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“Acqua Ferita” (Wounded Water) 6 Iraqi artists interpret the theme of water



Azad Nanakeli “Illumination” Installation/performance In the artist’s studio, Florence 2010 Wood, sand, clay, glue, lead, candles, rope, wax

Iraq’s experimental contemporary artists have never had a chance to present their work for an Iraqi pavilion at the Venice Biennale; the first and last major appearance in 1976 outlined only some of their «modern» artists. The Pavilion of Iraq for 2011 will indeed show the world an exciting professionally-curated selection of 6 Iraqi artists from two generations, including various artistic media (painting, performance, video, photography, sculpture/installation).

Ali Assaf, Commissioner for the Pavilion of Iraq 2011

These are extraordinary times for Iraq. The project to create, for the upcoming 54th Venice Biennale, an official country Pavilion is a multiple and participatory work that has been in progress since 2003, the last significant participation dating back to 1976. It is coming at a period of great renewal, after more than 30 years of war and conflict.

The causes of the upheaval are many and are not

linked with one individual or political regime but a myriad of situations of almost indescribable complexity. In spite of overwhelming odds and nightmarish scenarios, there is presently a flicker of “optimism” – political, economic and cultural – that makes this project so “right”, so timely. This is also a pilot project, not aiming to define the “perfect” choice or even perhaps the “best” choice of Iraqi

artists: after an absence of more than 35 years, it would be impossible in one exhibition to cover the many artists who are both worthy of inclusion and who merit their place in Venice.

Under the title “Acqua Ferita” (roughly translated as Wounded Water), the Pavilion will feature six internationally-known contemporary Iraqi artists who are emblematic in their individual experimental artistic research, a result of both living inside and outside that country. They represent two generations: one, born in the early 1950s, has experienced both the political instability and subsequent domination of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein, represented by Ali Assaf (born in 1950 in Al Basrah; lives and works in Rome), Azad Nanakeli (born in 1951 in Arbil, Iraqi Kurdistan; lives and works in Florence) and Walid Siti (born in 1954 in Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan; lives and works in London). These artists, came of age in the 1970s, and studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad during the period of the creation of a socialist political system that marked their background of artistic operation. It was a kind of “Golden Age” for art and literature; Iraq was part of the avant-garde of the Arab world. In order to complete their arts studies, these artists came to Europe to attend the various Fine Arts Academies (Rome, Florence, and Lubijana), where they remain today. These artists always intended to return to their country to contribute, like their Iraqi professors, to artistic practice and the subsequent cultural development of Iraq, but because of the powerful and far-reaching political repression, they were forced to remain in Europe. The second generation, here represented by Adel Abidin (born in 1973 in Baghdad; lives and works in Helsinki), Ahmed Alsoudani (born in 1975 in Baghdad; lives and works in New York), and Halim Al Karim (born in 1963 in Najaf; lives and works in Denver, Colorado) grew up during the drama of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) as well as Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait (1990) and the resulting “Desert Storm” campaign by the US, which inaugurated the Gulf War and encompassing overwhelming United Nations economic sanctions orchestrated by the West. The artistic and economic and political

situation was such that this generation of artists also fled, this time before the 2003 invasion, finding refuge not in the West (these doors closed after 11 September 2001) but in neighbouring countries like Syria and Jordan, only later miraculously



Ali Assaf “Narciso”, video installation, 2010/

finding possibilities for residency in the US and Europe by sheer fortune coupled with the artistic virtue of their work and the era of globalization. All these artists thus have identities indubitably forged with contemporary artistic practice that unites the West with the Iraq experience, and they represent a sophisticated and experimental approach that is completely international in scope. Historically, modernism in Iraq began in the 1940s during a period of international cultural exchange which led to an open and creative period that strove to forge a national identity for the arts, with the intention of overcoming British colonialism. This was a time of euphoric change and of secular illumination in



Azad Nanakeli "Illumination" Detail of the installation/performance In the artist's studio, Florence 2010 Wood, sand, clay, glue, lead, candles, rope, wax

all the arts, including strong support by the various political movements.

