

Illuminating Identity: Two Visions of Israeli Cultural Politics at the 2011 Venice Biennale**Rachel Kubrick****Abstract**

At the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, two internationally acclaimed Israeli artists, Sigalit Landau and Yael Bartana, representing Israel and Poland respectively, presented diverging expressions of their Israeli national identity whilst also engaging with the lasting impact of the Holocaust in Israeli collective memory. Bartana's film trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2007-2011) considers this history head-on, imagining an alternative present in which an activist movement sparks an exodus of Jews from Israel back to their pre-Holocaust home of Poland, in a revolutionary reversal of Zionist principles. Landau's contribution also creates innovative solutions to questions of Israeli identity and politics. In *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, Landau installed various environments using themes of water, land, and salt, referencing the natural border of the Dead Sea between Israel and Jordan. Her work considers the construction of a salt bridge between the two nations, and uses the motif of empty shoes as a reminder of the Holocaust. This paper delves specifically into the expression of national identity and the critique of nationalism that both artists presented at the Biennale, raising questions of transnationalism for future iterations of the exhibition.

Keywords

Yael Bartana, Sigalit Landau, Israel, Poland, Holocaust Studies, Venice Biennale, National Pavilions

Author's Note

Please be advised that, despite the publication date, this article was originally written in 2020 and revised in early 2023, prior to the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas War.

ILLUMINATING IDENTITY: TWO VISIONS OF ISRAELI CULTURAL POLITICS AT THE 2011 VENICE BIENNALE

Rachel Kubrick

Introduction

In October 2010, Bice Curiger, Artistic Director of the 54th Venice Biennale, announced the theme of *ILLUMInations*, sparking discussions of nationalism and globalism.¹ The first part of the title draws attention to the use of light in the paintings of the Venetian Renaissance artist Tintoretto.² The second half, “nations”, explicitly highlights what has become a somewhat contentious aspect of the Biennale – the tradition of National Pavilions. Curiger acknowledged this controversy in the exhibition press release: “Sometimes the Pavilions of the Biennale are considered anachronistic; on the contrary they can be a tool to reflect upon the issue of identity”.³

Over a century prior to 2011’s *ILLUMInations*, questions of nationhood in the context of a cosmopolitan biennial were already being considered. *La Biennale di Venezia* was inaugurated in 1895 as a new art-focused and industry-less alternative to the ubiquitous world’s fairs and universal expositions popular at the time, albeit one that utilised the same national framework.⁴ The similarly cosmopolitan Olympics – to which the Venice Biennale is frequently compared – was founded just a year earlier in 1894.⁵ Caroline Jones identifies both events as “theaters of representation” founded in the second half of the 19th century, “a time of expansionist nationalism”.⁶ Given this history, the Biennale pavilions have

1

Jennifer Allen, “International News Digest”, *Artforum International*, October 25, 2010, <https://www.artforum.com/news/international-news-digest-26706>, accessed May 2022.

2

“ILLUMInations – Giardini”, *Universes in Universe*, October 22, 2010, <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2011/tour/illuminations>, accessed May 2022.

3

Universes in Universe, “ILLUMInations – Giardini”; Bice Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), 44; Bice Curiger, “We are Working with Art Here” Bice Curiger on the Venice Biennale”, interview by Barnaby Drabble, *Metropolis M*, June 11, 2011, https://www.metropolism.com/en/features/22642_we_are_working_with_art_here, accessed May 2022.

4

Caroline A. Jones. *The Global Work of Art : World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 84.

5

Ibid., 94.

6

Ibid.

been called “the international art world’s glamorous graveyard to national cultural identity”.⁷

Such questions of national identity especially came into play with the 2011 Polish and Israeli Pavilions, both of which exhibited work by Israeli-born artists – Yael Bartana and Sigalit Landau.⁸ In this article, Bartana’s and Landau’s respective exhibitions will be used as a case study to explore the divergent expressions and criticisms of nationalism that emerged especially in the Israeli and Jewish diasporic contexts, ultimately proposing transnationalism as a more fitting guide for future biennials in an increasingly global art world.

The State of Israel itself is indebted to nationalism in its foundations and its continued survival as a nation for the Jewish people. It is therefore unsurprising that the idea of nation is a primary feature of both exhibitions. According to political scientist Benedict Anderson, nations as “imagined communities” emerged through recognised commonalities across a vast population, developing especially on linguistic grounds.⁹ Israel, however, diverges from this traditional definition as its nationhood is derived from an imagined community rooted in a common faith across a multilingual and ethnically diverse Jewish diaspora.

Jewish nationalism found its voice in the late 19th century with the Zionist movement, which historically aimed to “normalise the status of the Jewish people and transform it into a national group like all other nations in the modern geopolitical space”, according to Dmitry Shumsky.¹⁰ Although Zionism evolved into various branches with differing goals and ideologies, generally speaking, the movement came to fruition in modern geopolitics as the State of Israel. Accordingly, both Bartana and Landau will be explored primarily in terms of their Israeli national identity, rather than their Jewish national identity. One must acknowledge the difference between the Jewish diaspora as a nation across time and place, and today’s nation-state, the State of Israel, which naturally comprises groups of various religions and backgrounds, despite the apparent desires of the current, far-right leadership.

In the Israeli Pavilion, Sigalit Landau worked at the juncture of sculpture, video, and installation with her exhibition *One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings*. Landau’s work is ingrained in her homeland. She has used the Dead Sea as an outdoor studio space since 2004, including for her piece for the Biennale.¹¹ Abby McKenzie and Mimi Gillman succinctly describe this practice as the “use of the physicality of the land of Israel itself as a medium”.¹² Meanwhile, Israeli video artist and photographer Yael Bartana has established herself within the Jewish diaspora, or what Irit Rogoff calls “the Diaspora’s diaspora”, emigrating from Israel

7

Felicity Fenner, “As We Face Pressing Global Issues, the Pavilions of Venice Biennale Are a 21st Century Anomaly”, *The Conversation*, May 17, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/as-we-face-pressing-global-issues-the-pavilions-of-venice-biennale-are-a-21st-century-anomaly-117078>, accessed May 2022.

8

It should be noted that the Artistic Director’s curatorial theme for the Central Pavilion does not need to be followed by the curators of the National Pavilions in the Arsenale and Giardini or those of the collateral events. For an in-depth discussion of the biennale’s structure, see Vittoria Martini, “The Evolution of an Exhibition Model: Venice Biennale as an Entity in Time”, *OnCurating* 46 (June 2020): 479-493.

9

Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities”, in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (eds.), *Nationalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 89–96.

10

Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 220.

11

Sigalit Landau in David Goss (ed.), *Sigalit Landau – Salt Years* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2019), n.p.

12

Sigalit Landau, “Exploring Inherited Identities”, interview by Abby McKenzie and Mimi Gillman, *Keen on Protest*, July 15, 2016, <http://protest.keenonmag.com/sigalitlandau/>, accessed March 2020.

to live between Amsterdam and Berlin.¹³ Perhaps appropriately, she also exhibited her film trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned* at the Biennale outside of an Israeli context. Bartana represented Poland, a nation deeply rooted in Israeli collective memory for its connection to the Holocaust, and where, like many Israeli and diasporic Jews, Bartana has ancestral ties.

Both artists therefore dissect the notion of a collective Israeli consciousness, raising questions of how Israelis can connect amongst themselves but especially with other nations. Existing in an inadvertent juxtaposition, with the Israeli and Polish pavilions situated just a short walk across the canal in the Giardini, *And Europe Will Be Stunned* and *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings* put forth different expressions of national identity and critiques of nationalism by creating new political fictions and realities, fitting for citizens of a nation where politics are ever-present.

The Polish Pavilion: Yael Bartana

Much of Yael Bartana's work takes the form of "pre-enactments", a term coined by the artist in reference to "a methodology that commingles fact and fiction, prophecy and history".¹⁴ Through these pre-enactments, Bartana looks to disrupt collective memory and "to enable the political imagining of an alternative reality".¹⁵ Her pre-enactments are designed to spark thought and action, encouraging her audience to interrogate their own history and identity, two themes that permeate her practice.¹⁶ As discussed in the following section, Bartana's Venice Biennale exhibition imagines an alternative national reality – in which she employs a convincing narrative to disrupt assumptions of Zionism and what a home for the Jewish diaspora should be.

Her entry for the 2011 Polish Pavilion, *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, comes in three parts: *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)* (2007), *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)* (2009), and *Zamach (Assassination)* (2011). Each film calls for a political interpretation, engaging with questions of identity and history for both the Polish and Israeli nations. The video trilogy considers an alternative solution to the so-called 'Jewish question' after the Holocaust, essentially proposing a reversal of Zionism.¹⁷

The first film, *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)* (2007), introduces the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP), a fictional political group, through a speech by the movement's founder [fig. 1]. The film is reminiscent of World War II propaganda, but the near emptiness of the setting, a Warsaw sports stadium, adds a layer of irony and unease to proceedings.¹⁸ This passionate speech calling for the Jewish return to Poland concludes with young followers stenciling the following motto into the grass: "3,300,000 Jews can change the lives of 40,000,000 Poles".¹⁹

In the second film, *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)* (2009), the Jewish

13

Olga Gershenson, "Meta-Memory: About the Holocaust in New Israeli Video Art", *Jewish Film & New Media: An International Journal* 6, no. 1 (2018): 67-90, <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/725823>, accessed May 2022; "Bartana_CV_0521", *Yael Bartana*, <https://yaelbartana.com/files/pages/2021/09/Bartana-CV-0521.pdf>, accessed May 2022.

14

Yael Bartana, "Interview with Artist Yael Bartana", *Aesthetica*, August 26, 2014, <https://www.aestheticamagazine.com/interview-artist-yael-bartana/>, accessed May 2022.

15

Yael Bartana, "The Impossible Possible", interview by Sarah James, *Art Monthly* no. 450 (October 2021): 4.

16

Ibid.

17

Yael Bartana, "A Conversation between Yael Bartana, Galit Eilat and Charles Esche", interview with Galit Eilat and Charles Esche, in Joa Ljungberg and Andreas Nilsson (eds.), *Yael Bartana - And Europe Will Be Stunned* (Berlin: Revolver, 2010), 116, 168.

18

Joa Ljungberg, "A Dizzying Appeal for Reconciliation", in Ljungberg and Nilsson (eds.), *Yael Bartana - And Europe Will Be Stunned*, 16.

19

Ibid.

fig. 1
Yael Bartana. *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)*, 2007. Video still of one channel video and sounds installation, 11". Image courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam and Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw.



fig. 2
Yael Bartana. *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)*, 2009. Video still of one channel video and sounds installation, 15". Image courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



return comes to fruition. The JRMiP build a *kibbutz*, a communal settlement native to Israel, in the Warsaw Ghetto, thereby flipping the powerful symbol of the Israeli pioneer, *halutz*.²⁰ These pioneers become the new “bearer of the national mission, paving the way for national redemption”, as the original *halutzim* have been described [fig. 2].²¹ Once completed, they hoist up a flag depicting the JRMiP symbol, the Jewish star of David emerging from behind the emblematic Polish eagle.

The last and longest film, *Zamach (Assassination)* (2011), conveys the final act of the JRMiP’s origin story: the funeral of its founder after his mysterious assassination. An unidentified amount of time has passed since the events of the previous films, during which the movement has grown so that the funeral is completely packed with mourners, reminiscent of a rally. Various figures speak on behalf of their martyred leader as the audience waves posters with powerful slogans and flags of the JRMiP’s star-eagle symbol. A new chapter has arrived for this revolutionary movement in the wake of his death. As Bartana describes, “It is by means of this symbolic death that the myth of the new political movement is unified – a movement which can become a concrete project to be implemented in Poland, Europe, or the Middle East in the days to come”.²²

Rather than campaigning for a Jewish homeland and encouraging Jews to move there, the films advocate for an exodus from Israel to the European nations from which they were forced out. This reversal of the Right of Return for all Jews to immigrate to Israel is exemplified by the backwards-playing music of the Israeli national anthem, *Hatikvah*, in two of the films.²³ This idea frames those who left the ‘motherland’ to escape European anti-Semitism and genocide, as a diaspora in exile. This is opposed to the typical view of Jews living outside the Biblical homeland of Israel as being in an undesirable diasporic state. As Bartana explains, “there are different streams within Zionism, but one of them is that all Jews should be in Israel. So it goes against that stream”.²⁴

Overtly provocative, Bartana’s concept sparked interest internationally, especially in regard to its Polish setting. It was the first time a non-Polish citizen represented Poland at the Biennale.²⁵ The exhibition received much praise, such as in Jason Edward Kaufman’s otherwise negative review of the Biennale for the *Washington Post*, in which he argued that Bartana’s work stood out as “compelling”, or in Kaelen Wilson-Goldie’s review for *Frieze*, in which she exalted *And Europe Will Be Stunned* as “the most successful and disturbing” work of the National Pavilions that year.²⁶

It may have seemed strange for an Israeli artist to exhibit at the Polish Pavilion, but her family history lends this choice greater credence, especially in the context of the film series. Bartana’s grandparents perished there during the Holocaust, so her Polish heritage would qualify her as one of the 3.3 million Polish

20

Ibid, 17.

21

Eliezer Don-Yehiya and Charles S. Liebman, “The Symbol System of Zionist-Socialism: An Aspect of Israeli Civil Religion”, *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 2 (1981): 121-48, www.jstor.org/stable/1396057, accessed April 2020.

22

“And Europe Will Be Stunned/Zamach (Assassination), 2011”, *Yael Bartana*, <http://yaelbartana.com/project/trembling-time-2001-2#info>, accessed February 2020.

23

J. Hoberman, “Jewish Pioneers Return to Poland”, *Tablet*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/273209/jewish-pioneers-return-to-poland>, accessed May 2022.

24

Yael Bartana, “Interview Yael Bartana”, interview by Nina Folkersma, *Nina Folkersma*, May 7, 2011, <http://www.ninafolkersma.nl/?p=1299>, accessed May 2022.

25

“...and Europe will be stunned”, *Polish Pavilion in Venice*, <https://labiennale.art.pl/en/wystawy/yael-bartana-and-europe-will-be-stunned/>, accessed May 2022.

26

Jason Edward Kaufman, “Venice Biennale an Ambitious but Typically Overblown International Art Festival”, *Washington Post*, June 17, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/venice-biennale-an-ambitious-but-typically-overblown-international-art-festival/2011/06/14/AGQA75YH_story.html, accessed May 2022; Jens Hoffman, Dieter Roelstraete, and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “54th Venice Biennale”, *Frieze*, September 1, 2011, <https://frieze.com/article/54th-venice-biennale>, accessed May 2022.

Jews slated to return by the wishes of the JRMiP.²⁷ In this respect, her status as an artist-representative of Poland takes a small step toward fulfilling the goals of the JRMiP.

The films were made in close collaboration with Sławomir Sierakowski, founder and chief editor of *Krytyka Polityczna*. Cast as the fictional founder of the JRMiP, Sierakowski is an influential figure in contemporary Polish culture and politics in real life. Bartana's collaboration with Sierakowski – who not only acted but co-wrote the speech for the first film – furthers the idea of the JRMiP as “invert[ing] Zionist principles”, as Benjamin Seroussi and Eyal Danon define it.²⁸ Although Sierakowski himself is not Jewish, his status as a journalist and leading intellectual provides credibility for his character which mirrors that of Zionism founder Theodor Herzl. Bartana describes Herzl as follows: “author of imaginary utopias, journalist, politician and jurist...[he] was the embodiment of the New Jew, whose political vision created the Zionist movement ex nihilo, thereby giving birth to the future state of Israel”.²⁹

Not coincidentally, Sierakowski also creates an “imaginary utopia” in the films. Uilleam Blacker defines Sierakowski's fictitious call for the “Jewish return to Poland” as a “utopian project”, even comparing it to Michel Foucault's heterotopia, “an effectively enacted utopia in which [...] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted”.³⁰ Between Sierakowski's and Herzl's similar beginnings and ultimate goals, Bartana clearly positions her movement's founder as a new Herzl for a revitalised Jewish nationalism. But contextualised within this utopian mythology, the darker undertones of Bartana's films are revealed. One recalls the utopian aspirations embedded in the Israeli collective memory – from the socialist *kibbutzim* Bartana features in *Mur i wieża* [fig. 3], to the utopian elements of the Bauhaus in Israeli architecture, as elaborated upon in the following section. Bartana forewarns the viewer of potentially dire consequences and a hostile or even violent future for the JRMiP in Poland, just as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists today, with no resolution in sight.³¹

Viewers may therefore question the sincerity of Bartana's suggestions

fig. 3

Yael Bartana. *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)*, 2009. Video still of one channel video and sounds installation, 15". Image courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



27

Bartana, “Interview Yael Bartana”, interview.

28

Bartana, “A Conversation between Yael Bartana, Galit Eilat and Charles Esche”, 116; Eyal Danon and Benjamin Seroussi, *Inferno* (New York: Petzel Gallery, 2015), 47.

29

Yael Bartana in Nicole Schweizer (ed.), *Yael Bartana*, (Zurich: JRP-Ringier, 2017), 36.

30

Uilleam Blacker, “Spatial Dialogues and Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Polish Art: Yael Bartana, Rafał Betlejewski and Joanna Rajkowska”, *The Open Arts Journal*, no. 3 (2014): 183-5, <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-3/2014s32ub/>, accessed May 2022.

in *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, as the films' documentary-like appearance makes the meaning and reality of the work especially imprecise. Avi Feldman describes a "blurred distinction between 'real' and 'fictional'" in Bartana's trilogy, permitting her "to position the movement on the border between being a political engagement and being a fictional artistic project".³² Bartana's work can therefore be understood as what Carrie Lambert-Beatty calls "parafiction":

[Parafiction] has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.³³

The fictional movement to grant Jews Polish citizenship is grounded in reality; legislation is in place in Portugal and Spain to grant citizenship to those who can trace their roots to the Inquisition, and Germany is restoring citizenship for Jews who were stripped of it during World War II and their descendants.³⁴ With this similitude to real-life politics and Bartana's ability as a convincing filmmaker-artist, the plausibility of the JRMiP makes the viewing experience all the more effective [fig. 4].

fig. 4
Yael Bartana. *Zamach*
(Assassination), 2011. Video
still of one channel video
and sounds installation, 35".
Image courtesy of Annet
Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and
Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel
Aviv.



31

For further reading on utopia in Israeli culture and history, see Marc J. Rothenstein, *Contested Utopia: Jewish Dreams and Israeli Realities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2021).

32

Avi Feldman, "Performing Justice – From Dada's Trial to Yael Bartana's JRMiP Congress", *OnCurating* 26 (October 2015), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-26-reader/the-curator-and-her-double-the-cruelty-of-the-avatar-copy-183.html#.XfL-WZnKh-V>, accessed May 2022.

33

Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility", *OCTOBER* 129 (Summer 2009): 54.

34

Ofer Aderet, "Ashkenazi Jews Find Spanish, Portuguese Roots after Passport Offer to Descendants of Expelled", *Haaretz*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/premium-ashkenazi-jews-find-spanish-portuguese-roots-after-passport-offer-to-descendants-1.8024821>, accessed May 2022; "Restoration of German Citizenship (Article 116 II Basic Law)", German Missions in the United Kingdom, <https://uk.diplo.de/uk-en/02/citizenship/restoration-of-citizenship>, accessed April 2020.

There are a plethora of examples indicating Bartana's prowess as a "parafictioneer" through this work. Feldman, for example, lists numerous reviews of *And Europe Will Be Stunned* as evidence of "the consistent debate" about whether this work is "real or unreal".³⁵ Beyond critics and journalists, viewers too have been confused or even fooled by the murky reality of the work. Bartana describes receiving "the best comment" about the film trilogy when an older Israeli man exclaimed, "That was the best documentary I've ever seen!" upon leaving the pavilion.³⁶

Another interesting, albeit unsettlingly anti-Semitic, example came in the form of a news article about the 2012 JRMiP conference by the Nordic Resistance Movement, a neo-Nazi organisation. The article, entitled "Jews Plan to Make Poland a Zionist Homeland", states, "the conference...was supposedly about Jewish art and population development in Poland...in reality it was a Zionist conference...which was about how the Jews are intent on grabbing control of Poland and turning it into a new Jewish state".³⁷

These examples, one entertainingly anecdotal and another disturbingly dangerous, express the complexities and consequences of politically engaged art that straddles this blurred border between fiction and reality. But, as Bartana puts it, "that's the mark of success for a fictional story. It has to do with the work's proximity to reality", citing the very real and very racist reactions of Polish commenters on the YouTube video of *Mary Koszmary*.³⁸ The documentarian narrative therefore has a pungent effect, rendering the casual viewer unsettled and unsure of the films' veracity.³⁹

Joshua Simon explains that "by changing means and by confusing symbols, by using images and by activating representational devices and systems, in Israel, Poland and Palestine, these films perform a political act".⁴⁰ As the far-right continues its ascent in Europe and Israel, and the distinctions between fact and fiction in politics become increasingly and startlingly vague, *And Europe Will Be Stunned* feels especially relevant. Bartana effectively wields her political knowledge and artistic expertise to create films that not only engage viewers with a convincing narrative, but prompt them to reconsider Jewish national identity and its relation to both Eastern Europe and Israel.

The Israeli Pavilion: Sigalit Landau

Across the Giardini, Sigalit Landau's installation in the Israeli Pavilion considers the relationship between Israel and Jordan, two countries also bound together by 20th century conflict, but looks to a more collaborative future across national borders. As the Israeli Pavilion curators Jean de Loisy and Ilan Wizgan state in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, "Landau's insistence on working with contradictory forces, forcing them to somehow correlate and interrelate, should be understood as a political stance".⁴¹ In *One's Man Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, playing on the title of the 1973 Paul Simon song "One Man's Ceiling is Another

35

Feldman, "Performing Justice".

36

Yael Bartana, "Embrace Weakness! A Conversation", in Schweizer (ed.), *Yael Bartana*, 139.

37

Erik Forsell, "Jews Plan to Make Poland a Zionist Homeland", *Nordic Resistance Movement*, June 8, 2019, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/jews-plan-to-make-poland-a-zionist-homeland/#>, accessed May 2022.

38

Bartana, "Embrace Weakness! A Conversation", 139.

39

Nicole Schweizer, "Foreword: Fictionalizing the Real", in Schweizer (ed.), *Yael Bartana*, 5.

40

Joshua Simon, "Spaces of Appearance", in Ljungberg and Nilsson (eds.), *Yael Bartana - And Europe Will Be Stunned*, 146.

41

Sigalit Landau, Jean de Loisy, and Ilan Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings* (Paris: Kamel Mennour, 2011), 106.

Man's Floor", Landau reimagines the Dead Sea, the impenetrable natural border between the two opposing nations, as a nexus for creativity and movement.⁴² She aims for a bridge inspired by the saline body of water from which it would emerge.

One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings is a truly multifaceted work, incorporating the entire Israeli Pavilion: three floors and a courtyard. The building itself is emblematic of Israeli nationalism; Chelsea Haines has described the Israeli Pavilion development, which launched in 1949, the year after the State of Israel declared independence, and opened at the 1952 biennale, as a "microcosm of the Israeli national project" – the nascent nation-state aimed to establish itself as a modernised, Western ally in the Middle East.⁴³ Its design, conceived by Corbusian architect Ze'ev Rechter, emulates the International style that has come to be associated with Israeli architecture due to its prevalence in Tel Aviv's White City.⁴⁴ Landau's installation was heavily integrated with the architectural integrity of the building itself, in contrast with Bartana's utilisation of the Polish Pavilion building as a vessel for her films. According to Wizgan, Landau engaged with the building's structure in her creative process, "including the tearing down of walls, the sealing of windows, the digging of holes, excavations and the like".⁴⁵ Landau's interest in connecting her work with its environment is consistent with her interest in land and place. As she puts it, she is "acting in the land, rather than 'about it' in the studio – it means going on site. Like an archaeologist, treating the land of a different stratum".⁴⁶ She said, "the story and questions the pavilion posed were a series of interactions with water, land, place, coexistence and polyphonic shades of gray with questions and illumination of the future".⁴⁷

By the time of the Biennale, Landau had already been working with the concept, location, and salt of the Dead Sea for seven years.⁴⁸ She describes the Dead Sea as a "ritualistic motif" in her art.⁴⁹ These "rituals" have involved traveling to the Dead Sea with a variety of found objects throughout August, the hottest time of year, during early morning hours. This is when, according to Landau, "the Dead Sea is impossible to visit and totally unbearable to enter, this is when the lake gives its best crystals".⁵⁰ Through a process of prolonged suspension in the Dead Sea's thirty-three percent salinity, various found objects develop a thickly crystallised layer of salt.⁵¹ For *One's Man Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, her signature crystallisation method is used for a pair of shoes, whose journey after removal from the Dead Sea make up an important aspect of the exhibition.

