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Layers of Exhibition

The Venice Biennale and Comparative Art Historical Writing

In 1895, the *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia*, the first edition of the future *Venice Biennale*, was held in the Venetian Giardini. With this international art exhibition, officials sought to enhance Venice as a cultural attraction for tourism in a time when it long ago had lost its former splendour. Nevertheless, the *Venice Biennale* as a direct descendant of 19th-century world fairs and European international art exhibitions took a prominent position in the reformation of the Western art system and the promotion of a moderate modernity that mediated between traditional academicism and the avant-garde. Thus, since its beginnings, the *Venice Biennale* has reflected the structures of the capitalized Western art system, relying on standardized regulations and competition. Between these two poles – homogeneity and particularity – the nations negotiate to create a unique but aligned cultural identity. Moreover, the Biennale representations are always affected by the political climate of the respective nation – both domestic and international. The exhibitions at the *Venice Biennale* may therefore be regarded as peripheral memories of a nation's cultural self-perception.

At the Swiss Institute for Art Research in Zurich (SIK-ISEA) the research project *The Venice Biennale and the structures of the art sector* analyzes the individual national participations in the *Venice Biennale* in its entire history through a comparative approach. Professor BEAT WYSS from Karlsruhe University of Art and Design launched the project in October 2008 as a Professorial Fellow of SIK-ISEA's Advanced Studies Program. So far, the project has focused on Central European countries. At present, a team of international art historians is exploring the participation of the following nations: Poland (JÖRG SCHELLER), Hungary (KINGA BÓDI), Romania (DARIA GHIU), Czech Republic (VERONIKA WOLF), and the former Yugoslavia (KAROLINA JEFTIC). In studying these countries, the

project will unavoidably encounter national reconfigurations affected by the two World Wars and later political upheavals, which can be retraced through their Biennale participation. The former Czechoslovakian Pavilion, for example, today houses alternate exhibitions by the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The former Yugoslavian Pavilion, in contrast, became the Serbian Pavilion after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

By focusing on this marginalized region in the context of 20th-century art historical writing, the project aims to reveal the development of multiple modernities beyond the perspective of the dominant Western art history. The analysis of the United States' participation (ANNIKA HOSSAIN) will simultaneously deconstruct aspects of the Western canon by analyzing exhibitions' political and economic determinants. This will prove how one of today's foremost Western art nations had to struggle for its eminent position until the mid-20th century. A collection of essays on Switzerland's participation will be contributed by SIK-ISEA staff members.

Methodologically, all research will apply the same modular structure provided by the following constitutional paradigms of Biennale exhibitions: 1) National Self-Image, 2) Institutional Lobbying, 3) Art Economy, 4) Critique and Discourse, 5) Display, 6) Life and After-life of Artists. By adapting this structure, the project seeks to assure the comparability of the research. At the same time, the methodological approach intends, starting from the systematic analysis of an art exhibition (by archival material, publications, press material, interviews, etc.), to deploy the circumstances of artistic production, distribution and consumption within a nation at a certain period and thus open up a wider cultural framework. Following, short accounts of the architecture of the Hungarian, American and Romanian Pavilion will give an insight into the comparative approach of the project.



Abb. 1: Front view of the Hungarian Pavilion (1909)

The Hungarian Pavilion in the Venetian Giardini was built by the Hungarian Architect Géza Maróti (1875–1941) to house the country's exhibitions in Venice. Specific to the building are not only its rich Art Nouveau decoration, its prestigious place within the Giardini, and its dimensions, but also its date of construction: Hungary was (after Belgium) the second nation to build a permanent exhibition hall on the Giardini grounds in 1909.

The architectural history of the Hungarian Pavilion can be divided into three periods. The first period (1909–1958) represents the building designed by Maróti. In its realization, the building lived up to the expectations of the Art Nouveau *Gesamtkunstwerk* tendency of the time. While the architectural structure was created by Maróti, the decorations (mosaics, stained glass windows) were prepared by artists of the Hungarian Art Nouveau Colony in Gödöllő, and the pyrogranite tiles by the Zsolnay-factory in Pécs. Its patriotic program was dominated by the legend of Huns and Hungarians, which became a favored theme around the *fin-de-siècle*. The Pavilion was given two floors (with the ground floor for painting and sculpture, and the first floor for applied arts), an ostentatious entrance in a Romanesque style, and, notably, a glass roof that distributed natural light to the upper exhibition rooms. The floor plan was based on a rectangle with a small apsis.

