

# la Biennale di Venezia

## 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition

Statement of Okwui Enwezor

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A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

### The State of Things

In May 2015, one hundred and twenty years after its first art exhibition, the International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia will unfold once again in the *Giardini*, the historical grounds where the first event took place in 1895. When that first exhibition was inaugurated there were no national pavilions. The only permanent exhibition building that existed at the time was the sepulchral structure of the Central Pavilion, with its neo-classical columns and towering winged victory perched atop the pediment. National pavilions would arrive twelve years later with the Belgian Pavilion in 1907, followed by several others in successive years to where it stands today at nearly ninety five pavilions. The expansion of the pavilions in the *Giardini* to thirty exhibition buildings designed in various architectural styles, and the overspill of those pavilions unable to secure a plot in the *Giardini* proper into different areas of the city and the Arsenale area, testify to the unquestionable allure of this most anachronistic of exhibition models dedicated to national representation. Adjacent to the burgeoning national pavilions is the non-national international exhibition in the *Giardini* and Arsenale.

Since its first edition in 1895, the visual art exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia has existed at the confluence of many socio-political changes and radical historical ruptures across the fields of art, culture, politics, technology, and economics. Founded in 1893, the institution of la Biennale di Venezia arrived on the world stage at a significant historic period, at a point when forces of industrial modernity, capital, emergent technologies, urbanization, and colonial regimes were remaking the global map and rewriting the rules of sovereignty. Accompanying these developments were several mass movements: from workers' to women's movements; anti-colonial to civil rights movements, etc.

One hundred years after the first shots of the First World War were fired in 1914, and seventy-five years after the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, the global landscape again lies shattered and in disarray, scarred by violent turmoil, panicked by specters of economic crisis and viral pandemonium, secessionist politics and a humanitarian catastrophe on the high seas, deserts, and borderlands, as immigrants, refugees, and desperate peoples seek refuge in seemingly calmer

and prosperous lands. Everywhere one turns new crisis, uncertainty, and deepening insecurity across all regions of the world seem to leap into view.

Surveying these epic events from the vantage point of the current disquiet that pervades our time, one feels as if summoned by Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. Thanks to the philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin who bought the work in 1921, the painting has acquired a kind of cult status of clairvoyance beyond its actual representation. Benjamin saw in Klee's picture what in fact, was not registered nor even painted in it. Instead he read *Angelus Novus* allegorically, seeing the picture with clear historical eyes, while facing another catastrophe unfolding in Europe at a time of immense crisis. By excavating the painting as the very reality unfolding before him, with the state of the world he knew being dismantled right before his very own eyes, Benjamin compels us to revision the representational capacity of art. His novel interpretation of the animated stick figure standing in the middle of Klee's composition, with shocked expression in its eyes, as the "angel of history," at whose feet the wreckage of modern destruction reaches new summits, remains a vivid image. If not necessarily for what the picture actually contains and the image it registers, but for the way Benjamin brought a focus to how the work of art can challenge us to see much further and beyond the prosaic appearance of things.

The ruptures that surround and abound around every corner of the global landscape today recall the evanescent debris of previous catastrophes piled at the feet of the angel of history in *Angelus Novus*. How can the current disquiet of our time be properly grasped, made comprehensible, examined, and articulated? Over the course of the last two centuries the radical changes – from industrial to post-industrial modernity; technological to digital modernity; mass migration to mass mobility, environmental disasters and genocidal conflicts, chaos and promise – have made fascinating subject matter for artists, writers, filmmakers, performers, composers, musicians, etc. This situation is no less palpable today. It is with this recognition that in 2015, the 56<sup>th</sup> International Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia proposes *All the World's Futures* a project devoted to a fresh appraisal of the relationship of art and artists to the current state of things.

### **The Exhibition: Parliament of Forms**

Rather than one overarching theme that gathers and encapsulates diverse forms and practices into one unified field of vision, *All the World's Futures* is informed by a layer of intersecting *Filters*. These *Filters* are a constellation of parameters that circumscribe multiple ideas, which will be touched upon to both imagine and realize a diversity of practices. In 2015, the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia will employ the historical trajectory of the Biennale itself, over the course of its one hundred and twenty years existence, as a *Filter* through which to reflect on both the current "state of things" and the "appearance of things". *All the World's Futures* will take the present "state of things" as the ground for its dense, restless, and exploratory project that will be located in a dialectical field of references and artistic disciplines. The principal question the exhibition will pose is this: How can artists, thinkers, writers, composers, choreographers, singers, and musicians, through images, objects, words, movement, actions, lyrics, sound bring together publics in acts of looking, listening, responding, engaging, speaking in order to make sense of the current upheaval? What material, symbolic or aesthetic, political or social acts will be produced in this dialectical field of references to give shape to an exhibition which refuses confinement within the boundaries of conventional display models? In *All the World's Futures* the curator himself, along with artists, activists, the public, and contributors of all kinds will appear as the central protagonists in the open orchestration of the project.