42

Sigalit Landau, email to author, March 4, 2020.

43

Chelsea Haines, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures: Producing Israel at the Venice Biennale, 1948–1952", 20, 33 in *Exhibitions Beyond Boundaries: Transnational Exchanges through Art, Architecture, and Design from 1945*, ed. Harriet Atkinson, Verity Clarkson, and Sarah Lichtman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

44

For further reading on Bauhaus architecture in Tel Aviv, see Nitza Metzger-Szmuk, *Dwelling on the Dunes: Tel Aviv, Modern Movement and Bauhaus Ideals / Des maisons sur le sable: Tel-Aviv, Mouvement moderne et esprit Bauhaus* (Paris: Editions de l'Eclat, 2004).

45

Ilan Wizgan, "The Freezing and Melting Point", in Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 154.

46

Landau, "Exploring Inherited Identities", interview.

47

Landau, email to author.

48

Landau, *Sigalit Landau – Salt Years*, n.p.

49

Ibid.

50

Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 99.

51

Joshua Hammer, "The Dying of the Dead Sea", *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 1, 2005, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-dying-of-the-dead-sea-70079351/>, accessed May 2022.

fig. 5
Sigalit Landau. *King of the Shepherd and the Concealed Part* (detail), 2011. Installation view of metal pipes, water, 11.2x2.2x8.6 m. *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, Israeli Pavilion, 54th Biennale, Venice, Italy. Image courtesy of Sigalit Landau.



The *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings* experience begins on the ground floor in what Landau calls the “machine room”.⁵² The visitor is immediately confronted by large pipes which fill the space [fig. 5]. Water flows through the pipes, out of and into the canal, propelled by a concealed pump. The white and blue pipes, incidentally the colours of the Israeli flag, are ready-mades; the same pipes used by the Israeli National Water Company, Mekorot.⁵³ Landau therefore ensures the specificity of location beyond the assumption presented by its existence within the Israeli Pavilion. Although conceptual, her work remains grounded in a reality of place.

Past the pipes is a video projected onto the floor. The work is entitled *Azkelon* (2011), a hybrid of Gaza and Ashkelon. This sixteen-minute video shows three men playing the game “Countries” or “Knife” on the beach (specifically the stretch of sand between the Gaza Strip and the Israeli city of Ashkelon), in which knives are used to delineate borders and mark out territory. According to Landau, “the work examines the notion and process of marking and erasing, establishing and demolishing, be it by a natural force such as waves...or by human will”.⁵⁴ This concept of territorial negotiation and creation is followed later in the exhibition.

Visitors then go up a spiral stairwell to the upper floor (the middle floor is the final location in the *promenade architecturale* of the building), in which the *horror vacui* element of the first floor is juxtaposed by a room empty but for a solitary film projected on a vast, diagonal wall. This video, *Salted Lake* (2011), depicts a pair of salt-crystallised shoes slowly melting into the ground. Like her other salt objects, these shoes were subjected to the crystallisation of the Dead Sea until they were completely enveloped by thickly layered salt. Next, they were flown from the hot, Israeli body of water to a frozen one in the northern Polish city of Gdańsk. As one watches the video, the viewer bears witness to another of Landau's scientifically informed techniques; the salt melts the ice until the shoes are swallowed by the water [fig. 6].

52

BiennaleChannel, “Art Biennale 2011 – Israel”, YouTube video, 00:13, June 1, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBFDeDy1gH0>, accessed May 2022.

53

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 155; BiennaleChannel, “Art Biennale 2011 – Israel”, 00:30; Landau, email to author.

54

Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 42.

fig. 6
Sigalit Landau. *Salted Lake*, 2011. Installation view of still video with sound, 11'04". *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, Israeli Pavilion, 54th Biennale, Venice, Italy. Image courtesy of Sigalit Landau.



Landau's choice of location was not incidental. Like Bartana, she is looking back to recent Jewish history. Gdańsk, formerly known by its German name of Danzig, had been semi-autonomous with ties to Poland after the Treaty of Versailles, until Hitler annexed it in 1939 and soon afterward established the nearby Stutthof concentration camp.⁵⁵ Like Bartana, the Holocaust is not simply a part of history but of personal relevance – Landau's father and grandparents were Holocaust survivors.⁵⁶ The choice of shoes as the chosen object for the film likely also has ties to the Holocaust. According to Jeffrey Feldman, shoes “have been central to almost every attempt to use objects to relay the visceral brutality of Holocaust history by turning the memory of the concentration camps into things” – take, for example, the piles of shoes which are a hallmark of Holocaust museums and commemorative sites.⁵⁷ These shoes, as Wizgan asserts, are therefore “the most prominent motif in the exhibition”.⁵⁸

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate the collective memory and trauma of the Holocaust from Israeli life, and therefore from Israeli art. “[Holocaust] questions are particularly resonant in Israel, where Holocaust history and memory are the cornerstones of national culture”, says Olga Gershenson.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Yigal Zalmona maintains that “the post-Holocaust trauma...is deeply embedded in Israel's collective psyche and affects even the political sphere”.⁶⁰ We see this resonance in *And Europe will be Stunned*, just as we do in *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*. In this respect, both works' incorporation of Holocaust-related themes and symbols supports the assertion that Israeli national identity is directly linked to this past collective trauma.

The visual imagery of the melting lake and salt-covered shoes acts as an aesthetic/thematic transition between the “machine room” ground floor and the

55

“Danzig”, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/danzig>, accessed February 2020.

56

Landau, email to author.

57

Jeffrey Feldman, “The Holocaust Shoe: Untying Memory: Shoes as Holocaust Memorial Experience”, in Edna Nahshon (ed.), *Jews and Shoes*, (New York: Berg, 2008), 119–30.

58

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 159.

59

Gershenson, “Meta-Memory: About the Holocaust in New Israeli Video Art”, 67.

60

Yigal Zalmona, *A Century of Israeli Art* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2013), 466.

middle floor, the centrepiece of the exhibition. Next, on the middle floor, the viewer encounters a round conference table. Twelve laptops are on the table, each showing the same video, *Laces* (2011), in which twelve people speaking Hebrew, Arabic, and English (the number twelve may bring to mind the twelve tribes of Israel) are debating the proposed construction of a salt bridge in the Dead Sea.⁶¹ The debaters include the Israeli cultural attaché to Jordan, a representative of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Head of Israel Chemicals, two engineers, the Head of a Jordanian salt company, the secretary of an Israeli fertiliser company, a Jordanian ecologist, an Israeli designer, the spokesman of Israeli Dead Sea Works, an Israeli landscape architect, and the artist herself.⁶² Like in the film on the ground floor, *Laces* reintroduces the themes of international debate and negotiation, through which conflict ridden borders and border crossings are constantly redetermining what and where Israel is, and in turn, what it means to be an Israeli. The video also invokes shoe imagery – we view the debate from below the table, where a young girl is mischievously tying their shoelaces together, representing the ‘under the table’ aspect of such negotiations.⁶³

Once the debate is over, it seems that the participants will fall down, tripping onto each other due to their connected shoelaces. But as the film concludes, the unexpected occurs. These high-profile industry executives, engineers, scientists, diplomats, and artists all remove their shoes to leave. A circle of tied-together oxfords and loafers remains. The young girl’s attempt at connecting the debaters and bringing forth their commonalities despite their differences unfortunately fails. They part ways, with the salt bridge ultimately unsuccessful and unrealised. In the transcript of the debate, Landau has the closing line, asking, “is there anything we can do together to bridge the Dead Sea?”⁶⁴ The video and audio begin again, continuously looping as its ending seamlessly returns to the first questions on the feasibility of the project. Nothing is resolved, and this project, which Chantal Pontbriand accurately calls “complex from a technical standpoint...even more so on geostrategic and political levels”, remains unrealised.⁶⁵ The proposed action to break the barriers of seemingly antithetical national identities – a Jewish democracy and an Arab monarchy, let alone the Palestinian territories – has barely commenced, despite an end goal of October 2014 or the awareness and seed money that Landau has raised.

Landau has spent much of her career imagining, designing, and advocating for the salt bridge proposal debated here. As previously described on her website, “for some years, Sigalit Landau has pursued her vision of building a bridge, pier, or float that would function as a meeting point in the Dead Sea’s waters, offering the people of all national entities in the area of Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority a new way of experiencing and sharing the Dead Sea”.⁶⁶ It is defined as a public art project, and yet would also work to create infrastructure – a new source for transnational movement and communication. The geography becomes essential, using art “to unravel how geography as an epistemic structure and its signifying practices shape and structure not just national and economic relations but also identity constitution and identity fragmentation”, in the words of Irit Rogoff.⁶⁷ This project therefore reflects an antithesis to the border drawing depicted in *Azkelon*; instead of creating boundaries between “imagined communities”, she hopes to connect or permeate them.

61

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 158.

62

Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor Is Another Man’s Feelings*, 137.

63

Chantal Pontbriand, “Building a Different World: An Aesthetics of Fluidity”, in Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor Is Another Man’s Feelings*, 164.

64

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 142.

65

Pontbriand, “Building a Different World: An Aesthetics of Fluidity”, 164.

66

“Salt Bridge”, sigalilandau, <https://www.sigalilandau.com/salt-bridge>, accessed February 2020.

67

Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 10.

As opposed to the “parafictional” proposal of Bartana, Landau’s salt bridge is not abstract. In fact, the debate transmitted in the video is based on real meetings in Israel and Jordan held the year before.⁶⁸ An image of former Israeli President Shimon Peres with the artist on the project’s (since deactivated) website alludes to the political intent behind the idea, as does the tagline “Growing the political in the aesthetics, the aesthetics in the ethics, and the ethics in the political (for almost two decades)”.⁶⁹ In fact, Peres gave a speech at the opening of the 2011 Israeli Pavilion, seemingly the only time he visited the Biennale despite the three others that occurred during his term as president.⁷⁰

Finally, audiences end their visit in a courtyard, where a circle of the twelve pairs of shoes, cast in bronze, sits. This piece, entitled *O My Friends, There Are No Friends* (2011) after an Aristotle quote, acts as a monument both to the potential of collaboration beyond differences and the failure of the salt bridge debates to do so.⁷¹ This sculpture is reminiscent of commemorative memorials, especially those of the Holocaust, due once again to the repeated motif of empty shoes [fig. 7]. Tied together, the shoes of their former wearers are inseparable, recalling what Wizgan describes as the “recurring concept of the exhibition...the interdependence of human beings and nations”.⁷²

In a fitting summary of the exhibition, Wizgan states,

Without being overtly political, the exhibition (also) deals with the political in life and in art, and is inherently critical of nationalism and national ego, which always undermine rationalism and the positive potential inherent in cooperation and in a just distribution of resources and wealth.⁷³

fig. 7
Sigalit Landau. ‘O my friends, there are no friends’, 2011. Installation view of twelve pairs of bronze shoes, 300 cm diameter. *One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings*, Israeli Pavilion, 54th Biennale, Venice, Italy. Image courtesy of Sigalit Landau.



68

Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor Is Another Man’s Feelings*, 137.

69

“Home”, Salt Bridge, Salt Route Foundation, <https://www.saltroute.org/>, accessed February 2020.

70

Lior Dotan, “President Shimon Peres speech at the Opening – Venice Biennale 2011”, YouTube video, June 16, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co8iNJw96Q8>, accessed May 2022.

71

Pontbriand, “Building a Different World: An Aesthetics of Fluidity”, 164.

72

Wizgan, “The Freezing and Melting Point”, 159.

73

Ibid.

One could use a similar quote to describe Bartana's piece, although she is certainly more overtly critical of nationalism. Ultimately, both artists, although raised within an intensely nationalist environment, are uninterested in uplifting the "national ego" inherent to the organisation of the Biennale. Rather, they use diverse political tactics, from revolutionary grassroots movements to multinational diplomatic talks, as an artistic technique to question such nationalist tendencies that ultimately serve only to divide communities rather than bring them together.

ILLUMInations: Nationalism and the Venice Biennale

Although the biennial model is centred around metropolitan ideals – with Venice and its successors defined by their urban locales rather than countries – the participating nations themselves and their accompanying artists are not granted this luxury.⁷⁴ They are defined by nationality within what Caroline Jones has called the "toyland world-picturing" within "the biennial's cosmopolitan urbanism".⁷⁵ In this cosmopolitan exhibitionary tradition, "the artist must both represent her tribe and become transcendently *international*".⁷⁶ As Jones further explains, "the artist who would become international would need to speak a global language, but would just as often be understood to speak of her own representative difference".⁷⁷

One can argue that both Bartana and Landau are forced to fit into such contradictory categories, and their divergent efforts to do so are exemplified by their coinciding Biennale entries. Bartana may best exemplify Jones's first description of the biennial artist. She quite literally "represent[s] her tribe" in creating a set of work that focuses on Jewish themes, as many modern Jews refer to themselves by the Biblical identification of "tribe".⁷⁸ Bartana does consider herself Jewish, according to a 2015 interview with Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, despite her secularity and murky national identity.⁷⁹ Although she clearly recognises and maintains a connection with her Israeli roots (she has stated that despite raising her son in Germany, she "make[s] sure he knows Israel's his home"), she has certainly achieved such transcendent internationalism with associations in Germany, the Netherlands (currently her two homes; she has even been described in several reviews of *And Europe Will Be Stunned* as "Dutch-Israeli" or "Israeli-Dutch"), and now Poland.⁸⁰ Perhaps she is branching into what can be termed *anationalism*, beyond a single or multi-national identity. Bartana would likely agree with fellow multinational artist Yinka Shonibare, who said in 2003, "I feel strongly that the time has come to resist the temptation of defining artists by the narrow confines of nation" and instead "prioritise the aesthetic and political concerns of artists rather than their origins".⁸¹

74

Jones, *The Global Work of Art*, 93.

75

Ibid., 95.

76

Ibid., 96.

77

Ibid.

78

Rabbi Susan Leider, "Torah: Are Jews Today Members of a Tribe", *Bay Area Jewish News*, June 9, 2016, <https://www.jweekly.com/2016/06/09/torah-are-jews-today-members-of-a-tribe/>, accessed May 2022.

79

Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua, "Artist Yael Bartana Taps into Jewish-Diaspora Zeitgeist", *Haaretz*, February 9, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/premium-artist-yael-bartana-taps-into-diaspora-zeitgeist-1.530184>, accessed May 2022.

80

Fox-Bevilacqua, "Artist Yael Bartana Taps into Jewish-Diaspora Zeitgeist;" Laura Cumming, "Yael Bartana: And Europe Will Be Stunned; Elizabeth Price: Here – Review", *The Guardian*, May 12, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/may/13/art-exhibition>, accessed May 2022; John Arthur Peetz, "Yael Bartana Talks about the Completion of Her Polish Trilogy", *Artforum*, July 9, 2011, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/yael-bartana-talks-about-the-completion-of-her-polish-trilogy-28418>, accessed May 2022.

81

Francesco Bonami, Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor, Tim Griffin, James Meyer, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Martha Rosler, and Yinka Shonibare, "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition", *Artforum* (November 2011): 154.

A rather telling example of this is Bartana's response to a series of five questions regarding the theme of nationhood that Curiger posed to all Biennale artists. Her response to the question, "where do you feel at home?", was "I feel at home where I feel generosity and trust", thereby totally removing any connections to a specific place, let alone nation.⁸² When asked, "how many nations are inside you?", she responded with a simple "there are no nations inside me".⁸³ These answers support the interpretation that Bartana is far removed from identifying herself with any specific nation, and is instead an international artist in every sense of the term. This is in stark contrast to Landau, whose entire practice and identity seems to be indebted to a specificity of place. Landau's response to "where do you feel at home", for example, incorporated her Israeliness and emphasised the importance of it in her life, replying "In airports, in Israeli towns, on the beach of the Med, Red, or Dead seas, in the desert, inside water, in my house and bed".⁸⁴

Landau indeed uses Jones's prescription of "a global language...to speak of her own representative difference".⁸⁵ She is differentiated by her Israeli nationality, both in the context of the Biennale and in the international art world more generally. In her words: "I represented myself in Venice...I am Israeli, I feel Israeli, I am Jewish and also international in my language in art".⁸⁶ In order to express and reckon with her Israeli identity, she uses the universal language of conceptualism, ever popular in the globalised contemporary art world. The ideas presented of water, salt, and earth take centre stage in her conceptual installation at the Biennale and in much of her practice, and narrative elements, while still present, are used to far less of a degree than in the work of Bartana, for example.

Landau's guiding concept for her practice can be found in one iteration of an oft-used phrase for describing her work: "Refusing to accept pre-given assumptions of difference, she aims to connect the past to the future; the west to the east; the private to the collective; the sub-existential to the Uber-profound".⁸⁷ In this respect, Landau makes explicit her rejection of differences between various communities; rather she sees the connections as more telling. She states explicitly, "my work is about building bridges", referring not only to the salt bridge but also to metaphorical bridges between peoples.⁸⁸ In *One Man's Floor is Another Man's Feelings*, she critiques nationalism by highlighting commonalities, bringing together Israelis and Jordanians over a common geographical landmark to encourage communication and connection. This is a completely different strategy from the one Bartana adopts for her critique of nationalism in *And Europe Will Be Stunned*; she brings to light the tensions and dangers of only thinking in terms of differences, like the notion that Jews are inherently different from Poles.

Both artists are concerned with ideas of movement and migration between nations, delving into the realm of transnationalism. Stefan Krätke, Kathrin Wildner, and Stephan Lanz identify transnationalism as a term which

generally questions a conception of space that uses nation-states as its primary reference point. Borders, political regulations, and constructions of national identities still maintain central importance, even if they are challenged by transnational communication and social practices. With

82

Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte*, 418.

83

Ibid.

84

Ibid, 382.

85

Jones, *The Global Work of Art*, 96.

86

Landau, email to author.

87

Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 106.

88

Sigalit Landau, "Biography", in Landau, de Loisy, and Wizgan, *Sigalit Landau: One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*, 174.