The curatorial vision and related organization of the Iraq Pavilion is under the direction of participating artist Ali Assaf as Commissioner, together with Mary Angela Schroth as Curator. Assaf, as part of the Iraqi artistic diaspora since 1973 when he arrived in Rome for his studies, has consistently followed the artistic scene of Iraqi artists both inside and outside Iraq as well as being extremely well-informed internationally; Mary Angela Schroth, director since 1985 of Sala 1 (founded by artist Tito Amodei in 1970), Italy's oldest non profit institution for contemporary art, and one of the first Western curators since the late 1970s to specialize in a non-European construct, has elaborated the choices and conceived an identity for the Pavilion that is sharply contextualized by her choice of venue: the Gervasuti Foundation. The six artists will execute works on site inspired by both the space and the thematic choice of water. This is a timely interpretation since the

lack of water is probably the primary source of problems in Iraq (also throughout the Middle East in general), far more serious than terrorism or war (subjects that Assaf and Schroth are relegating to minor status on this occasion). It is estimated that no more than 25% of the available water supply, for millennia once under the great dominion of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, reaches the population in Iraq. Another aspect of the theme is linked to the forced disappearance of the marshes and resulting desertification, the tragic loss of smaller tributaries and reduction of water sources such as the river delta area of Shat Al Arab, now saline. The theme of water is also linked to the city of Venice, itself based on water both physically, commercially, and artistically. Schroth also wanted to involve the possibility of integrating 6 younger artists who are still living and working inside Iraq; her plan is to create a project space in the Gervasuti entitled "Window on Iraq". This is an audio-visual section where artists will be asked to participate with digital documentation on their

work, projected by video inside a designated room in the Pavilion. The projection will be accompanied by any publications and/or visual material relating to these and other Iraqi artists, thus broadening the scope of information on contemporary art inside the country. A collaboration with various experts, such as the Iraqi contemporary art scholar Rijin Sahakian, is essential for integrating those artists in Iraq and thus establishing a synergy with the country's current art situation.

Adjunct Commissioner for the Pavilion of Iraq is Dr. Vittorio Urbani of the Nuova Icona cultural association in Venice. Dr. Urbani has organized various country pavilions for the Biennale since 1993. Nuova Icona curated the Pavilion of the Republic of Ireland in 1997, and won the 2000 Biennale Prize for best young artist with Kathy Prendergast.

In the last few years, Nuova Icona has forged a series of working contacts and links between Europe and the Middle East (Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Lebanon, Palestine and Azerbaijan), resulting in a new strategy. Inspired by the centuries-old Venetian tradition of commerce and diplomatic relationship with the East, the association is extending this direction through the traditional gate of Venice.

Urbani will be responsible for all managerial and logistical aspects of the Iraqi participation, no small feat in a city like Venice and for such a major exhibition as the Venice Biennale. The project has the official patronage and support of Iraq's Ministry of Water Resources, Ministry of Culture and the Embassy of Iraq in Italy, as well as the Iraq Representation to the United Nations World Food Organization based in Rome. Honorary Commissioner is Ambassador Hassan Janabi, himself an expert in water resources. Support for the Pavilion is a mix of public and private: Iraqi entrepreneur Shwan Ibrahim Taha chairs the Pavilion of Iraq Patrons Committee together with Iraqi art collector Reem Shather-Kubba. Together they are securing an impressive list of Iraqi individuals and private enterprises that have not only made possible the project in Venice but also demonstrate a strong commitment to the future of Iraqi art internationally. Equally important to the support are the various art galleries dedicated to the

artists: Robert Goff of Haunch and Venison in New York, Mona Hauser of XVA Gallery in Dubai, Guido Cabib of Changing Role Rome/Naples, and others. A special color catalog supervised by Rijin Sahakian will be published for the occasion, to include essays by the curator and commissioners as well as an in-depth text on contemporary Iraqi art by Sahakian. The international publisher is in process of confirmation. Both Nuova Icona and Sala 1 will be responsible for communications.

Notes on the venue

Since Iraq unfortunately does not have its own physical pavilion (unlike France, Germany, USA, Great Britain, Japan, Russia, China or Egypt, among others), it was necessary to secure a venue for Iraq. Curator Mary Angela Schroth has selected a suggestive solution: The Gervasuti Foundation, ideally located at the north end of Via Garibaldi and equidistant from both Giardini and Arsenale, sites of the Venice Biennale. The Gervasuti is a young (initiated in 2009) alternative art platform located



Ahmed Alsoudani Untitled, 2009 Charcoal, acrylic and pastel on paper. 206 x 152 cm



Walid Siti - Gali Ali Beg, 2010 Mixed medium, size varies

on the site of the Gervasuti family artisan wood workshop, which for over 60 years has been one of the most respected and active in the Venetian working class area of Castello, renowned for its excellence in wood craft and shipbuilding. The complex, with its history as a hospice from the 11th century, is part of the authentic history of Venice itself and has not been “gentrified”, thus maintaining its identity as part of the oldest community in this unique city. Like Iraq itself, the space is a metaphor for the dual themes of destruction and rebirth: the rooms could be synonymous with any of the houses in today’s Iraq, with their centuries-old walls and simply-decorated construction of local materials often situated on the river fronts and now destroyed or abandoned. A suggestive and magical atmosphere pervades this extraordinary complex and is an ongoing source of inspiration and adaptation for the artists’ installations. The collaboration with the Iraq Pavilion fits into the aim of the Foundation to forge

a network of local and international artists to work with and to rethink and address the cultural context and develop experimental projects making use of local realities and materials. The Foundation includes a courtyard project meeting point, offering the possibility of hosting seminars, concerts, and other encounters – a situation that will be integrated into the outreach activities of the Iraq project, engaging both residents and visitor participation.

