

PAVILION REVEALS "CIVIL FUTURE" AT VENICE ART BIENNALE 2015

TUESDAY, MAY 12, 2015 - 4 MONTHS AGO NO COMMENTS 12,828 VIEWS



Visitors are seen in front of James Beckett's "Negative Space: A Scenario Generator for Clandestine Building in Africa" at the Belgian Pavilion of the Art Biennial in Venice, Italy

China's pavilion was unveiled in Venice on Saturday, bringing the innovative ideas of Chinese artists into the Italian "water city", where artists from all over the world are showing their works at the 56th International Art Exhibition, or Venice Art Biennale 2015, between May 9 and Nov. 22.

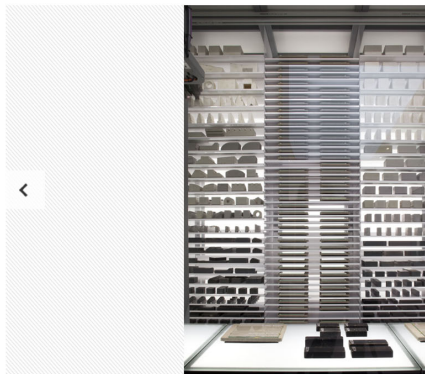
The Chinese pavilion at the biennale this year is themed "Civil Future". It means "everything is among the people and points to the future," Li Ruiyu, Chinese Ambassador to Italy, said at the opening ceremony.

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ART / 14 MAY 2015 / BY OSSIAN WARD



'Personne et les Autres' by Vincent Meessen & Guests, Belgium: Over a century ago, Belgium was the first nation to open its own dedicated Venice Biennale exhibition space in the Giardini, an event that is also marked (or perhaps marred) by the centenary of the Belgian annexation of the Congo, a bloody and brutal rule that lasted until 1960. In response, the invited artist from Belgium, Vincent Meessen, decided to throw the pavilion doors open to a number of other international artists - from Zimbabwe, Guyana, Italy, Brazil and the Democratic Republic of Congo - whose meditations on colonialism and exploitation makes for an eye-wateringly powerful presentation, the highlights of which are Sammi Baloji's photographs of the 500-metre no-man's zone between segregated neighbourhoods, representing the maximum flight range of malarial mosquitoes; the black, white and 'grey' chess pieces by Patrick Bernier and Olive Martin; as well as James Beckett's robot arm that shifts wooden blocks around to reconfigure existing Modernist buildings across Africa (pictured).

Giardini della Biennale, Sestiere Castello, 30122 Venezia

Photography: Alessandra Bello, Courtesy of the artist, Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam and T293, Rome and Naples

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Art news



The Belgian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale presents the work of Belgian artist Vincent Meessen together with international guest artists. Meessen's proposal "Personne et les autres" breaks with the tradition of Belgium's representation in Venice to date, which has mostly featured solo or duo exhibitions of Belgian artists. It challenges the notion of national representation by moving away from the traditional format of a solo show and opening up to include multiple positions and viewpoints. Working in close collaboration, Meessen and Brussels-based curator Katerina Gregos have developed an international, thematic and contemplative group exhibition, which is grounded in research-based practices. The exhibition welcomes ten other artists from four continents and—for the first time in the Pavilion—artists from Africa, all of whose work has explored the question of colonial modernity, and most of whom are producing new work for the exhibition.

The title of the exhibition, "Personne et les autres", is borrowed from a lost play by André Frankin, a Belgian art critic affiliated with the Lettrist and Situationist Internationals. The exhibition takes the history of the Pavilion and the international context of the Biennale as its point of departure; the Belgian Pavilion itself was the first foreign Pavilion to be built in the Giardini in Venice. This was during the reign of King Leopold II, a year before Congo Free State (Leopold II's private property, claimed during the imperial powers' 'Scramble for Africa' in the late nineteenth century) was handed over to the Belgian State.