With each *Filter* superimposed on the other, in a series of rescensions, the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia will delve into the contemporary global reality as one of

constant realignment, adjustment, recalibration, motility, shape-shifting. Given this fact, the presentation of *All the World's Futures* will play host to a *Parliament of Forms* whose orchestration and episodic unfolding will be broadly global in scope. At the core of the project is the notion of the exhibition as stage where historical and counter-historical projects will be explored. Within this framework, aspects of the 56<sup>th</sup> Exhibition will solicit and privilege new proposals and works conceived specifically by invited artists, filmmakers, choreographers, performers, composers, and writers to work either individually or in collaboration for the 56<sup>th</sup> Art Biennale. These projects, works, and voices, like an orchestra will occupy the spaces of the La Biennale and pre-occupy the time and thinking of the public.

#### **Filters:**

##### **Liveness: On epic duration**

In the search for a language and method for the exhibition of the 56<sup>th</sup> Art Exhibition we have settled on the nature of the exhibition as fundamentally a visual, somatic, aural, and narrative event. In so doing, we ask how an exhibition of the scale and scope of the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Biennale can address its format and refresh it with the potential of its temporal capacity. In this search the concept of *liveness* and epic duration serve two complementary purposes: they suggest the idea that *All the World's Futures* is both a spatial and temporal manifestation that is relentlessly incomplete, structured by a logic of unfolding, a program of events that can be experienced at the intersection of *liveness* and display. It will be a dramatization of the space of the exhibition as a continuous, unfolding, and unceasing live event. In doing so *All the World's Futures* will activate works that are already existing but also invites contributions that will be realized especially for the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia.

##### **Garden of Disorder**

This *Filter*, located in the *Giardini* and the Central Pavilion, Corderie, Giardino delle Vergini in the Arsenale, and selected areas in Venice, takes the historical ground of la Biennale in the *Giardini* as a metaphor through which to explore the current “state of things,” namely the pervasive structure of disorder in global geopolitics, environment and economics. The original concept of the garden derives from Persian antiquity. It conceives of the dimension garden as paradise, an enclosed space of tranquility and pleasure, which over several millennia has been transformed into an allegory for the search for the space of order and purity. For the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Biennale in 2015, the exhibition returns to the ancient ground of this ideal to explore the changes in the global environment, to read the *Giardini* with its ramshackle assemblage of pavilions as the ultimate site of a disordered world, of national conflicts, as well as territorial and geopolitical disfigurations. Proposals that take the concept of the garden as a point of departure will be worked through by artists who have been invited to realized new sculptures, films, performances, and installations for *All the World's Futures*.

##### **Capital: A Live Reading**

Beyond the distemper and disorder in the current “state of things,” there is one pervasive preoccupation that has been at the heart of our time and modernity. That preoccupation is the nature of Capital, both its fiction and reality. Capital is the great drama of our age. Today nothing looms larger in every sphere of experience, from the predations of the political economy to the rapacity of the financial industry. The exploitation of nature through its commodification as natural resources, the growing structure of inequality and the weakening of broader social contract have recently compelled a demand for change. Since the publication of Karl Marx's massive *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* in 1867, the structure and nature of capital has captivated thinkers and artists, as well as inspired political theorists, economists, and ideological structures

across the world. In *All the World's Futures*, the aura, effects, affects, and specters of Capital will be felt in one of the most ambitious explorations of this concept and term.

A core part of this program of live readings, is “Das Kapital” a massive meticulously researched bibliographic project, conceived by the artistic director in the Central Pavilion. This program, occurring everyday for nearly seven months, without stop, will commence with a live reading of the four volumes of Marx’s *Das Kapital* and gradually expand into recitals of work songs, librettos, readings of scripts, discussions, plenaries, and film screenings devoted to diverse theories and explorations of Capital. Over the course of the 56<sup>th</sup> Art Biennale, theater ensembles, actors, intellectuals, students, and members of the public will be invited to contribute to the program of readings that will flood and suffuse surrounding galleries with voices in an epic display of orality. A major inspiration for this unusual operatic performance is in the opening lines of Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar’s book *Reading Capital*.

“Of course, we have all read, and do read *Capital*. For almost a century we have been able to read it every day, transparently, in the dramas and dreams of our history, in its disputes and conflicts, in the defeats and victories of the workers’ movement which is our only hope and our destiny. Since we ‘came into the world’, we have read *Capital* constantly in the writings and speeches of those who have read it for us, well or ill, both the dead and the living, Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, Stalin, Gramsci, the leaders of the workers’ organizations, their supporters, and opponents, philosophers, economists, politicians. We have read bits of it, the ‘fragments’ which the conjuncture had ‘selected’ for us. We have even all, more or less read Volume One, from ‘commodities’ to the ‘expropriation of the expropriators.’

But some day it is essential to read *Capital* to the letter. To read the text itself, complete, all four volumes, line by line, to return ten times to the first chapters, or to the schemes of simple reproduction and reproduction on an enlarged scale, before coming down from the arid tablelands and plateaus of Volume Two into the promised land of profit, interest, and rent...

That is how we decided to read *Capital*...And we present them in their immediate form without making alterations so that all the risks and advantages of this adventure are reproduced; so that the reader [and listener] will be able to find in them new-born the experience of a reading; and so he in turn will be dragged in the wake of his first reading into a second one which will take us still further.”

With this outlook, *All the World's Futures*, through its constellation of *Filters* will delve into the “state of things” and question “the appearance of things”, shifting from the guttural enunciation of the voice to the visual and physical manifestations between artworks and the public.

Okwui Enwezor