The second period lasted from 1958 until 1992 and was inaugurated by the reconstruction of the Pavilion by the Hungarian Architect Ágost Benkhard (1910–1967). His intention was to modernize and neutralize



Abb. 2: The rebuilt Hungarian Pavilion (1958)

the original appearance of the building according to new, simpler trends with pure forms. Since the political leaders disliked the Art Nouveau style, a complete restructuring of the Maróti plan was necessary: the main and side façades of the ground floor were walled up; the high roof and the first floor with the stained glass windows were demolished; the mosaics were destroyed; the ornaments of the main gate were plastered up; and the exhibition interiors were completely remodeled. In consequence, the new building became a simple white cube with a flat roof and an open interior court.



Abb. 3: The reconstructed Hungarian Pavilion (1999–2000)

It was not until the end of the Communist regime that art historians discovered that the original building and its mosaics were partly preserved behind the white walls of the Fifties. As a consequence, the third period of the building began in 1992 with the complete reconstruction of the original plan by Maróti. Between 1992 and 2000 the removal of the interim architectural

layers took place. The reconstruction was done according to the plans of the Hungarian Architect György Csete (born 1937), beginning in 1994 and included the exploration and restoration of the remaining Art Nouveau decorations and the rebuilding of the high roof structure (though without the first floor). Today the historical façade of the Pavilion contrasts with the supra-national dimensions of contemporary times.

In contrast to Hungary's early participation in the *Venice Biennale*, the United States only felt the urgency for national representation in 1929. At that time, the desire for cultural independence from Europe was strong enough to launch the construction of an American Pavilion, even despite the Great Depression. The Grand Central Art Galleries, a private non-profit organization, was responsible for the initiative. „It is a proud thing that America is at last to have a place of her own in this notable International“, commented Leila Mechlin, Secretary of the American Federation of Arts in 1930.¹

For the U.S. Pavilion, the architecture firm Delano & Aldrich symbolically blended neo-classical elements (the official style during the construction of Washington D.C.) with the Georgian architecture of 18th-century English colonies. American settlers had adapted these European styles which, by the time of the Pavilion's construction, had been incorporated into official U.S. culture. Thus, the American Pavilion, characterized by its two-wing, C-shaped complex, its doric porticus with columns and triangular pediment, and its central cupola, forms a miniature version of the monumental Philadelphia Museum of Art, whose first part was completed in 1928. Additionally, the building's red-brick façade, which is structured horizontally by the white frieze and white frames of the blind windows, refers to the simple yet prominent Georgian façades as can be found in Philadelphia's Independence Hall (1741) where the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. Lawrence Alloway, however, described the Pavilion as “halfway between Monticello and Howard Johnson”.² Due to these multiple formal connections between the Pavilion and U.S. architecture, the Pavilion may be regarded as a dense allegory of official American values. Since these

refer to independence, civilization and mass culture, the “cultural message” conveyed by the architecture refers exclusively to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite, who dominated U.S. culture in the 1930s.³ The only reconstruction of the building ever considered had been intended to enlarge its exhibition spaces. Its symbolic meaning, on the other hand, has never been questioned.



Abb. 4: Front view of the U.S. Pavilion (2009)

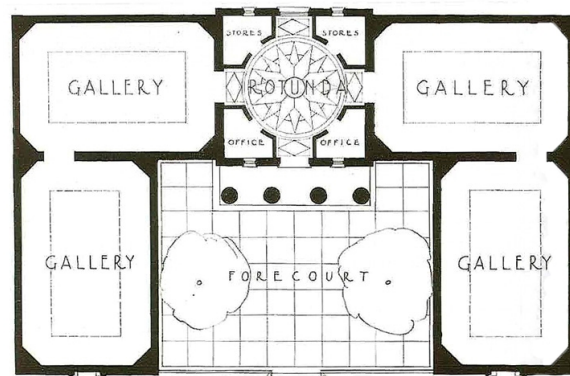


Abb. 5: Floorplan of the U.S. Pavilion (1930)

Lack of interest marked the Romanian concern for a permanent exhibition hall at the Biennale. In 2010 the Romanian Cultural Institute in Venice publicly stated that the status of the Romanian Pavilion, which had missed institutional continuity before, was finally being brought under regulation: after more than seventy years the Pavilion was put under the aegis of the Min-

istry for Foreign Affairs. This initiative – as the Institute’s press release stated – would contribute “to a better organization of the Romanian presence at the Biennial and a stronger visibility at one of the most important international events”.⁴

Between the two World Wars, increasingly powerful claims from artists and art critics regarding the construction of a Romanian Pavilion were met with indifference by authorities. In 1921, the artist Nicolae Tonitza (1886-1940) strongly emphasized that “in the interest of our prestige it would be necessary to make ‘a sacrifice’ and construct our own pavilion”.⁵ After visiting the Biennale in 1932, the art historian George Oprescu (1881-1969) received little response to an article in which he expressed the “inexplicable” absence of a “still sleeping” Romania.

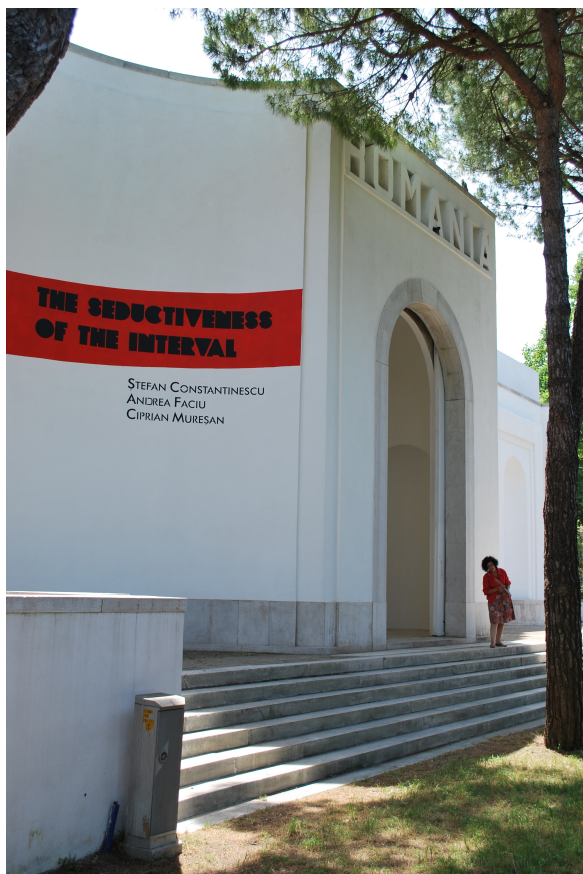


Abb. 6: Front view of the Romanian Pavilion (2009)

Building a pavilion was not a priority to the government, which was “much more prepared to finance an exceptional presence, such as the one in Barcelona

(1929), Haga (1930) or Paris (1937)”. Thus Romania’s cultural strategy was dominated more by discontinuous “strokes”, with which officials aimed to impress a foreign audience, than by long-standing cultural representations abroad. Only in 1938 did Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940), at that time State Counselor and president of the League for Romanian Cultural Unity, manage to obtain the necessary funds to buy a pavilion what was formerly denied to him by the Ministry of Finance. The pavilion forms part of a complex designed on Isola Sant’ Elena in 1932 by the Italian architect Brenno del Giudice (1888-1957). Originally made to house the Padiglione di Venezia and the Polish and Swiss Pavilions, the block had been extended in 1938 with two more pavilions, given to Romania and Yugoslavia in the same year. The complex was fashioned in a classical version of the fascist style and embodied a “structure of geometrical, stylized, horizontally articulated volumes, through monumental arcades that were marking the access into each pavilion”. The construction of an independent pavilion, however, was never considered by Romanian officials.

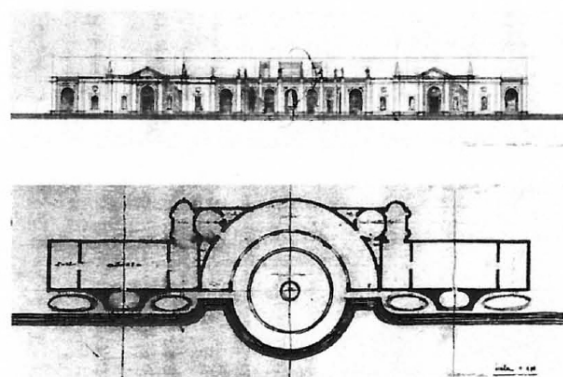


Abb. 7: Front view and floor plan of the complex (1932)

This short comparison reveals the different attitudes towards national representation at the *Venice Biennale* that range from ideological adaptation to cultural manifestation to lack of interest. The alleged cultural self-perceptions, however, have to be considered with respect to the historical circumstances of the aforementioned nations. Hungary’s early interest in national representation in Venice must thus be regarded in

terms of its struggle for independence from the rule of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. Not long after that goal was achieved (1918), the Republic of Hungary had to deal with the political rise of the Soviet Union. In contrast, the United States was still dominated by an isolationist tendency at the beginning of the 20th century, which only began to dissolve slowly after it had entered into World War I. Its quickly-gained political and economic power led to significant national self-esteem, which finds its expression in its pavilion architecture. Romania's failure to maintain continuity in its cultural politics, however, was due to inner conflicts and political instability which led to its presumed disinterest in national representation in Venice.

Finally, the Biennale Research Project allows to perceive cultural shifts and similarities amongst participating nations in a social and political context. The publication of research results (including Ph.D. and post-doctoral theses) in a series of books sharing a consistent structure of thematic chapters will assure such a comparative reading. By April 2012, the first round of the SIK's research project will be officially completed, which continues at least until all initiated projects will have been concluded. Meanwhile, exhibitions as for example on the history of the Hungarian Pavilion or on Romanian Socialist Realism at the Venice Biennale will share intermediary results.⁶ Project researchers contributed to the official catalogue of the 54th Venice Biennale 2011 and to the publication *Look at me. Celebrity Culture at The Venice Biennale*.⁷ Furthermore, conferences organized by SIK-ISEA, as for instance *Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle*, which took place in Bucharest 2010, already provide new starting points for further academic research on the complex history of the Venice Biennale.⁸

Footnotes

1. Leila Mechlin, *An American Exhibition at Venice*, in: *Grand Central Art Galleries Yearbook*, 1930, pp. 14-15, quotation: p. 15; *Archives of American Art*, Grand Central Art Galleries Records, Reel N-GCAG1, Frame 239-240.
2. Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968. From Salon to Goldfishbowl*, London, 1968, p. 18.
3. Cf. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Expositions* (1967), in: *Travels in Hyperreality. Essays*, Orlando (FL) 1986, pp. 291-307, here: pp. 296-303.
4. Cf. <http://www.icr.ro/venetia/evenimente-4/o-initiativa-a-ircu-venetia-reglementarea-statutului-pavilionului-romaniei-la-bienala-de-la-venetia.html> (03.07.2011).
5. All the quotations referring to the history of the Romanian Pavilion are taken from: Ruxandra Juvara-Minea, *Participarea României la Bienala de la Veneția* [Romania's Participation at the Venice Biennial], Bucharest 2000, pp. 55-68.
6. *101 Years of the Art Gallery in Venice - The Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennials*. Exhibition in the Pince Gallery of the National Office of Cultural Heritage, Budapest (September, 13 - October, 14 2010); *Art of Propaganda - Socialist Realism in Romania*. Exhibition in the National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest (October, 13 2012 - March, 10 2013).
7. Beat Wyss, Jörg Scheller, *The Bazaar of Venice*, in: *ILLUMinations. 54th International Art Exhibition*, catalogue ed. by Bice Curiger et. al., Venezia 2011, pp. 112-129; Beat Wyss, Annika Hossain, Jörg Scheller, Kinga Bódi, Daria Ghiu, Veronika Wolf, *Is this so contemporary? A look at the Historical Dimension of Celebrityfication, Personalization, Touristification and Critical Backlashes at the Venice Biennale*, in: *Look at me. Celebrity Culture at the Venice Biennale*, ed. by Mona Schieren and Andreas Sick, Nürnberg 2011, pp. 118-134.
8. *Comparative Art History - The Biennale Principle. A conference on the history, present and future of Art Biennales*. The conference took place at Bucharest Academy of Art and was organized in cooperation of the Bucharest Biennale and the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA), June, 25-26 2010.

Illustrations

Abb. 1, 2: © György Sűmegi Collection

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Abb. 5: Philip Rylands, *Flying the Flags for Art. The United States and the Venice Biennale 1895-1991*, Richmond 1993.

Abb. 6: © Alex Axinte

Abb. 7: Marco Mulazzani, *I padiglioni della Biennale: Venezia 1887-1988*, Milano 1988.

Summary

A research project at the Swiss Institute for Art Research in Zurich analyzes the individual national participations in the Venice Biennale from 1895 until today. Focusing on the frequently marginalized Central European nations, the project aims to stress the role of exhibitions in the construction of 20th-century art history. The application of a common modular structure in all research will assure its comparability and reveal cultural shifts and similarities among participating nations. The concept of a universal modernity will therefore be avoided. In a short presentation brief accounts of the architecture of the Hungarian, U.S. and Romanian Pavilions will give insight into the comparative approach of the project.

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Title

Annika Hossain, Kinga Bódi, Daria Ghiu, *Layers of Exhibition. The Venice Biennale and Comparative Art Historical Writing*, in: kunsttexte.de/ostblick, Nr. 2, 2012 (6 Seiten), www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick.