



Cristina Baldacci and Susanne Franco (dir.)

On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools

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The Archives of La Biennale di Venezia as the Seventh Muse: Revisiting (Art) History

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The Archives of La Biennale di Venezia as the Seventh Muse: Revisiting (Art) History

Cecilia Alemani, Cristina Baldacci

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Cristina Baldacci (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia) invites Cecilia Alemani (Director and Chief Curator of High Line Art, New York, and Artistic Director of the 59th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia) to converse about *The Disquieted Muses: When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History*. This collectively curated exhibition was organized in Autumn 2020 (29 August–08 December) to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the Venice Biennale (1895). As a major event based on the archival material provided by the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (ASAC), the exhibition looked at the history of La Biennale di Venezia focusing on the points of crisis that have been transforming its political views together with its curatorial visions. Alemani and Baldacci highlight the strong relationship of the Venice Biennale with an interdisciplinary spectrum of arts, as well as with the city of Venice and its residents. They further address *The Disquieted Muses'* goal to revisit and reenact in the present both the history of the institution and its past exhibition formats as a specific curatorial practice.

113

CRISTINA BALDACCI: I would like to start by asking you about the premises that made *The Disquieted Muses* possi-

ble, as this is the first major exhibition that was organized using primarily documents from the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (ASAC).¹ Other small archival exhibitions were installed in recent years at Ca' Giustinian, the Venice Biennale headquarter, to celebrate and inquire about the institution's history, but none resulted in such a vast project.² One of the reasons for organizing an exhibition like *The Disquieted Muses* may lie in the increasing attention that the Venice Biennale has given to its archives while gradually becoming aware of their importance. Another reason is probably to be found in the particular historical moment we are living in. The many restrictions due to the pandemic might have encouraged the decision to make an exhibition based mainly on archival material. Is that right?

CECILIA ALEMANI: Yes, the Venice Biennale already organized other exhibitions out of its archives or inspired by them. Indeed, I was also working on a smaller exhibition of the same kind, when president Roberto Cicutto was nominated as Paolo Baratta's successor at the beginning of 2020. He immediately made it very clear that one of his visions for the Venice Biennale was to highlight its multidisciplinary nature and "DNA". To most of the visitors who come to the Art Exhibition, it is still quite unknown that the Venice Biennale actually produces five more festivals and exhibitions dedicated to Architecture, Cinema, Dance, Music, and Theatre, and that the archives – as I like to call them – are the seventh muse among them.

As the artistic directors of the other sectors and I were already working on an exhibition in collaboration with the ASAC, the postponement of the Architecture Biennale in 2021 became for us an opportunity to move the exhibition

1. See Cecilia Alemani, Hashim Sarkis, Alberto Barbera, Marie Chouinard, Ivan Fedele, and Antonio Latella, eds., *The Disquieted Muses: When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2020).

2. See e.g. *Amarcord*, curated by Massimiliano Gioni alongside the Art Exhibition 2013 (1 June–24 November), and the two exhibitions, *dAPERTutto* (5 May 2015 - 9 June 2016) and *Plateau of Humankind* (16 June 2016 - 7 July 2017), which reconstructed the pivotal editions of the two Biennale directed by Harald Szeemann respectively in 1999 and 2001. In the first case, see also the accompanying publication *Amarcord: Fragments of Memory from the Historical Archives of La Biennale* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2013).

from a smaller location to a much more prominent one, the Central Pavilion at the Giardini. But this also meant that we had to change the curatorial approach and expand the exhibition to encompass a much larger vision of the history of the Venice Biennale. I think it is important to clarify that *The Disquieted Muses* does not attempt to retrace a full history of the Venice Biennale. There will probably be other occasions to do that, but here we wanted to focus on a selected number of events and historical moments in which the history of the Venice Biennale clashed with the “Big History”. We wanted to look at those moments of both transformation – caused by internal and external crises – and the introduction of new art languages that the Venice Biennale has been absorbing throughout its history. We chose *The Disquieted Muses* as a title because we sought to highlight the polyphony of voices that we were bringing to the table: art, architecture, cinema, music, theatre, and dance. While these are the different sides of the same institution, the ASAC is undoubtedly the brain of the exhibition.