Notes on the Venice Biennale and the 54th edition in 2011

“As usual, the Venice Biennale is the most eagerly awaited exhibition in the world of international art. This is because, despite its age and the vast number of art events throughout the world, the Biennale remains the most prestigious.”

-L’Express, Annick Colonna-Césari, 7 June 2009

Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennale has played an imperative role in the presentation, development, production, and visibility of artists throughout the



Halim al Kalim "Nations Laundry" 2010-2011 - channel video, 3' (Video still)

world. Arguably the most important platform for global arts exchange, development, and visibility, the Biennale has served as a springboard for the careers of many young artists, providing a venue for their work to be seen by a wide spectrum of art critics, journalists, dealers, collectors, museum directors, and galleries.

The most recent Biennale, in 2009, was the 53rd edition of the International Art Exhibition, and attracted a record 375,702 visitors between the months of June and November, and included the participation of 77 nations. During the course of the exhibition, 5,868 journalists attended, this coverage resulting in 3,155 published articles. In addition, 104 television teams were accredited (66 foreign and 38 Italian), securing the representation of the 53rd Exhibition in all leading international news programs.

In addition, the Biennale, much like the World Cup or the Olympics, is an event that brings the visual

arts into an international arena. Artists are selected to represent their respective nations, with the various pavilions housing not simply artists' work –but a visual and experiential selection of the creative work and offerings of their citizens on a highly sophisticated level. These creative voices of course speak of the particular concerns, experiences, critical thought, and imaginative skill of the artists involved, bringing a nuanced and diverse lens to national –and thus international –discourse.

While nations such as the US, France, Germany, and Italy have been present at the Biennale throughout its duration, the development of pavilions by other nations is a critical step towards the recognition of the importance of the arts and the role that it plays in contemporary society. Recent nations or territories who have developed pavilions include Palestine, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, China, and the United Arab Emirates.

The Venice Biennale, 2011, will mark the first time that Iraq has been represented in more than twenty years (there were minor appearances in 1988 and 1990), and will be an incredible benchmark in placing Iraqi artists on the global contemporary art stage. At this point in Iraq's history, this will have an indelible impact in creating awareness of the current work of Iraq's living artists, as well as drawing attention to Iraq in a way that brings dignity, humanity, and sophisticated creative contribution and expression to the forefront. In addition, this project will set a precedent for future artistic endeavours, and is likely to invigorate and energize the Iraqi art scene in ways that no other public venue or exhibition can, thanks to the scale of an event such as Venice.

Artistic director for 2011 is the Swiss curator Bice Curiger, who has conceived an apparently banal but not uninteresting theme on the subject of "Nation", by historical coincidence particularly relevant in the case of Iraq. The title chosen is ILLUMInations. Bice Curiger explains: 'La Biennale is one of the world's most important forums for the dissemination and "illumination" about the current developments in international art. The title of the 54th Exhibition, ILLUMInations literally draws attention to the importance of such developments in a globalized world. I am particularly interested in the eagerness of many contemporary artists to establish an intense dialogue with the viewer, and to challenge the conventions through which contemporary art is viewed. The term "nations" in ILLUMInations applies metaphorically to recent developments in the arts all over the world, where overlapping groups form collectives of people representing a wide variety of smaller, more local activities and mentalities. In addition, I am in favour of a Biennale with the Pavilions because they represent an extraordinary opportunity for dialogue among the artists. The Arsenale offers me an opportunity to bring together the works of artists who use the space as a medium through the creation of "para Pavilions". Sometimes the Pavilions of the Biennale are considered anachronistic; on the contrary they can be a tool to reflect upon the issue of identity. I wish to reinforce the sense of unity between the International

Exhibition and the National Participations by asking the artists from every country and the artists of ILLUMInations to answer five questions regarding this theme: 1.) Is the art community a nation? 2.) How many nations are inside you? 3.) Where do you feel at home? 4.) Which language will the future speak? 5.) If art were a "state", what would its constitution say?'

The 54th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale opens on 4 June 2011 and closes on 27 November 2011. The exhibitions are located in the Giardini and the Arsenale (vernissage press dates are 13- June 2011) as well as various sites throughout the city.

www.labiennale.org

*(article by Mary Angela Schroth and Ali Assaf)
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