille Bonito Oliva, Münster, October 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 528, fasc. 2, Germania.

revolution”.¹⁷ The installation epitomised a further “cardinal point” of the present Exhibition, the new media as the *lingua franca* of the emerging Global village, dictated, in Bonito Oliva’s words, by a “technological polycentrism”.¹⁸

As archival findings and printed sources demonstrate, an overall preference for the German pavilion emerged from the very early stages of the exhibition. Prior personal connections between Bonito Oliva and the two artists (especially Paik), based on mutual friendship and esteem, inevitably influenced his positive predisposition towards the German project.¹⁹ Once disclosed at the commissioners meeting, the project met with the unconditional approval and support of Bonito Oliva, who regarded it not just as a “fortunate cultural coincidence”, but as proof that the “key word of the cardinal points of art” was being comprehensively treated as an urgent issue. By relying on national stereotypes, he confessed to value “German efficiency” for “giving an answer even before the question was asked”.²⁰ It follows that in his opening essay for the general catalogue, Bonito Oliva overtly called “Germany’s trans-national pavilion” an example of best practice.²¹ A few pages later, Bussmann expressed his gratitude to the Biennale’s artistic director for his enduring enthusiasm towards the German contribution, which he felt entitled to define “the leitmotiv of the entire Exhibition” for pushing forward “all global relations and interests”, which were nothing less than the “ultimate goals of the current Biennale”.²² Finally, Dieter Honisch, the director of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and appointed member of the Biennale Advisory Committee, praised, in a letter to Bonito Oliva, the programme of the German pavilion as a “marvellous example” of intercultural dialogue between Europe, America and Asia.²³ The horizon of expectations towards the German contribution was extremely high and, at this point, its national pavilion seemed unlikely to disappoint.

3. *The Red Pavilion: A Private Matter?*

Where the German pavilion was thoroughly planned as relevant to the concept of the 1993 Exhibition, the genesis of the former Soviet pavilion was byzantine and accidental. In the first instance, the Biennale administration had to review its protocols in compliance with an official notice received from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome about the fifteen former Soviet republics currently recognised by the Italian Government as sovereign States.²⁴ Within the Biennale’s procedure, it meant that each of these countries had acquired the status of a “national participation”, hence the right to present its own pavilion, even though none of them had a dedicated venue yet. Finally, a collective participation under the common flag of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was opted for, as had been the case in 1992 with the national team at the Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona. The

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Patricia Mellencamp, “The Old and the New: Nam June Paik”, *Art Journal* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 41-47. In light of past collaborations and Paik’s status as the “most important video artist present at the 1993 Biennale”, Bonito Oliva commissioned from Paik a series of short videos titled *Hi Tech Gondola*, intended to brand a new image of the Biennale (see Clarissa Ricci, “*Hi Tech Gondola*”).

18

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, 13.

19

See footnote 17 and Clarissa Ricci, “*Hi Tech Gondola*”: 134.

20

Achille Bonito Oliva, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 49.

21

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, 17.

22

Klaus Bussmann, “Repubblica Federale di Germania”, 172.

23

Dieter Honisch to Achille Bonito Oliva, Berlin, July 28, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 521, Corrispondenza con Dieter Honisch.

24

Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Venice Biennale, Rome, July 3, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

Biennale administration was later informed that the management of the national participation rested with the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, as “the legitimate heir of the property and the expenses of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR”.²⁵ This circumstance explains why the CIS pavilion was informally called the Russian pavilion, in line with a tradition of interchangeably using “Soviet” and “Russian” as synonyms. This simplification was formally correct within the toponymy of the Venice Biennale when referring to the building itself, which had been commissioned, constructed and inaugurated in 1914 in Imperial Russia, under the aegis of the Tsar’s family.²⁶

Continuity with the recent past was interrupted by Vladimir Goriainov, the Soviet commissioner since 1964, who decided to give up the organisation of the pavilion. This was due to his worsening health condition but also to the new circumstances, with the Ministry of Culture being unable to provide any substantial support, hence relegating the role of commissioner to project manager.²⁷ Goriainov acknowledged that the time had come to make finally room for new names. While officially retaining his post, he backed the *de facto* commissioner, art critic Leonid Bazhanov, who had recently been appointed director of the Department of Visual Arts at the Ministry of Culture.²⁸ From Moscow Bazhanov obtained an overall budget of ten thousand roubles, an amount mostly sufficient to purchase – in his own words – a one-way ticket to Venice.²⁹

From the very first steps it was clear that the managing of the national pavilion was not a priority for the Russian Government, back then afflicted by financial issues such as rapid inflation and the liquidation of State properties. Bazhanov therefore had to find support abroad from private parties and, without any further consultation, he invited Ilya Kabakov to exhibit, the best internationally known Russian artist, and hence the most likely to attract foreign sponsors.³⁰ One was soon found in Austrian art dealer Peter Pakesch, who assumed all costs associated with the production of Kabakov’s project.³¹ The rapid transition in post-socialist Russia from a collectivist, State-planned society to a private, free-market system was sanctioned by the entity of the pavilion itself, which no longer hosted overcrowded group shows intended to represent Soviet cultural riches, but one single artist, residing, furthermore, in the United States. In light of Kabakov’s worldwide recognition, Bonito Oliva’s call for transnationality was primarily embraced for pragmatic reasons. The emigration of Russian artists – a circumstance repeatedly mentioned by Bazhanov as the main problem affecting contemporary Russian art – eventually turned out to be an asset.³² At the same time, the invitation to an émigré artist such as Kabakov could be presented as a response to the nomadic and transnational condition evoked by Bonito Oliva.

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Alexander Shkurko, Deputy Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation, to the Venice Biennale, Moscow, June 15a, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

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About the history of the pavilion, designed by State architect Aleksei Shchusev, see the extensive collection of archive documents in Marianna Evstratova, Sergei Koluzakov (eds.), *Russian Pavilion in Venice. Alexei Schusev* (Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014).

27

Vladimir Goriainov, “Zritel’iam nash pavil’on nraivlsia”, *Artkhronika* 9, no. 7-8 (2007). In the interview Goriainov regards the exhibition held in 1990 as “his” last Biennale.

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Leonid Bazhanov, “Vladimir Goriainov sdela mnoga dlia ‘Sovetskogo khudozhnika’ i sovetskikh khudozhnikov”, *The Art Newspaper Russia*, no. 7 (September 2013).

29

Leonid Bazhanov, cit. in Sandra Frimmel, “1993”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 520.