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CB: I like the idea of the ASAC as the “brain” of the exhibition very much. This metaphor brings me to my next question. Enquiring an archive, thus the history, by first selecting and appropriating its materials and then by reenacting and restaging them through a specific montage or display are political gestures. As political gestures, they are never neutral – whether an archivist/researcher or a curator/artist who performs them.

115

When I visited the exhibition, the political aspect of *The Disquieted Muses* was very clear to me. Right from the start, after an initial focus on the foundation act of the Venice Biennale (1895), the attention turned to the fascist years and the relationship between dictatorship and the arts. Fascism, whose signs are still visible in many of the Venice Biennale’s pavilions, despite the renovations they went through after World War II, is certainly a problematic memory, one on which light should continuously be shed on.³

3. An emblematic example, but certainly not the only one, given that fascism does not concern only Germany and Italy, was Hans Haacke’s 1993 intervention in the German pavilion (*GERMANIA*). Since the post-war period, many of the projects hosted by the German pavilion have critically addressed the Nazi-fascist

Was such an emphasis on fascism a specific curatorial choice rather than just historical documentation? By creating a visual narrative climax, did you intend to prepare the visitor for the following part of the exhibition? Was the opposition between two political regimes and historical periods, namely fascism and communism, the Cold War and the riots of 1968, intentional? Clearly, as a cultural institution, the Venice Biennale experienced these tensions first-hand.

CA: We decided to open the exhibition starting from the late 1920s for several reasons. First of all, because, as I mentioned before, the exhibition focuses on moments of general crisis. We acknowledged that the Venice Biennale was founded at the end of the nineteenth century, but we thought that the fascist years were among those of deepest transformations – both internally, in terms of the commission and presentation of the artworks, and externally, as the world was at that time rapidly changing. That, of course – as you said – set the tone for a political reading of the history of the Venice Biennale. In addition to that, I would also like to say that it was important for us to start from those years because it was at that time that, alongside the Art Exhibition, the other sectors came to life. The first editions of the Venice Biennale were entirely dedicated to visual art. It was only in the 1930s that the film, music, and theatre festivals were born. Since *The Disquieted Muses* had to give an overall glimpse, we wanted to make sure that we could start from a period of internal renovation.

We need to bear in mind that 1928 was also the year in which the ASAC was founded. Even if documents about the history of the Venice Biennale can be found before that

memory. The architectural space of the pavilion, which echoes this memory despite the numerous restorations, is still being questioned. Just think of the interventions by Christoph Schlingensiefel, Anne Imhof, Natascha Sadr Haghigian or Maria Eichhorn's project for the next Biennale (see: <https://www.deutscher-pavillon.org/en/exhibition/> [accessed 07 January 2022]). The 1993 edition of the Venice Biennale, directed by Achille Bonito Oliva, was a fundamental one, which started the renewal process that led to the Biennale as it is today. See Clarissa Ricci, *Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale: Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition*, 1, no. 1 (2020): 78-98: <https://www.oboejournal.com/index.php/oboe/article/view/5> [accessed 07 January 2022].

date, it was for us as curators a key year to begin with. What is really striking is to think about the role of the Venice Biennale within the structure and the texture of the city. The Biennale has never been just an exhibition space with no connection to Venice. On the contrary, it has also been managed by the city of Venice. This was most evident in the 1930s, when, under fascism, the administration of the institution changed dramatically. The Venice Biennale became officially an entity of the Italian government, which meant a fascist institution. With *The Disquieted Muses*, we wanted to make clear that the Venice Biennale became, for all intents and purposes, a tool for the fascist regime, namely a tool for propaganda, for the power of art to be used to exert an influence on a broader public.

CB: Even the display conceived by the Italian design duo Formafantasma (Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin) seems to stress the political aspect of the exhibition. I think of it almost as a stage machinery, namely an apparatus that, while embodying the archival documents, reframes and recontextualizes them in the present. I was particularly struck by Formafantasma's use of sound, which contributes to turning the exhibition into an immersive environment, where viewers can experience the past in a constant relationship with their own present. Can one say, then, that *The Disquieted Muses* becomes a kind of *Denkraum* or a "space of thinking" – to use an expression that goes back to Aby Warburg?

CA: I think one can definitely say that. It is indeed a space of contamination of different idioms and disciplines. As we are talking about archives, Warburg is, of course, the perfect reference – I just returned from Berlin, where the *Mnemosyne Atlas* is on view at Haus der Kulturen der Welt.⁴ Going back to the installation of *The Disquieted Muses*, we were excited to work with Formafantasma, who helped us assemble the incredible amount of materials we selected from the ASAC: something like thousand of documents and

4. See Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne: The Original*, ed. Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil, in cooperation with the Warburg Institute and Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020).

other items, including artworks. What Formafantasma did was quite fascinating. They created a modular system that allowed certain flexibility, considering the exhibition was put together rather quickly. We were able to make tweaks to the exhibition but still evoke different atmospheres in different rooms.

When you start your visit in the Sala Chini,⁵ there is this sort of monumental installation with a survey of the Venice Film Festival from the 1930s. Then, you enter the large exhibition space of the main hall, which to me has been turned into a labyrinth of history. You are supposed to get lost in this structure. When you move to the mezzanine upstairs, you can actually see from above the completely different atmospheres that Formafantasma were able to evoke. We wanted to stress the cacophony of history, and music – which is very present in the first main room – helped us do that. It became almost like a soundtrack of the exhibition. When you enter the following room, the one dedicated to 1968, the sound of the installation is intended to highlight the presence of people, the quality of the protests and revolutions that were happening at that crucial time in the history of the second half of the twentieth century.

We also tried to create an exhibition that was not just telling the history of the Venice Biennale but the history of the institution throughout its display. One has to bear in mind that art history in general is created by amazing artworks and artists, but also by different exhibition formats, modalities of presentation, and institutions behind the scenes.

CB: Speaking of exhibition formats, do you think that such a complex and multi-layered exhibition as *The Disquieted Muses* can be well understood both by specialists or professionals and by a wider audience? Exhibitions based on archival materials require not only a lot of attention from the spectator but also the ability to create connections,

5. The Sala Chini was restored on the occasion of the 2013 Art Exhibition. It is the vestibule of the Central Pavilion at the Giardini. The room is dominated by a dome decorated in 1909 by Galileo Chini (1873-1956) for that year's Venice Biennale. To find out more about Chini: https://www.galileochini.it/?page_id=993&lang=en [accessed 07 January 2022].

which implies good general knowledge. What audience did you have in mind when you were planning the exhibition?

CA: First of all, we had Venice in mind, therefore, a local audience. That does not necessarily mean only professionals or experts in the history of the Venice Biennale, but mostly Venetian citizens. I definitely think that an archival exhibition can be interesting for a wider audience. Of course, it is an exhibition that requires time to think about history. Our hope was that the local audience too could use this quiet time, with almost no tourists around, to go to the exhibition. Maybe on a regular basis, not just rushing through it once – because it is indeed overwhelming – and rediscovering a part of the city’s history.

CB: A large section of the exhibition focuses on the 1970s, namely on those years (1974-1978) when the president of the Venice Biennale was Carlo Ripa di Meana. It was a very special moment in which – at the climax of the story – the “Biennial of dissent” took place as a sign of both institutional transformation and socio-political change in the midst of the Cold War.⁶ What did the archival materials let reemerge of those years?