The exhibition explores the consequences of political, historical, cultural and artistic interactions between Europe and Africa during the time of colonial modernity, and in its aftermath. It probes unknown or overlooked micro-histories, brings into view alternative versions of modernity that emerged as a result of colonial encounters, and recounts stories that unfolded outside of and in reaction to accepted colonial hierarchies. The project aims to provide insight into the diverse forms—whether artistic, cultural, or intellectual—that were produced during this time. It questions the Eurocentric idea of modernity by examining a shared avant-garde heritage, marked by artistic and intellectual cross-pollination between Europe and Africa, which generated pluralist so-called "counter-modernities".

Personne et les autres traces, through the work of the artists, a timeline of references that connect the critique of colonial modernity with Dada, CoBrA and the Situationist International (1957-1972)—the last of the international avant-garde revolutionary movements whose final conference took place in Venice in 1969, and the emancipation of black people, Pan-Africanism, African independence movements, and 'Global 68' (the lesser known off-shoot of May 1968 in the Global South).

Central to the exhibition concept is a new audio-visual work by Vincent Meessen, which revisits the role of the largely unknown Congolese intellectuals within the Situationist International. The artist unexpectedly discovered an unpublished document: the lyrics of a protest song, signed by a former Situationist, Joseph M'Belolo Ya M'Piku. Written in Kinshasa in May 1968, the document revealed a completely unknown episode in the history of the Situationist Internationals. Meessen worked with the author of this song to re-interpret the text in the form of a musical work: a rumba, recorded in Kinshasa in the nightclub Un Deux Trois that was established in 1974 by the legendary Congolese musician and bandleader Franco Luambo (1938-1989), bandleader of the famous orchestra TP OK Jazz.

It is important however to highlight that Personne et les autres does not focus only on the colonial history of Congo and Belgium, but on a broader critique and analysis of colonial modernity, challenging its official histories, addressing its blind spots, and re-inscribing what has been absent, erased or marginalised in the present. By exploring both adverse and positive cultural outcomes of colonial history, the exhibition reveals the fruitful, polyphonic and heterogeneous artistic and intellectual dialogues under colonisation during liberation struggles, most prominently in the aftermath of independence. At the same time, it reflects on the meaning of groundbreaking, emancipatory and oppositional practices (cultural or otherwise) related to that epoch, in light of the present global situation of unrest and crisis, with a view to alluding to potentialities for the future.

Vincent Meessen will be exhibiting alongside: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc (1977, French Guiana; lives and works in Metz); Sammy Baloji (1978, Democratic Republic of Congo; lives and works in Lubumbashi and Brussels); James Beckett (1977, Zimbabwe; lives and works in Amsterdam); Elisabetta Bernasconi (1966, Italy; lives and works in Rome); Patrick Bernier & Olive Martin (1971, France; 1972, Belgium; live and work in Nantes); Tamar Guimarães & Kasper Akhøj (1967, Brazil; 1976, Denmark; live and work in Copenhagen); Maryam Jafri (1972, Pakistan; lives and works in Copenhagen and New York) and Adam Pendleton (1984, USA; lives and works in New York).

at Belgian Pavilion, Venice Biennale

until 22 November 2015

"Personne et les autres" installation views at the Belgian Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2015

Courtesy: © Photo: Alessandra Bello.

'Personne et les Autres' is a generous idea stemming from the close collaboration of Belgian artist Vincent Meessen and curator Katerina Gregos. They invited ten other artists to share the pavilion in an attempt to investigate Belgium's colonialist era, and to explore the layers of colonial legacies found in Africa today. Sammy Baloji (Congo) sheds light on the colonial practice of segregating black from white neighbourhoods with 500 meters long sections of no man's land (the distance that equates the "maximum flight range of malarial mosquitoes"). 'Essay on Urban Planning' features six aerial views of those "no-contact" zones paired with six images of mosquitoes and flies. James Beckett (Zimbabwe) presents an automated storage machine relentlessly ordering African Modernist buildings.



© James Beckett, Negative Space: A Scenario Generator for Clandestine Building in Africa, 2012 (detail view)

What appears as an interesting statement has created great discomfort amongst certain viewers that felt this proposal was another neo-colonialist assumption. While malaise could be inevitable, the artworks gathered however still provide an interesting ground for discussion in the context of unveiling counter narratives.