

## **The Laboratory of the Future**

18th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, Venice

20 May 2023 – 26 November 2023

*The Giardini is a park where global geopolitics and colonial and imperial histories are enacted. At the core of its experience are nationalism and politics of representation, mediated by resources that each nation can fuel into this exhibition act. Unevenly distributed resources mirror global conditions. The differences, noticeable among those who have access to the national showroom, heighten when considering those unable to take part.<sup>1</sup>*

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Upon entering the Cordieri, Lesley Lokko, curator of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, quotes Marina Otero's review of the previous Biennale on the left wall. After this critical reading of the previous show and the institution of the Biennale as a whole, the audience enters the exhibition under a giant LED screen suspended overhead, where the video *Those with Walls for Windows* by British poet Rhael "Lionheart" Cape presents a call to arms for those seeking the joyous and redemptive liberation of Carnival. Perhaps this ambivalence between analytical critique of the recent present and celebratory faith in the future is what the Biennial's title, "The Laboratory of the Future," seeks to capture. Laboratories, in addition to being as sheltered from the outside world as the fortress of the Arsenale, have often been places where present conditions are clinically dissected to construct

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Otero Verzier, "Review of La Biennale di Venezia 17th International Architecture Exhibition, curated by Hashim Sarkis, Venice, May 22 – November 21, 2021", *JAE Online*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.jaeonline.org/issue-article/how-will-we-live-together/> (accessed 10 Nov. 2023)

possible futures. They are also, to quote Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar in *Laboratory Life*, institutions that are rarely self-aware of the power structures and social rituals that hold them together, which may explain why this Biennial explicitly acknowledges the institutional conditions in which it operates.

For example, the Arsenale and the Central Pavilion in the Giardini, the sections of the Biennale under the control of the curator —the national pavilions enjoy a calculated autonomy that is always questioned, always maintained—have been carefully quantified. More than half of the participants are from Africa or the African Diaspora. They maintain a 50/50 gender balance. They are young (43 on average, and some under 25), and nearly half come from small practices of five people or less, a percentage that increases to 70% in sections of the show. These statistics on identity, gender, age, and labor practices are not an afterthought. They occupy a prominent space in the curator's statement and are evident throughout the exhibition. The labels describing each project include portraits of their authors, explicitly unveiling the traits behind the muted percentages. When it comes to the politics of representation, revealing the faces —with their racial, gender and age features— of those in charge of the laboratory is essential to understanding who has the right to construct the futures of Africa and its Diaspora.

Visualizing who the presenters are—and whom they represent—is at the heart of an exhibition that decidedly makes decolonizing and decarbonizing claims, but that may not be enough. Institutions like the Biennale and the events it has hosted for nearly a century are essential to perpetuating the social organizations and technologies of governance and representation that began in Europe in the 16th century and took over the globe with the expansion of colonial capitalism and racializing epistemologies. For centuries, the Arsenale produced the galleons that sustained Venetian control overseas. More recently, with some notable exceptions, its shift to the creative arts has helped maintain Western hegemony over discourses and practices of art and architecture. This set of technologies and techniques cannot be separated from the burning of fossil fuels at the heart of global warming. In fact, they are the source of energy that has made both the historical maritime empire and the contemporary art-based tourism

economy possible. Therefore, naming is of paramount importance as a strategy for resignifying these spaces and cultural practices. The exhibition's titles indicate the role that participants are expected to fulfil—how they actively contribute to the Biennale's ambitious project—and Lokko, whose successful career as a writer has brought her a much wider audience than her architectural endeavors, does not shy away from ambitious names.

The exhibition is divided into six parts, further unpacking Lokko's curatorial approach. The first, "Force Majeure," takes its name from the French legal term for the exceptional circumstances that release both parties to a contract from liability and obligation. It is the name of the exhibition in the Central Pavilion in the Giardini and includes an idiosyncratic selection of sixteen established art and architecture practices of African and Diasporic origin. Rooms filled with large-scale models by Adjaye Associates and videos describing the work of other firms, such as MASS Design Group or Koffi & Diabaté Architects, coexist with practices based in academic environments, such as Urban AC or Softlab@PSU, and installations by smaller practices, such as Sumayya Vally's imagined pan-African post office, Thandi Loewenson's graphite panels that bring together African struggle and the politics of extraction, or Sean Canty's take on South Carolina vernacular sheds filtered through the recognizable formal tropes of Harvard GS—a reminder of how these Diasporic practices have infiltrated Ivy League institutions in recent years. On the artistic side, a video piece by Theaster Gates summarizing his Black Artist Retreat project, Ibrahim Mahama's Parliament of Ghosts, and an Afro-futurist waiting room by Olalekan Jeyifous add to a collection that, in its traditional combination of large-scale models, spatial installations, plans and sections, documentaries, construction details, video projections, and architecture-related art, seems to imagine what a normative yet black Venice Architecture Biennale—an exhibition of architecture centered on what Paul Gilroy has called the Black Atlantic<sup>2</sup>—might look like; an optimistic sign that the disruption of architecture's racial bias is not only urgent and possible; it is already happening.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995.)

The "Dangerous Liaisons" section provides a counterpoint to the confidence of "Force Majeure" and helps us understand how much still needs to happen. Located in the Arsenale complex, the exhibition hosts 37 practices that, to paraphrase Lokko, enjoy the company of "others" outside the field of architecture. Its name is also a French idiom, but instead of signaling a break with the existing status quo, it takes us back to the pre-revolutionary novellas of decadent 18th-century France and the concupiscent Hollywood films of the 1980s that warn us of nefarious acquaintances. Lokko's Francophilia is strategic. Based on Lokko's Ghanaian origins, the section unearths France's colonial history and the European nation's strategic refusal to establish architecture schools —only one architecture school exists in a territory of 167 million people. Revealing colonial histories is a trend shared by most of the participants, but the name of the section also refers to the format chosen by most of the exhibitors —audiovisual storytelling, that is, films— perhaps fueled by Lokko's interest on narration. Exceptions such as the exquisite collections of models by Flores y Prats, BDR Bureau, Neri&Hu or ZAO/Standardarchitecture, seem to confirm, in their inability to discuss the interlocking of colonial and carbon logics, the adequacy of visual narratives to critically address them. Explicit documentaries like Killing Architects' *Investigating Xinjiang's Network of Detention Camps*, DAAR's acts of decolonization using fragments of fascist architecture painted in red portrayed in their film *Ente di Decolonizzazione — Borgo Rizza* — awarded with the Golden Lion—or Gbolade Design Studio's report on the fate of the West Indian community in Brixton known as the "Windrush Generation," demonstrate the power of journalistic reporting to expose how colonial structures are far from gone. At the same time, films such as Liam Young's *The Great Endeavor*, an atmospheric depiction of extractivism, MMA Design Studio's dance performance over the layered historical landscape of the Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve depicted in *Origins*, or Sammy Balojii's visual essay on the Yangambi Agricultural Center, a remnant of Belgian colonial agricultural experimentation, also remind us of fiction's capacity to foster political imagination.

Fourteen other films complete a sea of moving images that appropriate Audre Lorde's thesis<sup>3</sup> and explicitly refuse to undo the house of architecture with traditional architectural tools. Only 1:1 crafted mockups survive the disciplinary drowning. Works that retain certain normative architectural qualities despite their challenging scale or material strangeness such as Serge Attukey Clotey's yellow plastic "Afrogallonist," an endless fabric-like skin, Estudio A0's embroidered constellations of agro-ecological urbanisms in the Amazon basin, or Studio Barnes' ambiguous archaeological and anthropological fragments of an imminent future, can evoke totemic powers, enable symbolic readings, and at the same time seriously present the thing itself. A glimmer of hope: perhaps architects do not need to learn filmmaking to deal with the colonial and carbonizing present of the field.