CA: At that time, the Venice Biennale had left its own venues at the Giardini to infiltrate into the city of Venice, extending its community in the urban space. This is the reason why we wanted to include a lot of material about the editions led by Carlo Ripa di Meana. Hopefully, some of the local visitors still remember those years in which the large Chilean murals were installed in the city squares and streets;⁷ where many public events concomitantly took

6. See Lucrezia Lante della Rovere, Andrea Ripa di Meana Cardella, Lorenzo Capellini, eds., *Carlo Ripa di Meana. Le mie Biennali 1974-1978* (Milan: Skira, 2018); Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978: La rivoluzione incompiuta*, PhD dissertation (Venice: Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, 2011); and, by the same author, “How La Biennale as a Brand was Born: Venice as the Archetype of a Biennial City”, in *OBOE-Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2020): 99-107: <https://www.oboejournal.com/index.php/oboe/article/view/14> [accessed 07 January 2022].

7. After Pinochet’s *coup d’état* and the neo-fascist attacks in Piazza della Loggia in Brescia, and on the Italicus train between May and August that year, the

place: concerts, performances, and theatre pieces among others. There was also that beautiful performance in Piazza San Marco with thousands of people carrying over their heads a huge man made of a very light fabric that James Lee Byars conceived as the apparition of *The Holy Ghost* during the Theatre Festival in 1975.

CB: In his four-year term as president of the Venice Biennale, Ripa di Meana pursued a policy of cultural decentralization that transformed the urban public space into the Biennale's field of action. You rightly mentioned the legendary Byars' participatory performance in Piazza San Marco, which in 1975 had become an open stage space with the Living Theatre. It can be said that in those years the city of Venice became itself a medium. In composite projects like *The Disquieted Muses*, the exhibition becomes likewise a medium. In this regard, I would like to ask you, first of all, what message do you think the exhibition delivers to the general public? Secondly, what kind of image did you want to suggest for the Venice Biennale in 2020, both as an international art exhibition and as a cultural institution?

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CA: The spirit and genesis of the exhibition came with the hope and enthusiasm of recognizing that the arts continue also in times of crisis. As evidenced by *The Disquieted Muses*, the Venice Biennale was always present during the two World Wars in the first half of the twentieth century, and during the social transformations of the sixties and seventies. For us, it was fundamental to put things in a historical perspective. We are living through a major crisis right now and it is hard to have a distanced view of where we are as a society, especially as a cultural society. Our goal was to show that art can still be a beacon of hope and also a place where institutions support the production of art. The Venice Biennale is not an isolated institution that lives in a bubble. It is an institution that registers history as a seismograph. Sometimes the results can be devastating, other times they are completely unreal. If you think about what

the Venice Biennale presented during the fascist years, it was not the reality of what was happening in the creative spheres. Everything was completely censored. But what is important to understand is that the Venice Biennale is not a sturdy, monolithic institution. On the contrary, it is a flexible institution, one that allows for different entry points and different outcomes. One perceives this especially when viewing it from a historical perspective.

CB: Archival exhibitions are usually based on the reenactment of objects, documents, images, and attitudes, which lead to reinterpretations of the past *in* and *for* the present. As an exhibition format, it has become very successful in recent years.⁸ In the case of *The Disquieted Muses*, one could also speak of a “meta-exhibition”, which not only narrates the history of the Venice Biennale but also of exhibition display as a form of knowledge. What, in your experience, are the pros and cons of such an exhibition format?

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CA: Having the luxury of time would be important for every curator that faces the gigantic task of putting together an international exhibition like the Venice Biennale. I was lucky to have the time to dive into the ASAC – although I took a glimpse only at a fraction of it – and to collaborate with the talented people who work there. They carry so many layers of history in their mind, which go way beyond the simple document that is actually kept in the boxes!