30

Leonid Bazhanov to Achille Bonito Oliva, Moscow, March 18, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

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Leonid Bazhanov to Achille Bonito Oliva, Moscow, February 18, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

32

Leonid Bazhanov, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 52-53; Minutes of the Second Commissioners meeting, November 13-14, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 520, fasc. 7, 37-38.

Kabakov's project *The Red Pavilion* reflected upon the crisis in the former USSR, exemplified in the state of decay of the pavilion, which the artist deliberately left as such. He developed his piece as a dramaturgy in three acts. After entering a corridor filled with garbage, visitors had to pass by a construction site with rickety scaffolding, open paint buckets and waste material scattered throughout the halls, to finally access a terrace overlooking the lagoon [fig. 1]. Here the view extended over the red pavilion itself, adorned with Soviet flags and loudspeakers broadcasting military marches and political speeches, recorded and mixed by composer Vladimir Tarasov. The miniaturised building was conceived as an inaccessible, still familiar materialisation of a recent past. On its purpose, Kabakov wrote: "Socialism is beautiful, but it must remain only in the utopias of Iofan or Mayakovsky, and in no case must it be translated into reality. It is beautiful, but only from a distance".³³ From such a distance, the *Red Pavilion* revealed its innocuous, almost playful, nature: it was not painted in red, but in pink; its construction material was not solid like stone or concrete, but provisional and perishable like plywood. Its shape recalled *vysotki*, the eclectic, monumental high-rises erected in Moscow under Stalin; its reduced scale and pastel colours evoked a wedding cake, according to a mocking expression commonly used for Soviet post-WWII architecture, ascribing it to the category of *kitsch*.³⁴ Overall, the decrepit image of post-Soviet Russia, concealed behind the decorum of its façade, corroborated the characterisation of an entire nation as a "Giant with feet of clay", to sanction what Bonito Oliva had archaised in the catalogue as "Finis Russiae".³⁵

The *Red Pavilion* fully met the expectations of western critics and visitors, who were finally facing an art piece reflecting an allegedly autochthonous, i.e. Soviet, tradition. This put Kabakov on equal terms with western artists, by questioning "his" socialism, just as western artists were critical of "their" capitalism.³⁶ Hence, it should not surprise that the installation easily found a buyer, renowned German collector Peter Ludwig. Kabakov had promptly ensured him the installation for a major retrospective of Soviet art to be held at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne under the title *From Malevich to Kabakov* and scheduled to open in mid-October, just one week after the closure of the Biennale³⁷ [fig. 2]. Unbeknownst to the Biennale, Kabakov brought forward the dismantling of "his" pavilion by one month,³⁸ whose earlier closure was also announced on the booklet printed in Russian, Italian and English as accompanying text to the installation [fig. 3].

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Il'ia Kabakov, "Krasnyi pavil'on", 1993, in Ilya Kabakov, Boris Groys, *Dialogi* (Vologda: Biblioteka Moskovskogo Konceptualizma Germana Titova, 2010), 159-169, here 161. Here Kabakov refers to two personalities of Soviet culture: architect Boris Iofan (1891-1976) and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930).

34

In German as well, the term *Zuckerbäckerstil* is commonly used to refer to socialist multistory monumental architecture.

35

Achille Bonito Oliva, "Cardinal Points of Art", 10. Bonito Oliva adapted the formula from "Finis Austriae", used to refer to the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire after World War I.

36

Ekaterina Degot, "Russian Art at the Rendez-vous: Post-Soviet Russia at the Venice Biennale", in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 80-95, here 83.

37

The exhibition catalogue features 27 works on paper and 3 installations, including the *Red Pavilion*, presented as the first outdoor installation ever realised by the artist. Evelyn Weiss (ed.), *Von Malevitsch bis Kabakow. Russische Avantgarde im 20. Jahrhundert. Die Sammlung Ludwig* (Cologne, Museum Ludwig, October 16, 1993 - January 2, 1994), exh. cat. (Munich-New York: Prestel, 1993), 246, 251. The exhibition title was in line with art market strategies adopted in West Germany in the Seventies, aimed at branding contemporary unofficial Soviet art – with Kabakov as a leading personality – as the "Second Russian Avant-garde", in continuity with Russian modernism and Malevich as one of its champions. See Elena Korwin, *Der Russen-boom. Sowjetische Ausstellungen als Mittel der Diplomatie in der BRD* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015), 265-284.

38

Evelyn Weiss, Deputy Director of the Ludwig Museum, to Achille Bonito Oliva, Cologne, September 14, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia. Emphasis in original (see footnote 40).

fig. 1
Two-page spread of the booklet exhibition catalogue "The Red Pavilion" designed by Ilya Kabakov, with the maps of the pavilion and of its location at Giardini, 1993. Courtesy Collection Sandretti Barbano

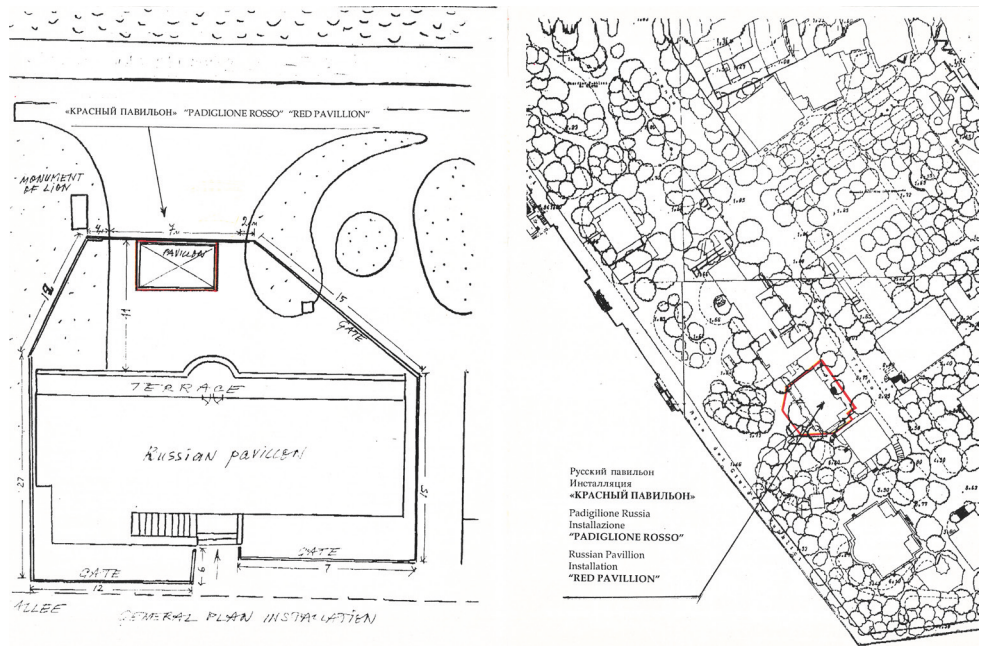


fig. 2
Front cover of the exhibition catalogue *Von Malewitsch bis Kabakov. Russische Avantgarde im 20. Jahrhundert. Die Sammlung Ludwig* (Cologne, Museum Ludwig, October 16, 1993 - January 2, 1994).

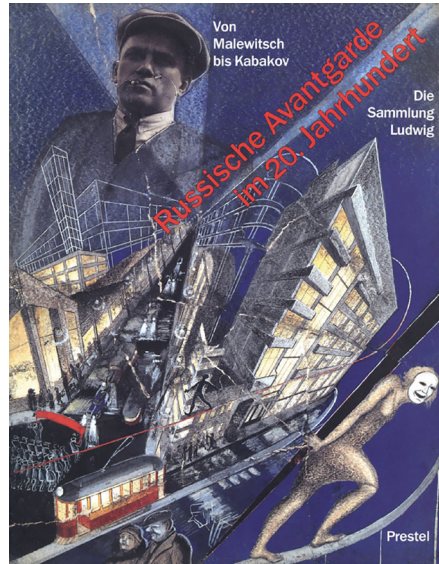


fig. 3
Front cover of the booklet exhibition catalogue "The Red Pavilion" designed by Ilya Kabakov, 1993. Courtesy Collection Sandretti Barbano



Further evidence of his personal appropriation of the exhibition was the omission on the brochure of any reference to the installation as a “national participation” of the Venice Biennale.³⁹ This self-publication was intended to compensate for the lack of information about the CIS participation in the general catalogue of the 45th Art Exhibition issued by the Biennale; in the section dedicated to the national participations, only two pages were granted to the CIS (while Germany had six), with no text and only one full-page reproduction of Kabakov’s installation *The Toilet*, presented in 1992 at documenta 9.

The de-regulated and private management of the pavilion was overtly stated in a fax sent by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov to Bonito Oliva:

I spoke today with Mr Bazhanov and he said that Russia has nothing to do with our installation. We can take it off any time we want and return the key from the Russian Pavilion to the office of Biennale. The pavilion didn’t have any commissioner this year, because the one who was supposed to be a commissioner was discharged and in hospital. They never appointed another person. Actually the person who was in charge was I. So, please, let us take the piece off immediately [...] It is an artist request to take this installation which is *his* work.⁴⁰

According to Boris Groys – one of Kabakov’s earliest promoters – such an act of private arrogation should be regarded as a prerequisite for putting an end to the communist legacy, as a practice of emancipation from the past and an axiom of an era in which “post-Communist art is produced largely by means of the privatisation of the mental and symbolic territory that had been left behind by Soviet ideology”.⁴¹

4. The “meta-pavilions” of Germany and Russia in Historical Perspective

Within the history of exhibitions, a comparable precedent of Russian-German confrontation can be found in the last pre-WWII large-scale art encounter, the World Expo held in 1937 in Paris, with the famed juxtaposition of the Nazi and Soviet pavilions [fig. 4]. The two buildings incarnated two opposing worldviews which would be defeated in the two preeminent ideological conflicts of the twentieth century: World War II and the Cold War.⁴² The architecture of both pavilions had championed modernised forms of classicism as an ideal pan-European style, with which even ideologically opposed nations could identify.⁴³

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See *Krasnyi pavil'on, Padiglione rosso, Red Pavillion* [sic] (Pavilion of the Commonwealth of Independent States, La Biennale di Venezia, June 14 - September 14, 1993), exh. cat., in ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia. The poster advertising the exhibition reports the same partial information, see Boris Groys, David Ross, Iwona Blazwick, *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 22. In the closing acknowledgements, the booklet features, besides Pakesch and Ludwig, a series of first-ranking art professionals and institutions such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the MoMA and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York; Kasper König in Frankfurt; Dina Vierny in Paris; the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

40

Emphasis in original. Emilia and Ilya Kabakov to Achille Bonito Oliva, New York, September 29, 1993, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 529, Russia.

41

Boris Groys, “Privatizations, or Artificial Paradises of Post-Communism”, in Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 2008), 164-171, here 166.

42

For an overview of the literature about the confrontation of National Socialism and Stalinism within the Paris Expo, see Danilo Udovički-Selb, “Facing Hitler’s Pavilion: The Uses of Modernity in the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (January 2012): 13-47, especially note 8.

43

Otto Karl Werckmeister, “The Political Confrontation of the Arts. From the Great Depression to the Second World War, 1929-1939”, *Georges-Bloch-Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Instituts der Universität Zürich*, no. 11/12, 2004/05 (2006): 143-175, here 160.

fig. 4
Postcard from the Paris World Expo, 1937. On the left: the German Pavilion. On the right: the Soviet Pavilion [Public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris-Expo-1937-carte_postale-01.jpg]



Soviet architect Boris Iofan designed the pavilion as a pedestal for the colossal, stainless-steel sculpture *The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman* by Vera Mukhina⁴⁴. According to Slavoj Žižek, the extreme verticalisation of architecture is an eloquent demonstration of the oppressive character of socialist realism, whose works were conceived to be observed from below, hence from a reverential perspective, sublimating the ambition to omnipotence of the “new Soviet man”.⁴⁵ As it is well known, such a vertical magniloquence was taken over and expanded in the adjacent pavilion of Germany, designed by the Führer’s architect, Albert Speer.⁴⁶

In 1993, the two pavilions of Germany and Russia deployed again a similar strategy, this time not by erecting new magniloquent constructions, but rather by intervening on their existing premises and challenging their role as showcase of an alleged national character. A second common feature concerned the status of both Haacke and Kabakov within their respective domestic art scenes. On the one hand both were chiefly renowned abroad, while on the other they were part of their national cultural establishments, where they occupied a liminal space between official recognition and internal disputes. Haacke had created controversial pieces tackling German history and cultural memory but also the intertwinements between art, politics and the economy. One of his best-known works, *Der Pralinenmeister* (1981), highlighted the conflict of interests and the entanglement among private business, political involvement and artistic patronage in the activity of the already mentioned collector (and chocolate entrepreneur) Peter Ludwig.⁴⁷ Following such works, Haacke, soon labelled as “a synonym for *the* political artist internationally”, was declared persona non grata by several art institutions both in Germany and the United States.⁴⁸ A charismatic personality of Moscow Conceptualism since the late seventies, Kabakov could benefit at home from his international prominence only from the late Eighties onwards. With his

44

Dawn Ades, “Paris 1937. Art and the Power of Nations”, in Dawn Ades et al. (eds.), *Art and Power. Europe under the Dictators 1930-45*, (London, Hayward Gallery, October 26, 1995 - January 21, 1996, et al.), exh. cat. (London: Thames and Hudson-Hayward Gallery, 1995), 58-62, here 62.

45

Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 2002).

46

Vladimir Paperny, “Hot and Cold War in Architecture of Soviet Pavilions (1937-1959)”, in Rika Devos, Alexander Ortenberg, Vladimir Paperny (eds.), *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937-1959. Messages of Peace, Images of War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 81-98, here 88.

47

Hans Haacke, *Der Pralinenmeister* (Cologne, Galerie Paul Maenz, May 29 - June 27, 1981), exh. cat. (Cologne: Galerie Maenz, 1981).

48

As far as it concerns Haacke’s activity in the United States, it will be enough to mention his project based on real estate ownership and its connections to the art system, planned for 1971 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, but later turned down. Consequently, in the following fifteen years no US museum offered him a solo show. As of 1993, only three museums from the United States and one from Germany owned an artist’s work. Walter Grasskamp, “No-Man’s Land”, 57-58.

participation in 1993, he paved the way in Venice to former “unofficial” Soviet artists as the “official” representatives of the new Russia. This new strategy was meant as a reaction to extinct Soviet ideology and a measure of rehabilitation for previously neglected or banned artists, while it externally aimed at an integration of post-socialist Russian art into the global market.⁴⁹

Kabakov and Haacke turned the two pavilions into the very object of their works, as already suggested in the title of both projects. The pavilion was no longer considered an empty shell or a white cube to host exhibits, but rather the subject matter itself on which to intervene with site-specific installations. It was not, however, a finished environment, but a space in progress, subject to a process of deconstruction that, following an avant-garde principle, tended to lay bare the structure and the foundation, to show the process and not the result, to propose an alternative perspective on the historical present. This “new vision” was suggested by a radical gesture, which did not imply any symbolic interrogation, but rather an act “material and violent in nature”.⁵⁰ Thus, while Germany gained international prominence as a reunited art-power, its pavilion evoked a demolition site; while the Commonwealth of Independent States emerged as the spectrum of a disintegrated world power, its pavilion recalled a construction site. Both Haacke and Kabakov looked back at the history of their home countries, and more precisely at their totalitarian past, when both nations were dominant and cohesive, and their pavilions in Venice ranked among the most anticipated and discussed. The two artists restated the centrality of the two pavilions into the miniature world of the Biennale, as a reminder of a more or less recent past, one echoed in the architecture of their art embassies. Haacke’s ruins recalled not only the rubble left by Nazism and WWII but also the debris of the Berlin Wall as the result of its progressive demolition by German authorities and citizens, thus producing in many visitors a visual shortcut for the images that had circulated worldwide just three years earlier. For his part, Kabakov stated: “This ‘little pavilion’ is a territory of a world that still exists, but one which is hiding behind the façade of the other. Poised at the rear of the backyard, it is awaiting its moment to return to its place, from which it was thrown out not so long ago”.⁵¹

Both exhibitions were constructed – as Walter Grasskamp put it – upon a dialogue between time and space⁵²: in time, as the interplay between the rubble (be they from the Nazi capitulation or the crumbling Berlin Wall) and the advent of the reunified Deutschland; and between the indoor Russian construction site and the fresh-varnished Soviet pavilion; in space, as the interaction between the inside and the outside, between the national and the international dimension, exemplified by the expansion of both exhibitions to the territory surrounding the pavilions. Paik’s multimedia installation and Kabakov’s fence, right down to the point of encircling but not isolating the two pavilions, exemplify “the transience in geographical and cultural boundaries, the insecurity of national identity” envisioned by Bonito Oliva.⁵³ At the same time the two artists challenged visitors to negotiate an exhibition fraught with barriers and obstructions, bringing into play their physical endurance and intellectual curiosity. In *Germania*, Haacke sketched out an effective “Topography of Terror”,⁵⁴ where entering visitors were forced to meet

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Matteo Bertelé, “Ot ‘krasnogo pavil’ona’ k ‘zelenomu pavil’onu””, in Nikolai Molok (ed.), *Sovremennye russkie khudozhniki – uchastniki Venetsianskoi Biennale. Izbrannoe* (Saint Petersburg: Manezh, 2016), 18-27, here 24-25.

50

Michael Diers, “Germania a Margine. The German Pavilion in Venice and the Interventions of Art. An Historical Survey”, in Elke aus dem Moore, Ursula Zeller (eds.), *Germany’s Contributions to the Venice Biennale 1895-2007*, 33-53, here 46.

51

Ilya Kabakov, *Krasnyi pavil’on*.

52

See footnote 11.

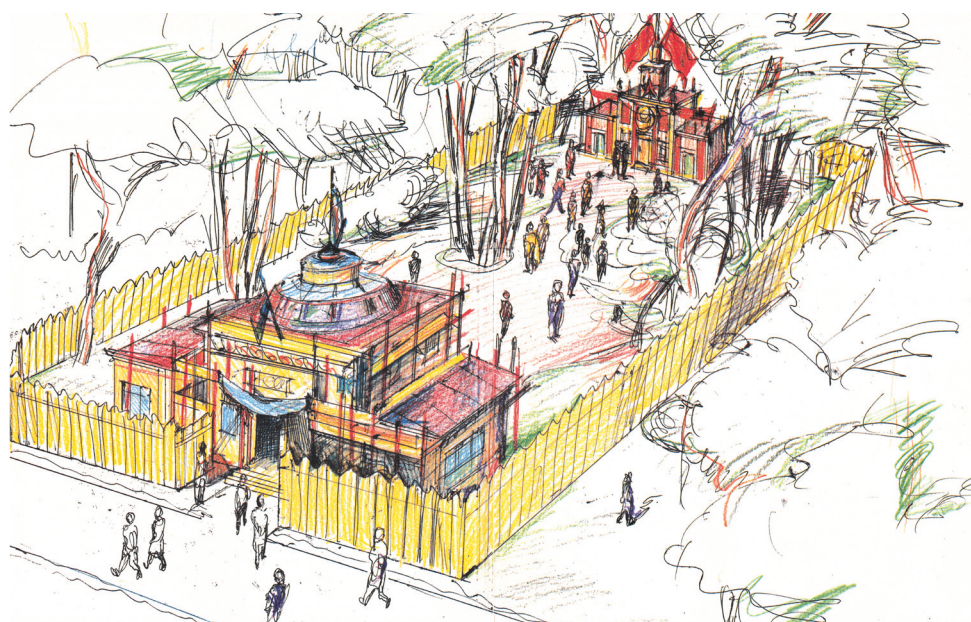
53

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Cardinal Points of Art”, 14.

54

Topographie des Terrors is a museum and documentation centre housed in the former location of the Third Reich Main Security Office, including SS and Gestapo headquarters, in the heart of Berlin. The project was initiated in 1987 to inform visitors of the terrors of Nazi Germany and today hosts outdoor and indoor permanent exhibitions, itinerant shows and a library.

fig. 5
Two-page spread of the booklet
exhibition catalogue "The
Red Pavilion" designed by Ilya
Kabakov, with a preliminary
sketch of the installation, 1993.
Courtesy Collection Sandretti
Barbano



the eyes of the Führer, and then to plunge into an arduous space, where every step was accompanied by a trampling and a stumbling through torn up floor tiles. As Kabakov recalled, at the sight of the fence enclosing the *Red Pavilion*, many visitors stepped back assuming it was still under construction.⁵⁵ Those who entered were finally rewarded with a view of the lagoon and the red pavilion itself. As already tested in previous installations, Kabakov designed a “psychological topography” of the Soviet Union, specifically aimed at Western audiences⁵⁶ [fig. 5]. As a result, both pavilions were assembled as synesthetic and engaging itineraries, albeit irritating and confusing ones.

This *modus operandi* was not new in the practice of both artists. In the sixties Haacke had coined the term “Real time system”⁵⁷ to designate a conceptual approach rooted in historical sociology and based on targeted surveys. The concept of *total'naia installiatsiia* (total installation) was developed by Kabakov in the Eighties, after his departure from the Soviet Union, as an ongoing embodiment of the dream, sought after by Wagner, of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total work of art). His total installations were hence conceived and produced as full-scale, immersive, yet minimal reconstructions of the lost socialist context, where visitors could experience Soviet daily life through an accumulation of images, spaces, sounds and scents.⁵⁸

Haacke and Kabakov's pieces acted as catalysts of the cultural memory of the nations that they were called to represent. Cultural memory, as defined by Aleida Assmann, is an objectified and outsourced knowledge entrusted to institutional mediators who, through images and symbols, define an official political memory, hence a national identity. The main task of a museum consists in preserving artefacts that shape the “storage-memory” of a culture from which, in specific historical moments, useful elements can be selected and combined together to forge a “functional memory”.⁵⁹ In both displays, the pavilion remains indeed

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For this reason, Kabakov had to put up an entrance sign to show the way. Ilya Kabakov, *Installations 1983-1995* (Paris, Centre Pompidou, May 17 - September 4, 1995), exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1995), 186.

56

Nicole Seeberger, *Ilya Kabakov. Der Konzeptkünstler und das Dialogische* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2016), 61.

57

Walter Grasskamp, “No-Man's Land”, 57.

58

Ilya Kabakov, *Über die “totale” Installation. O “total'noi” installiatsii. On the total installation* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1995), 275-280.

59

Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Arts of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 119-134.

the repository of an ephemeral memory “for export”, targeted at international audiences.⁶⁰ However, Haacke and Kabakov questioned the officially accepted cultural memory, turning the pavilion into an “anti-museum”, within a relentless debate “between memory-function and memory-archive, between remembrance and oblivion, consciousness and unconsciousness, evident and dormant”.⁶¹

As Groys recalled, the museum is defined as the institution devoted to the collection and preservation of the “new”, a repository for artefacts and documents whose *raison d'être* lies precisely in their *caesura* with the canonical tradition.⁶² Both Haacke and Kabakov defied the pretense of originality, innovation and uniqueness of this “new” art, intended as the last achievement within an evolutionary progress, by interrogating the pavilion’s status and legitimacy as a public display of an institutionalising memory. According to Haacke, the reunified German pavilion ought to incarnate one common memory, shared by the two former republics, as problematic as this might be. The most recent all-German (or German German) precedent at the Venice Biennale dated back to the national participations under the Third Reich, which the artist accordingly evoked. The shared memory among the Independent States of the Commonwealth dated back to the Soviet Union, as the inscription “URSS” (Italian for USSR) on the pavilion façade still reminded, and that Kabakov consequently addressed.

Several reviews reported on the emotional impact provoked by the two installations, with headlines such as *Death in Venice*, *Sinking Venice*, *Chaos* and *Apocalypse* [fig. 6].⁶³ Others identified the rubble as the quintessence of the current Biennale, with the two pavilions playing a leading role.⁶⁴ Art historian and former Biennale curator (1976-78) Enrico Crispolti foregrounded Haacke’s “rumbling” and Kabakov’s “chaotic but lively” pavilions as topical projects within a precarious art show, that he dubbed a “paper Biennale” [fig. 7].⁶⁵ The aesthetics of the rubble was particularly striking when compared to the environment surrounding the Biennale: Venice, a city devoid of any debris – not to say ruins – of its glorious past. A city where restorative policies towards its conspicuous cultural heritage had always dictated to reconstruct, when needed, “as it was, where it was”, as it was the case after the collapse of St Mark’s Campanile in 1903 or after the devastating fire of *La Fenice* theatre in 1996. In the name of a dogmatic restoration of the city, sanctioned by laxity and paralysis, the lagoon city was destined to repress any attempt to reflect upon, rethink and possibly innovate its history, leaving no trace of its past, always deceptively contemporary, yet timeless.⁶⁶ According to the distinction between

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See Sandra Frimmel, “Kak pokazivat’ Rossiui v Venetsii”, *Artkhronika* 5, no. 1 (2003): 22-29. In the case of the Soviet pavilion, art historian Andrei Kovalev writes about “double standards” in selecting artists for either international or domestic venues. Andrei Kovalev, “Empty Space? The Soviet Pavilion during the Cold War”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 70-78, here 73-74.

61

Tiziana Gislimberti, *Mappe della memoria. L'ultima generazione tedesco-orientale si racconta* (Milano: Mimesis, 2009), 106.

62

Boris Groys, *On the New*, in Boris Groys, *Art Power*, 23-42.

63

See Michael Kimmelman, “Death in Venice”, *The New York Times*, June 27, 1993: 1; Viktor Miziano, “Tonushchaia Venetsiia”, *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, no. 1 (1993); Marco Rosci, “Americani nell’irrealtà, ex sovietici apocalittici”, *La stampa*, June 14, 1993: 15. Art historian Luciano Caramel wrote about a “general feeling of apocalypses”, while art critic Pierre Restany about “a current geopolitical and ideological chaos”, both openly referring to the German pavilion (cit. in Gabriella de Marco, Carlo A. Bucci, “Gran bazar del caos con remake”, *L’Unità*, June 13, 1993: 17).

64

Petra Kipphoff, “Bodenlos in den Gärten der Kunst”, *Die Zeit*, June 18, 1993: 53; “Führers Trümmer”, *Der Spiegel*, no. 24, June 13: 26-27; Frederika Randall, “Biennale: News on the Rialto”, *The Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 1993: 12; Hervé Gauville, “La marathon de Venise”, *Libération*, June 16, 1993: 1, 14. About the Italian reception of the German pavilion, see also Petra Schaefer, *GERMANIA – Italienische Kritik der deutschen Beiträge seit 1990*, in Jan May, Sabine Meine (eds.), *Der deutsche Pavillon*, 127-140, here 131-133; about the reception of the CIS pavilion, Sandra Frimmel, “1993”, in Nikolay Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale (1895-2013)*, 520-522.

65

Enrico Crispolti, “Una Biennale di carta”, *L’Unità*, June 13, 1993: 17.

66

Salvatore Settis, *Se Venezia muore* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014), 122-132.

fig. 6
 Marco Rosci, "Americani nell'irrealità, ex sovietici apocalittici", *La stampa*, June 14, 1993. In the reproduction, the two-page spread designed by Hans Haacke for the Biennale's general catalogue with key elements of his *Germania* installations (photograph of Hitler's visit at the Venice Biennale in 1934; the plastic oversized replica of a 1 *Deutschmark* coin from 1990, the year of the monetary union).

Americani nell'irrealità Ex sovietici apocalittici

LE nazioni che partecipano ufficialmente alla Biennale con quale volto, con quali caratteri si presentano alla kermesse? Passando da un padiglione all'altro della rassegna, si possono riconoscere delle tendenze nazionali? Interrogativi a cui è difficile rispondere, perché ciò che prevale è un certo gusto del compromesso, dell'escamotage da un lato, e dall'altro del recupero di valori e personaggi degli anni buoni. Per il resto il taccuino registra schematicamente il gusto surrealista di americani e inglesi, il cartesianesimo francese, il pessimismo tedesco, una vena apocalittica tra gli ex sovietici e un decadente trovaresimo fra gli spagnoli.

Gli Stati Uniti, con lo speranzoso e poderoso impegno di ogni edizione, sembrano aprirsi alla Francia della più che ottantenne scultrice Louise Bourgeois, ma sta di fatto che dal 1938 essa è felicemente newyorkese; e che il suo personalis-

«Germania 1993» del tedesco Hans Haacke il pessimismo che caratterizza le opere presentate nel padiglione tedesco ha destato molte perplessità nel più autorevole visitatore: Ernst Jünger



All'estremo opposto, con indubbia forza e suggestione in cui però s'instaura il sospetto di un alto professionismo da Cassandre della caduta degli dei e dei muri, il tedesco Haacke - ma vivo a New York - dietro al nudo muro con l'ingrandimento fotografico di Hitler che visita la Biennale (dietro di lui Botai) riduce semplicemente la maceria dissestata al pavimento del padiglione centrale tedesco. Kaputt: di tutta la Germania, Est e Ovest. Negli ambienti del padiglione, Nam June Paik, finto ospite coreano ma autentico amico di Haacke al-

ternante New York con Düsseldorf, scatenata da decine di video e di altoparlanti la sua più grande, più clamorosa, più coinvolgente tempesta di immagini elettroniche, urlando l'Apocalisse della cultura occidentale.

Apocalisse anche nel padiglione ex sovietico: il sessantenne ucraino Kabakov, anche lui, vedi caso, attivo a New York, lo circonda con un asseito, lo cosparge di foglie morte e di incastellature precarie, lo immerge nell'oscurità e piazza nel giardino un tempetto-kitsch leninista; memoria del passato

Marco Rosci

fig. 7
 A full page of the daily newspaper "L'Unità" dedicated to the opening of the 45th Venice Art Biennale, June 13, 1993. Below the title of Enrico Crispolti's review, "Una Biennale di carta", an installation view of the German pavilion with visitors.

Cultura

Evento destinato ai media più che a presentare il nuovo nell'arte la rassegna veneziana di Bonito Oliva, nomade e transnazionale. In gran parte rivisitazione del già noto. Eppure regala forti emozioni. Dalle «rovine» del padiglione tedesco al vitalismo russo e giapponese

Una Biennale di carta

Dopo una lunghissima spettacolare vertice la Biennale apre oggi i suoi cancelli al pubblico. Che cosa c'è da vedere? Molto, almeno numericamente. Fattori perentorio. Poco invece di qualità. Il giudizio di un'emozione, soprattutto in un padiglione tedesco e in quello di Palazzo Fortuny, dove espone l'artista galles Peter Corneley.

Il settore invece l'ha visto solo una volta, in un'occasione per un'occasione che non è mai stata una Biennale. In una mostra intitolata alla Germania, ma che in realtà è stata una rassegna di artisti tedeschi, organizzata da Hans Haacke, il più grande padiglione del mondo. Un'occasione che non è mai stata una Biennale. In una mostra intitolata alla Germania, ma che in realtà è stata una rassegna di artisti tedeschi, organizzata da Hans Haacke, il più grande padiglione del mondo. Un'occasione che non è mai stata una Biennale.



Politi attacca il padiglione e la Biennale lo denuncia

Il fatto di utilizzare abitualmente il nome di un'opera di arte è un'operazione di marketing. In questo caso, il nome di un'opera di arte è un'operazione di marketing.

Critici, artisti galleristi e altri addetti ai lavori giudicano la proposta

«Gran bazar del caos con remake»

Artisti, architetti e operai tutti insieme (faticosamente)

Si chiama «Slittamenti», è il pezzo di metallo ospitato nel nuovo spazio espositivo veneziano collocato nei vecchi granai della Giudecca: ecco come è stato allestito

Il pezzo di metallo è un'opera di arte. È un'opera di arte che è un pezzo di metallo. È un'opera di arte che è un pezzo di metallo.



Il pezzo di metallo è un'opera di arte. È un'opera di arte che è un pezzo di metallo. È un'opera di arte che è un pezzo di metallo.

ruins and rubble provided by Marc Augé, the latter presents no cultural value as the consequence of an intentional act of destruction, therefore it needs to be removed as soon as possible.⁶⁷ In the microcosm of Giardini, the rubble, even if in the form of artefacts, offered tangible remnants of the end of an era, tangible in the true sense of the word, since pieces of the torn floor and discarded objects soon became souvenirs that visitors began to take home, as had already happened with fragments of the Berlin Wall.

The wide affinity from public and critics towards the two pavilions culminated with the art prizes awarded by the international jury: Germany received the Golden Lion for best national participation, in accordance with “the trans-national spirit of the present Biennale”,⁶⁸ while Kabakov, along with Louise Bourgeois, Joseph Kosuth and Jean Pierre Raynaud, was awarded an honorable mention.

5. Transnationalism Versus Trans(it)nationalism

The application of the claimed principles of “transnationality” and “coexistence” into the exhibitionary practice was eventually attuned to the disparate agendas of the growing national participations. A transnational representation within national pavilions was made possible in a few cases, such as the Israeli pavilion, which hosted Japanese Gutai artist Jiro Yoshihara, and the Austrian pavilion, which presented US and Swiss artists Andrea Fraser and Christian Philipp Müller, along with Austrian Gerwald Rockenschaub. In other premises, the call for transnationality provided the chance to celebrate the origins or the new homeland of world-renowned artists, as it was the case respectively with Joseph Kosuth hosted in the Hungarian pavilion and Louise Bourgeois representing the United States of America. Besides such cases, none of the other pavilions were ready to make room for alien artists. As the Commissioner of the Czech Republic stated, “the idea was noble, but out of reality”.⁶⁹

While on one side Bonito Oliva made frequent use of expressions such as “circulation of the art global village” and “intercontinental spirit of the Biennale”, on the other he had to come to terms with the fact that he had no supervision over national pavilions. He eventually advanced less ambitious and more pragmatic solutions, such as inviting commissioners to consider the option to accompany the exhibition of one “emblematic” national artist with a parallel show open to “pavilionless” artists. This option was mainly motivated by the circumstance that no space was left over, neither in the Central Pavilion nor at Giardini, for new national participations. Therefore, advocating for pavilionless artists to be hosted in already established premises was an attempt to think outside of the box of the idea of the nation. He also encouraged bilateral dynamics since “like in a marriage, things happen in two; matches and pairings may arise from historical, diplomatic and cultural affinities”.⁷⁰

Even the much-awarded German pavilion presented two artists whose presence, rather than proving a transnational attitude, testified to the international attractiveness of Germany in accordance with a grand national narrative which was at odds with Bonito Oliva’s original intentions. Germany’s openness and receptiveness towards new geographies, starting from its “close Other”, ultimately

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Marc Augé, *Le temps en ruines* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 45

68

La Biennale di Venezia: le esposizioni internazionali d'arte, 1895-1995 (Milano: Electa, 1996), 212. The international jury was headed by Luciano Anceschi and composed of Giovanni Carandente, Julia Kristeva, Steingrim Laursen, Katharina Schmidt and Nicholas Serota.

69

Magdalena Juříková, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 52.

70

Achille Bonito Oliva, Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, July 3-4, 1992, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518, Verbale della riunione, 10.

proved a failure. Judging from the archival findings, no art institution or personality from former East-Germany was invited nor considered in the making process of the national reunified pavilion, reinforcing allegations of cultural imperialism as a one-sided west-driven process.

Rather than reflecting a contemporary transnational spirit, Haacke and Kabakov's projects reflected on the construction process of the brand new (the reunified Federal Republic of Germany) or temporary (the Commonwealth of Independent States) political bodies that they were called to represent. Instead of a transnationalism, we could postulate, as hinted by Ricci, a trans(it)nationalism.⁷¹ With their emphasis on construction sites and rubble, both projects questioned practices of national construction, myth making and identity building, in the wake of the debates that emerged in the previous decade under Wende and Perestroika which inevitably brought about the dissolution of the geo-political status quo.

The transitional nature of the 1993 Biennale was also evident within the national participations of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, hence among those nations geographically and historically close to Germany and Russia. That was the case with two socialist federal republics dissolved under the new world order such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, whose pavilions raised issues about the legitimacy of their new owners. After the partitioning of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics, its pavilion in Venice was accordingly split into two separate – yet inevitably interconnected – sub-pavilions. Yet from the 2000's onward, the two countries began to alternate every two years.⁷² Since no agreement was found among the former republics of Yugoslavia by 1993, its pavilion was taken over by the Biennale to host the exhibition *Macchine di Pace*, while Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia found proper venues for their first independent participations. Only two years later, in view of the 1995 Centennial Biennale, these pavilions found a permanent arrangement: the Yugoslavian one was taken over by Serbia and has been managed in Belgrade ever since, the German one finally underwent a groundbreaking restoration, while the inscription "URSS" was removed from the façade of the CIS pavilion and replaced with "Russia".

6. The Afterlife of the Two Pavilions

The projects presented by Haacke and Kabakov in 1993 stand as milestones in the history of their respective pavilions, providing a significant precedent for future exhibitions held in the same premises. In both cases, a series of projects undertaken since 1993 have turned the pavilion's architecture into a disruptive, yet productive, artistic medium. Within the halls of the German pavilion, the first eloquent case dates to 2001, when Gregor Schneider, with *Totes Haus u r – 2001*, remodelled the building after his private house in Germany into a claustrophobic space by means of pits, tunnels and fake doors. A second example can be found ten years later with the construction of a chapel of rest, the *Church of Fear vs. The Alien Within*, a posthumous tribute to appointed artist Christoph Schlingensief, who had passed away a few months before the Biennale opening. Finally, in 2017 Anne Imhof with *Faust* altered the proportions of the building by blocking the main entrance and installing bullet-proof glass floors and walls to host live performances. It is noteworthy that all three mentioned projects were awarded the Golden Lion for best national participation, proving once more the potential of the pavilion as an effective artistic and curatorial tool. The most explicit reference to *Germania*, however, was presented in 2022 with *Relocating a Structure* by Maria Eichhorn, who laid bare the pavilion's historical and ideological stratifications by revealing its multiple renovation and correction plans through excavations and bricked-up

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Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary", 24.