The title of the section "Guests from the Future" also carries literary baggage, but of a different kind. It is the name of György Dalos's account of the dazing impression that a young Isaiah Berlin made on the 56-year-old poet Anna Akhmatova when they met in 1945. A literal reference, as Lokko embodies Akhmatova here and gathers 22 startling young African and Diasporic practices, most born in the 1990s, introducing them as a destabilizing thread in the fabric of the previous two exhibitions. Mixed between the established offices of "Force Majeure" and the critical readings of "Dangerous Liaisons," they reclaim the possibility of a future, not always because of what they are, but rather because of what they might become. And what might become is quite diverse: It ranges from Arinjoy Sen's embroideries depicting the domestic architecture of Bangladesh's vulnerable coastal floodplains to Ibiye Camp's attempts to decolonize data extractive technologies in South Africa; from Black Females in Architecture, a UK-based group that promotes diversity and racial and gender equity in all sectors of the built environment, to the Afro-Brazilian collective Cartografia Negra, which recovers the histories of Black Brazilians that have disappeared from national records; from New South's clothed domestic interiors that link Algiers to the Parisian Suburbs, to Dzidula Kpodo and Postbox Ghana's archival research into Ghana's midcentury

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<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007,) 110-114.

anonymous photographs. Geographically expansive and conceptually convoluted, this section takes a risk that only the bold fool or the brazen soothsayer dares: to draw images of the future, perhaps the section's best feature.

The exhibition continues with a section whose generic name, "Curator's Special Projects" avoids the programmatic tone of its predecessors. The works presented in its three didactic subtopics, "Food, Agriculture & Climate Change," "Gender & Geography," and "Mnemonic", have been developed in collaboration with the curator. Lokko's intervention seems to be the only thing they have in common and the reason why they have been separated from the rest. The stream of events, talks, screenings, and performances that completes every Biennale has been given its own name, "Carnival," a reference to one of Venice's local celebrations par excellence, but perhaps also a warning to participants, reminding them that every now and then the crazies get to run the show for a limited time. The final section is called "The Biennale College Architettura," and it replicates the educational programs that the Biennale's Art, Music, Dance, Theater, and Cinema sections have been running for several cycles. It held its inaugural season last June, focusing on the future of architectural education, a fascinating question that I will refrain from discussing further due to my personal involvement in the project.

Lokko's determination to operate within the logic of the Biennale while simultaneously subverting its histories and institutional structure draws parallels ruangrupa's experience curating Documenta 15 a year ago. Even if the invitation to occupy the center went to different geographical peripheries —the Global South, in the case of the Indonesian art collective and the Black Atlantic, in the case of Lokko— they have in common the discomfort they encountered. Beyond the accusations of ant-Semitism against Taring Padi's large mural *People's Justice*, which was immediately removed from the exhibition, the overall visceral reaction to ruangrupa's collection of non-Western art collectives in Kassel signaled the difficulty of fitting decentered proposals into the centers of power. Curatorial frameworks and established trajectories in the former colonies did not translate well back into Europe, culturally and politically. In

Venice, the controversies were less public but no less structural. By comparison, the few negative reviews complaining about the “lack of architecture” at this year’s Biennale seem anecdotal. Imagine organizing temporary visas for participants arriving in Italy from different regions of Africa under the notorious migration policy of *Fratelli d’Italia*, the neo-fascist party of Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s prime minister since October 2022. Picture working for an institution under the jurisdiction of the current Italian Minister of Culture, Gennaro Sangiuliano, who was a local representative of the MSI-DN in the 1980s, a direct heir of Mussolini’s *Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, and a candidate for the House of Representatives with Silvio Berlusconi’s *Casa delle Libertà* in the 2000s. If these conditions constrained the Biennale’s horizon of possibility, they also rendered it, when it opened back in May 2023, even more necessary. By the time it closed in late November 2023, the ever-rising death count in the Middle East had brought back debates on what constitutes colonialism, and the breadth of works in “The Laboratory of the Future” leaved us with a single certainty: the colonial project is not a long-gone historical period that affected African people and its Diaspora, but rather an ecology of epistemologies, cognitive structures, regimes of representation, techniques of the body, technologies of power, discourses of validation, narratives, and images that continue to operate in the present with the active participation of architecture.