In an ideal world, it would be incredible if an archival sensibility was possible in every exhibition. If one thinks about the succession of the many biennials around the world, the linearity and the sense of being part of a lineage of exhibitions are sometimes lost. Working on *The Disquieted Muses* was crucial to recognize how, eventually, one will look in the future at the Venice Biennale that I am directing – as well as at the ones that have been concurrently directed by

121

8. Archival exhibitions seem particularly suitable for our present moment, when to organize and visit large-scale international exhibitions has proved to be difficult, when/if not impossible, for the many limitations and restrictions caused by the pandemic. As a consequence, we are probably also getting more and more aware that large-scale international exhibitions are no longer sustainable in terms of mass tourism and carbon footprint.

my colleagues. If one looks through the lens of its archives at the different editions of the Venice Biennale, not just as single episodes but in the larger context of the institution itself, it becomes clear that the exhibition's content is what happens in the city of Venice, in Italy, and around the world. If I think of international visitors coming to Venice and seeing *The Disquieted Muses*, my hope is that they will be able to better understand the forthcoming editions of the Biennale Arte, those that will be organized in the next ten years, from a glocal perspective.

CB: That is right. Usually, people think about archives as institutions full of dust and not at all as lively places where history and memory can be reactivated. The archive is indeed – as thought by Michel Foucault – a “dispositive”; that is, an apparatus of knowledge production, a medium to reinterpret and give new meaning to the past. Therefore, I would like to ask you about the role of the Venice Biennale as a dispositive for the present. What function, in your opinion, should the Venice Biennale play in this moment of (partial) suspension of its usual exhibition activities due to the pandemic? Do you think the Venice Biennale still has a strong socio-political and cultural impact in these “interesting times”?⁹

CA: The role of the Venice Biennale, both as a recurrent exhibition and an institution, is a core topic of *The Disquieted Muses*. The exhibition shows that, despite all difficulties, the Biennale has been committed to bringing culture back to Venice. As you know, it was one of the very few newly conceived exhibitions that were actually open during the pandemic, while museums were still closed and other shows were postponed.

The Disquieted Muses also clearly shows that the Venice Biennale is not an exhibition divided into compartments and festivals. We wanted to celebrate its choral mission, namely what makes it so unique in the world. No other

9. The reference here is to Ralph Rugoff's Biennale and its allusive title to the extremely complex historical moment we are living in. See Ralph Rugoff, ed., *May You Live in Interesting Times* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2019).

institutions like the Venice Biennale promote six different disciplines all at once!

CB: Yes, indeed. To conclude, I would like to stress once more this aspect: taking a fresh look at the Venice Biennale's history – through the ASAC – is fundamental because it helps *re-present* the history of art and art exhibitions. The gesture of restoring visibility to something no longer present and reactivating it in the present is a political act of restitution and historical recontextualization, which keeps shedding light on our understanding of the past, as much as of our contemporaneity.¹⁰

CA: I agree. As this conference wants to point out, reenactment is not a synonym for *déjà vu* as something that already happened, and even less for a copy of something that was already done in the past. Reenactment is a synonym for renewal.

What was exciting to me is that an exhibition like *The Disquieted Muses* could be done so many other times with a completely different entry point and length. We decided to adopt the lens of the crisis because we wanted to respond to what was happening right now. However, you can do so many exhibitions that, in a way, follow the history of the archive and the Venice Biennale within another framework. I look forward to seeing many more archival exhibitions with materials from the ASAC made by other curators, and I expect there will be many more to come. I would like to make a final comment about the importance of archives and what we leave behind. Another reason why *The Disquieted Muses* display ends in 1999 and does not extend to the present times is that archives take a completely different shape and form with the advent of the digital world. It is striking to think how one could do an exhibition on the last twenty years of the Venice Biennale history, when basically there are not many archival materials left – no telegrams or

aA

123

10. See Cristina Baldacci, "Re-Presenting Art History: An Unfinished Process", in *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022): 173-182; https://press.ici-berlin.org/doi/10.37050/ci-21/baldacci_re-presenting-art-history.html [accessed 07 January 2022].

letters, only emails and phone calls. One can see a complete change happening in the archive itself. But, anyway, this is an interesting challenge that could be the subject of the next exhibition.