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Alexandra Kusá, "Slovak-Czech Participation", in Veronika Wolf (ed.), *Pavilion of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in Venice* (Prague: Národní galerie, 2013): 98.

doors. Like Haacke thirty years before, Eichhorn grounded her project on historical research and scholarly contributions by Biennale experts to the catalogue, which also featured a timeline showing the problematic history of the building. The German press discussed the project by inevitably referring to Haacke's *Germania* as a historical touchstone and visual benchmark.⁷³ In turn, *Relocating a Structure* prompted a posthumous recognition of Haacke's project, which back in 1993 – as the artist recalls in a conversation with Eichhorn printed in the same catalogue – had received a dismissive response from German State institutions and art critics.⁷⁴

As far as it concerns the afterlife of Kabakov's piece, it will be enough to mention *The Green Pavilion*, presented in 2015 by Irina Nakhova. Emerging from the Moscow underground art scene in the Eighties, in Venice Nakhova created a multimedia installation which manifestly resounded not only with the *Red Pavilion* but also with the history of the building itself, unveiled one century before from external green walls.⁷⁵ Through minimal interventions, Nakhova intended to “dissolve” the pavilion into its surroundings, in the green of Venice's main public gardens and in the blue of the lagoon.⁷⁶ It is noteworthy that neither colours declared by Kabakov and Nakhova matched with the eventual shade of the walls, with the first one being pink and the latter, according to most visitors, blue, hence producing in many visitors a shift between expectation and perception.⁷⁷

In his inquiry into “the geopolitics of architecture” at the Biennale, art historian Joel Robinson regards Haacke's *Germania* as the first “critical interrogation of the ideological nature of the built landscape” at Giardini,⁷⁸ paving the way for a plethora of artistic interventions in the following decades questioning the political implications embodied by pavilions. Similarly, Ricci recalls that the 1993 Biennale, through its insistence on the “transnational”, prompted a conscious approach to the otherwise outdated national participations.⁷⁹ This aspect contributes towards reassessing the impact of the 45th Exhibition, as anticipated in the title of her essays, as a “contemporary Venice Biennale” for demonstrating the potentiality of national pavilions as both subject and object of artistic and curatorial practices, questioning the history, the geo-politics and ultimately the infrastructure of the Venice Biennale, in a highly Institutional Critique spirit.

For these reasons, the two projects can be considered pioneering artistic experiments of “meta-pavilions”, before the term “pavilion” was consciously used and readapted as a curatorial device to provide the Venice Biennale with a new, yet self-reflecting, narrative and structure. That happened in 2011 with the Biennale titled *ILLUMInations*, when curator Bice Curiger rejected the allegations of anachronism applied to pavilions, by inviting four artists to create, in the framework of the international show, four “para-pavilions” intended as “meta-objects” to host the works of other artists intended to epitomise the dialogical nature of pavilions.⁸⁰

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Ulrike Knöfel, “Unsere Frau in Venedig”, *Der Spiegel*, no. 17 (2022); Adam Szymczyk, “Maria Eichhorn”, *Frieze*, no. 226 (April 2022); Ilke Becker, “Durcharbeiten der Wiederstände”, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 127 (September 2022).

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Interview with Haacke, in Yilmaz Dziewior (ed.), *Maria Eichhorn. Relocating a Structure* (German Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, April 23 - November 27, 2022), exh. cat. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022), 126-127.

75

Margarita Tupitsyn, “The Russian World: A Hare or a Bear?”, in Margarita Tupitsyn (ed.), *The Green Pavilion* (Russian Pavilion, 56th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, May 9 - November 22, 2015), exh. cat. (Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2015), 34-41.

76

Irina Nakhova, “Artist's Statement”, in Margarita Tupitsyn (ed.), *The Green Pavilion*, 29.

77

Matteo Bertelé, “Ot' krasnogo pavil'ona' k 'zelenomu pavil'onu””, 25-27.

78

Joel Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism: Venice's Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture”, *Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (Winter 2013 - 2014): 6, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2013w04jr>

79

Clarissa Ricci, “Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale”: 96.

80

Bice Curiger, “Para-Pavilions”, in Bice Curiger (ed.), *ILLUMInations* (54th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, June 4 - November 27, 2011), exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia-Marsilio, 2011), 301-316, here 303.

In 2017, Christine Macel created within her curatorial show titled *Viva Arte Viva* nine pavilions, that she also named “trans-pavilions”, for being “transnational by nature” while echoing the “Biennale’s historical organization into pavilions”.⁸¹

The primary role of the two pavilions was recently reasserted even by the Biennale itself in the framework of a documentary exhibition organised in 2020 in Venice by the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (ASAC) under the headline *The Disquieted Muses. When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History* (2022).⁸² In the exhibition catalogue, Cecilia Alemani highlighted the role and prominence of Kabakov’s and Haacke’s installations as “meditations in which the concept of nationality was not only a theme but almost a means of expression”,⁸³ hence as eloquent artistic contributions to a transition – paraphrasing the exhibition’s section and catalogue’s chapter that she curated – “from nation states to a global Biennale”.⁸⁴

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Christine Macel, “Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte Viva Arte”, in Christine Macel (ed.), *Viva Arte Viva* (57th International Art Exhibition. La Biennale di Venezia, May 13 - November 26, 2017), exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale, 2017), 16-31, here 16.

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In the exhibition, a section was devoted to a selection of national pavilions presented at the 45th Exhibition which included Germany, Russia and Great Britain. For an exhaustive exhibition review, see Clarissa Ricci, Marie Tavinor, “Musing with the Muses: the Venice Biennale’s Anniversary Exhibition”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26, no. 4 (2021): 482-501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2021.1943898>

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Cecilia Alemani, “The national pavilions in 1993: Hans Haacke, Richard Hamilton, Ilya Kabakov”, in ASAC, *Le muse inquiete. La Biennale di Venezia di fronte alla storia / The Disquieted Muses. When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History* (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, August - November 2020) exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2020), 382.

84

Cecilia Alemani, “90s. From Nation States to a Global Biennale” in ASAC, *Le muse inquiete / The Disquieted Muses*, 358-384.

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