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FRIEZE

National Pavilions Review: A Litany of Absences

From an especially weak German pavilion to Yuko Mohri's orchestra of rotting fruit, sensuality – and history – take centre stage at the Venice Biennale 2024

BY ANDREW DURBIN IN CRITIC'S GUIDES | 17 APR 24

Well, Germany is exhausted. In 2022, its signature international exhibition, Documenta, stumbled under its own monumental weight into a shambolic debate about the limits of artistic and political expression, especially regarding antisemitism, which has only reached new levels of intensity with the current Gaza-Israel War. Now, with the future of Documenta uncertain, and exhibitions cancelled or on hold, artists, writers and academics have rightly complained of a deep chill in the air. Careers swing on a tweet.

It was apt, then, to encounter a mound of dirt on the steps of the country's national pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale: yet another example of the country's obnoxious tic of taking apart its building, ever since Hans Haacke sledgehammered the marble floor in 1993, and a fitting appetizer to the nothingburger that is Yael Bartana and Ersan Mondtag's sci-fi-inflected 'Thresholds', which purports to leave 'visitors to the German pavilion in suspense of forgotten hopes'. Indeed. And if you thought you might find insight into any of the myriad predicaments that have fogged those hopes in present minds, from climate change (Bartana's stated aim) to current global conflicts, you won't find it here – only Bartana's empty vision, projected onto a massive screen, of a digitally rendered spaceship voyaging toward other, better galaxies. And what of our own? Well, good luck with that.

Meanwhile, back on earth, Israel's curators and artist representative, Ruth Patir, shut the doors to the country's pavilion until a ceasefire is agreed and the hostages are released. After weeks of gathering opposition to the artist's questionable project on fertility and motherhood at a moment when more than 13,000 children have been killed in Gaza, the decision was widely welcomed, the announcement shared across social media and discussed throughout the opening day. It was the obvious choice, and I wondered why it took so long for anyone to make.

Artists – OK, good artists – tend to struggle with the balance between their individual, independent visions and those of the states they're meant to represent. Australia's Archie Moore has wisely elected to change his role from 'representative' to 'presenter'. But these days, no one truly embraces the honour of standing for their country – why would they? Instead, they seek ways to disrupt, defuse, redefine or outright ignore the implications of Venice's ye-olde system of national pavilions, which seems less relevant, less interesting with each passing biennale. Often, however, the messaging is incoherent, failing in its attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable.

Despite this, an occasional glimmer of brilliance shines through, including Inuuteq Storch's quiet, lyrical photography show, 'Rise of the Sunken Sun', documenting indigenous experience in Greenland for the Danish pavilion. Across several distinct series, understated pictures depict his family and circle of friends, the startling landscape, and the daily existence of those living in one of Denmark's last two colonies. This violent, imperial history is never far from the photos, even those that capture the most private moments. *Keepers of the Ocean* (2024), for example, pairs pictures of life in the artist's hometown of Sisimiut with John Møller's historic photos of Greenland's 20th-century, gun-wielding colonizers. As he told this magazine in a roundtable discussion on how indigenous artists can approach the national pavilion system today, 'It's such a complex thing to live in a colony. Sometimes it weighs on me the whole day; sometimes I don't think about it at all.'

The weight of history – also its rare moments of levity and beauty – is the subject of John Akomfrah's British pavilion, 'Listening All Night to the Rain'. Entering through the basement, you find yourself immersed in a multichannel video installation that spans the whole building. With an almost six-hour run-time, the film is divided into eight 'cantos'. The range of the work, which at times reaches for the whole of Britain and its colonial history, is daunting. Akomfrah has multiple points of entry, from the poetry of Su Dongpo and Ezra Pound to the writings of Gaston Bachelard and Édouard Glissant. The

second canto, for instance, addresses the flooding of Bangladesh in 1980; the third – a sculpture in the stairwell – is a collaboration with Dubmorphology (Gary Stewart and Trevor Mathison) comprising 400 archival recordings. The cantos are sumptuous, environmental, full of evocative collisions between original and found imagery, poetry and philosophy. See a line of Glissant, just above one doorway: 'We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.'

Sound and smell are running themes through many of this year's national pavilions. An electronic soundtrack reverberates throughout Julien Creuzet's lavender-scented French pavilion – which, though extraordinary, could have lost half its sculpture and been twice as powerful. Music is integral to the pavilions of Belgium and Spain, too – noisy, erratic, unconvincing. Koo Jeong A's South Korea pavilion carries the sensual experience to its logical conclusion with an 'installation' of 16 perfumes. Except for a figurative sculpture in one adjacent room and a round bench in the main exhibition area, the pavilion is empty save for the artist-created fragrances wafting in the air.

Meanwhile, at the Japanese pavilion, **Yuko Mohri** mounted the biennial-stealing 'Compose', for which she created sculptures that generate music using rotting fruit. This immersive exhibition was wonderfully distracting as I wandered around the various objects and contraptions Mohri has constructed from wires, plastics, found furniture and decayed organic matter. I kept overstepping the demarcations meant to protect her sculpture from its viewers. I needed to get closer, even as I was politely told that I couldn't; much of the work is so fragile, you can imagine even the gentlest nudge could send it crashing to the floor. Often, at events like these, in pavilions where the art barely hangs together, you can't move on quick enough. Yet here, among Mohri's atonal melodies, I wanted to linger a little longer and listen to a music so exactly right for this moment.



Yuko Mohri, 'Compose', 2024, installation view.
Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia