

# Whose future?

## *All the World's Futures,* the 56th Biennale di Venezia

This year's Venice Biennale, which opened to the public on 9 May, had been widely anticipated since its curator, Okwui Enwezor, announced his intention to turn the event into a forum for the study and reconsideration of the three volumes of Marx's *Capital*. Such an undertaking promised to highlight the inherent contradictions of the biennial format and the contemporary art world more generally, which maintain the illusion of a kind of lofty detachment from market forces whilst being deeply entwined within them. Indeed, the lead-up to the Biennale saw politically committed artists in Italy ask whether the 56th Biennale di Venezia, entitled *All the World's Futures*, would build upon the potential of the art-activist hybridism of Italy's nationwide Commons movement, or if, rather, it would come to represent the final nail in the coffin of politically incisive art. To work under such conditions, a study of Marx's *Capital* would have to be adequate to the vast inequalities of wealth that have become only more profound since the start of the current economic crisis. One month after the Biennale's opening, the general verdict is that Enwezor's attempt to revive the grand narrative of *Capital* has failed to surmount the mountain of contradictions that such an undertaking so clearly entailed from the outset.

The centrepiece of Enwezor's Biennale is a live reading of *Capital*, entitled *Das Kapital Oratorio*, which is being performed three times daily by actors, directed by the British artist Isaac Julien. Reflecting Enwezor's assertion that '*Capital* is the great drama of our age' – made during the unveiling of his curatorial approach to the 56th Biennale, in Venice in September 2014 – the live reading forms part of a programme of songs, screenings, recitals and talks focused on the subject of capitalism and, more particularly, Marx's interpretation of it. Other events taking place in the Arena – a specially constructed space in which the public can engage with these artistic investigations of *Capital* – include the recital of work songs traditionally sung in prisons, fields and houses, predominantly by African Americans. The songs, performed by Jason Moran and Alicia Hall Moran, serve as a stark reminder that slavery is a very real and present phenomenon in the twenty-first century.

During the three-day opening of the Biennale this point was highlighted by the occupation of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum on Venice's Grand Canal by the Gulf Labor Coalition, GULF (Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction), SaLE Docks and MACAO, the latter two being art spaces linked to the Italian Commons movement. The occupiers expressed their opposition to the slave-like working conditions endured by immigrant workers involved in the construction of the Abu Dhabi branches of the Guggenheim and the Louvre on Saadiyat Island. Timed to take place when thousands of artists, critics, gallerists, collectors and museum and foundation directors were in Venice, the protest highlighted the fact that Enwezor's Biennale will be seen as an unmitigated failure if it does not stand up to social injustices perpetrated by the art world itself. Speaking about the protest, NYU member of the Gulf Labor Coalition, Andrew Ross, said that the protestors also wished to draw attention to 120 years of underpayment

and non-payment of Venice Biennale employees. The Venice Biennale itself has remain silent on this issue, maintaining its usual distance from controversy.

This was not the only major embarrassment for the 56th Biennale. Just prior to its opening, the Kenyan Pavilion dropped out of the event after widespread criticism, when it was revealed that it would contain only two Kenyan artists (one of whom is Italian-born), alongside several Chinese artists. It would appear that the commissioner, Paola Paponi, had exploited the eagerness of artists to participate in the Biennale, by charging money to Chinese artists to feature their work in an official event, a not uncommon practice. The cancellation of the project, which had received full authorization from the Venice Biennale, which rigorously reviews all entrants, followed sustained protests in Kenya, culminating in April when the Kenyan cultural and sports minister, Hassan Wario Arero, distanced Kenya itself from the Pavilion.



A second closure occurred shortly after, of Iceland's pavillion: a temporary mosque constructed in an ex-church, by Christoph Büchel. Such an act challenged a number of conventions and asked a number of questions about art and religion, Islam and the city of Venice, which has never had a mosque, despite its long historical ties with the East.

If the Icelandic Pavilion becomes the defining symbol of the 56th Venice Biennale it will be of further discomfort to Enwezor's stewardship. On 22 May the exhibit was closed by the Venetian police, who cited a potential terrorist threat as a motive for what amounts to simple censorship. The Icelandic Art Center in Reykjavik, which commissioned the work, subsequently issued a statement: 'the Venice Biennale, an institution within the City of Venice, has not supported this artistic endeavour in the way that would have been expected for an organisation of its stature and proclaimed

advocacy of contemporary art.' The question now remains as to why a mosque presented as art in an ex-church is seemingly not worthy of defence under the rubric of *All the World's Futures*.

If the 56th Biennale has so far demonstrated anything it is that the world's largest contemporary art platform is not up to a discussion of Marx. The current representatives of politically motivated art in Italy, and beyond, remain the art-activist groups such as the Italian Commons movement and Gulf Labor.

**Mike Watson**

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