

This spread (from left): Entrance to the Italian Pavilion. Image courtesy la Biennale di Venezia; View of damage from 18 March Bardo Museum shooting in Tunis; View of *All The World's A Mosque* exhibition in Tunis. Photography by Hydar Hewachi. Image courtesy JAOU.



"Third World" countries coming out with pavilions in Venice after they receive new influxes of money. Some of these fledgling shows have been breakout successes; others have been less praiseworthy. Take Azerbaijan: their 2015 exhibition is a resounding triumph. It consists of three pavilions, including a particularly impressive one commissioned by YARAT. By carefully choosing their curator and using a multi-storey building for their venue, they have been able to create an environment that does justice to the work included in their show, reflecting positively on both their national presence and the individuals who have had a hand in staging the exhibitions.

However, I have visited pavilions that were not lacking financial support yet still displayed lacklustre presentations put together by inexperienced curators. Money is not the only thing that decides a pavilion's success. It's also necessary for the financial backers to trust the curator's vision and the strength of the artists' work if the show is going to come together. In many of these disappointing pavilions, the problem results from the commissioners wanting to be overly involved in the artistic process. We have commissioners who believe that

their money guarantees them a certain level of control over the process of putting the exhibition together, frequently to the detriment of the show itself. In recent years there have been a number of instances of curators being compelled to drop out of shows for which they were hired after facing an inappropriate amount of control from institutions.

I propose that the boundaries and disparities between nations be diminished for the sake of artistic diversity, international equality and the health of the Venice Biennale as an institution. I am calling for increased attention to maintaining discrete roles between those individuals involved in staging the exhibitions. The role of the artist is different from the role of the curator, and the role of the curator is different from the role of the institution. Each individual works best when they are operating within the area of their expertise. The commissioner's willingness to be democratic in the planning process, and to let everyone do the jobs for which they are trained, can make or break an exhibition more than any other factor. In short, commissioners need to understand that they are not artists, but are the supporters of art.

## STAND AND DELIVER

**Katrina Kufer** attends JAOU, the annual arts symposium held in Tunis in late May at the Bardo National Museum, a bold choice of location given the 18 March shootings there. Traces of that black day were all around as panellists gathered to discuss this year's theme, *Visual Culture in an Age of Global Conflict*.

Supported by the Fondation Kamel Lazaar and organised by *Ibraaz*, JAOU founder Lina Lazaar referenced a contemporary global issue, particularly present in this year's Venice

Biennale. Brazilian Vik Muniz's *Lampedusa*, a boat made of newspapers discussing hundreds of migrant deaths, stirred dialogue on the role of the artist in bringing attention to conflict. 2015's JAOU addressed just that.

Words from Bardo Director Moncef Ben Moussa and Tunisian financier Kamel Lazaar, who set up the Fondation in response to a lack of cultural centres in the Maghreb, set the tone: art is the best way to respond to such "savage acts", with Ben Moussa adding, "We need to stay immune to danger. We need to consolidate our community against this curse." From a national standpoint, Tunisia is currently demonstrating the determination to counteract the attack on their tourism and culture, a position that fed into a key topic of the discussions. Artworks stemming from public events can serve as documentation or archival material, and archives, contrary to popular belief, are neither dead nor even about the past. "It is about the future," says Anthony Downey, Editor-in-Chief of *Ibraaz*. In fact, it is about what needs to change, now.

While the panels, roundtables, entrepreneurial presentations and exhibitions largely addressed the Maghreb, issues pertaining to culture and transgressed MENASA boundaries. Sheikh Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Foundation, put it bluntly: "Arab people do not connect art to conflict." The rest of the world does, however, exemplified by the Biennale pavilions of Iran, Iraq and Syria, curated by non-Arabs around conflict-oriented themes. The region fights against a stereotype that this is a regional dilemma. Lina Lazaar curated the contentiously titled *All The World's A Mosque*, an edgy and refined travelling exhibition arguing that if the world were a mosque, the hatred and conflict omnipresent today would not occur (Lazaar used the concept of the mosque to indicate faith as a matter of the heart, as opposed to adhering to a specific Islamic space). Culture faces challenges, independent of location, so how might it be used to expand discourse about global conflict? What is the role of artists, how do they affect civil society, and should they? Panellists vehemently agreed

that artists are torchbearers, but less explicit was the how and why. Herein lies another issue: with everyone busy championing art in terms of recording and then reiterating global conflict, where were the actual artists at the symposium?

While the roster of art industry panellists was impressive, particularly on *Roundtable V: Future Imperfect: Art Institutions in the Arab World*, featuring Al-Qassemi and Art Dubai Director Antonia Carver, among others, there were few artists present. Some, such as Slavs & Tartars, Hiwa K and Nadia Kaabi-Linke contributed by discussing their visceral performative works, but none commented more broadly on their ability to instigate change and how their work might serve as a vehicle for progress. Dream City co-founder Sofiane Ouissi indicated he often performs via Skype from his apartment. That isn't the power of the artist, though. It's the power of the Internet.

This leads to a final question: JAOU is clearly saying that culture is crucial to breaking