“transnationalism” we refer to border-crossing processes, which are constituted through national conditions, while questioning them at the same time.⁸⁹

In this respect, the transnational ideas of the works assert themselves as an alternative to nationalism, a way to go beyond the nationalist confines of an international society fragmented into nation-states.

Some may argue that the Venice Biennale already exists as a transnational entity, where curators and artists of diverse nationalities regularly contribute to a single nation’s pavilion.⁹⁰ In fact, former *Artforum* editor-in-chief Tim Griffin defined biennials and other large-scale exhibitions as “endowed with a transnational circuitry”.⁹¹ On the other hand, Francesco Bonami, Artistic Director of the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, seemed to hold a similar viewpoint to Curiger, recognising the potential of the Biennale as a platform for conversation regarding differences. He stated, “we experience fragmentation in the world, and that’s what these big scale events should reflect, with all the contradictions and tensions this implies”.⁹² In her essay in the *ILLUMInations* catalogue, Curiger echoed Bonami’s diction, saying that the exhibition will “explore notions of the collective, yet also speak of fragmentary identity”.⁹³

In the catalogue, Giovanni Carmine, the artistic organiser of *ILLUMInations*, addressed how the current events of the day reflected the “idea or better the ideal of nation” with which the Biennale was also concerned.⁹⁴ He pointed out how preparations for the event in 2011 were concurrent with the highly impactful Arab Spring.⁹⁵ With Curiger appointed a year before, her decision to focus on nationalist questions for her artistic direction was timely, if coincidental. The Arab Spring also included the start of the civil war in Syria, sparking massive migration from Syria to Europe and elsewhere. Although certainly not predicting this critical refugee crisis, both Bartana’s and Landau’s considerations of migration make their work ever more relevant, as Israel’s Arab neighbors found themselves steeped in revolution.

Bartana and Landau were not the only artists dealing with nationalism. It seems that Curiger’s theme of choice inspired, or perhaps struck a nerve with, many of the other artists and curators involved. In a *Los Angeles Times* review of the exhibition, Jori Finkel enumerated a wide variety of National Pavilions resisting traditional methods of national representation or the idea of it in general, stating, “the very concept of the national pavilions has come under attack. Contemporary artists and curators on the whole do not like to color within the lines, especially when those lines are national borders”.⁹⁶ She identifies the United States, India, Australia, Latin America, Central Asia, Sweden, and Poland as a sampling of

89

Stefan Krätke, Kathrin Wildner, and Stephan Lanz, “The Transnationality of Cities: Concepts, Dimensions, and Research Fields. An Introduction”, in Stefan Krätke, Kathrin Wildner, and Stephan Lanz (eds.), *Transnationalism and Urbanism*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

90

For an overview of these instances, see Angela Vettese, “The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy”, *Monos Editions*, no. 6 (2014): 46-7.

91

Bonami, David, Enwezor, Griffin, Meyer, Obrist, Rosler, and Shonibare, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition”, 153.

92

Ibid, 155.

93

Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D’Arte*, 44.

94

Giovanni Carmine, “Where is Ai Wei Wei?”, in Curiger, *ILLUMInations: La Biennale Di Venezia 54. Esposizione Internazionale D’Arte*, 60.

95

Ibid.

96

Jori Finkel, “At the Venice Biennale, National Artists Know No Boundaries”, *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2011, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-xpm-2011-jun-06-la-et-venice-wrapup-20110606-story.html>, accessed May 2022.

the pavilions present in 2011 that critiqued national identity.⁹⁷ According to Indian Pavilion curator Ranjit Hoskote, the curators and artists of these and other pavilions thought “beyond national borders” with a “transnational imagination”.⁹⁸

This trend seems to confirm the assertion by Anthony Gardner and Charles Green that biennials such as Venice’s may “be leading the reconsideration and reconstruction of art’s histories towards properly global narratives”.⁹⁹ In fact, four years after Curiger’s Biennale, in 2015, Nigerian curator Okwui Enzewor took a decidedly more globalising view with the 56th Venice Biennale (where Hoskote was on the jury).¹⁰⁰ Entitled *All the World’s Futures*, Enzewor emphasised its exploration of the “global reality”, “global landscape”, and “global environment”, therefore opening the potential for the Venice Biennale to continue exploring such relevant narratives and artists’ increasingly transnational identities in the coming years.¹⁰¹

In fact, transnationalism will take centre stage at the Venice Biennale in 2024, led by Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa. Under the theme *Stranieri Ovunque / Foreigners Everywhere*, the Biennale will shine a light on those who have crossed borders, nations, or identities – “artists who are themselves foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporic, émigrés, exiled, and refugees”.¹⁰² It will be enlightening to see how the Italian Pavilion, which hosted Israel’s first foray into exhibiting at the Biennale in 1948, will take to a theme which promises to turn the Biennale’s increasingly arbitrary national divisions on its head.¹⁰³

For individual nations, however, varied identities within and beyond borders call for unique approaches. According to Yigal Zalmona, given the “complexity of Israel’s conflicted reality...the concept of identity must be framed as a question rather than an answer”.¹⁰⁴ At the Polish and Israeli Pavilions, respectively, both Yael Bartana and Sigalit Landau used their place as international artists to explore questions of Israeli national identity. In doing so, they contributed to a larger conversation on nationalism that traversed this iteration of the Venice Biennale as well as the wider world in 2011. Now, more than a decade later, these questions continue to be posed as Israel grapples with its national ideals, while the possibilities of transnationalism challenge us to reimagine our communities and identities, today and in the future.

97

Ibid.

98

Ibid.

99

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 92.

100

“56th Venice Biennale 2015”, *Universes in Universe*, <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2015>, accessed April 2020.

101

Ibid.

102

“Biennale Arte 2024: Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere”, *La Biennale di Venezia*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2024-stranieri-ovunque-foreignerseverywhere>, accessed September 2023.

103

Chelsea Haines, “Universal Civilization and National Cultures: Producing Israel at the Venice Biennale, 1948–1952”, 20

104

Zalmona, *A Century of Israeli Art*, 490-1.

Author’s Biography

Rachel Kubrick is a writer, art historian, and art administrator. She holds an MA History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art, and a BA from Boston University. Previous journal articles have been published in *immediations*

and *Public Parking*, and she is a regular contributor to *Ocula*. Rachel has held positions at various art institutions in New York, Boston, Paris, and Tel Aviv, and is currently based in London.