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# The Venice Biennale as a system of (inter)national (re)presentation. The Polish Pavilion.

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**Abstract:** The Venice Biennale was founded in the nineteenth century as a reflection of a new European order: nations were asked to show their own art. National pavilions were gradually set up and indirectly took over the function of embassies. The art presented there became representative of a nation.

Also the Polish nation, which wasn't a political state at that time, had the chance to present its art there. With the installation of the Polish Pavilion (inaugurated in 1930), certain procedures of organization and control of exhibiting art were developed. On the one hand, this exhibition became a national tradition in Poland, on the other hand, it served as a tool of propaganda, in a positive and negative way. What is internationally presented as Polish in the Polish Pavilion or what represents the Polish nation there, depends on the respective politics of the Polish state. Three political contexts, the nationalist period, the communist period and the time after 1989, provide a framework to analyze this topic.

The structure of national exhibitions of the Venice Biennale was and still is criticized as obsolete and the "death" of the Biennale has often been predicted. However, this over a hundred year old exhibition seems to survive. The supranational organization of the European Union gives an opportunity for culture exchange. Furthermore, the new European identity has become technically possible. On the other hand, the fear of losing one's national identity has started to activate conservative movements. Which position take artists and how does the public opinion react to their art? Which values does the Polish state support today with their cultural policy? For the 54<sup>th</sup> Biennale, the organizers of the Polish state chose an Israeli artist, Yael Bartana, as their "national" representative. Her work, a video trilogy, examines the separation of we-they, native-stranger: three million Jews should come back home, to Poland...

**Key words:** identity, internationalism, national art, the Venice Biennale, Poland

## Europe of nations and the national language of the Venice Biennale

With more than 100 years of history, the Venice Biennale is the oldest still existing international art exhibition<sup>i</sup>. The structure of this exhibition is based on the national principle. The exhibition area is divided into national areas, into national pavilions and every two years nations are invited by the official diplomatic channels to show their art. The Venice Biennale reflects the national idea, which divided and organized the world of the 19th and 20th century into nations and the world of art into nationalities.

In the face of nationalization, new territorial and new mental borders became imperative. Political and social separation and centralization were required around the new political object, the nation. The geopolitics of the Venice Biennale's world are clearly marked by inscriptions on pavilion buildings, ITALIA, GERMANIA, POLONIA, with each Pavilion also possessing a flag pole. In clearly defined national territory, nations distinguish themselves from others through their own art.

According to the national idea, each nation possesses a separate culture, the national culture, a special symbolic system, which makes the group feel as one (nation) representing it<sup>ii</sup>. Depending on the national self-definition, some selected values and norms pretend to contribute to the national consciousness. A common culture has an inclusive, cohesive function, which allows the identification with the group and the exclusion of strangers. For this reason the national culture became an object of politics and works of art, functional for the national idea and therefore introduced into the system of the national art.

Art with its political potential is able to spread the political idea of the nation, to educate, to create and preserve an identity and a collective memory, to awake a feeling of solidarity. Through the symbolism, covered and uncovered messages, the national art internally (inside the nation) functions as a feedback. The self-perception as a nation is maintained and stabilized. Externally (international), the national art re-presents values, which are considered to be national by the nation itself.

The national idea, first spread by the national movement, is transported and preserved by national institutions. In the process of acculturation, citizens are trained to identify with the nation. Educational institutions provide the canon, which classifies works of art. Exclusion (like censorship) and inclusion (like promoting) regulate the system of the national culture. The national state, an entity of highly complex national institutions, represents and defends the nation

on a national and international level. Moreover, the state has the ability to control, manipulate or form the national idea. The Venice Biennale is a location where the connection nation-state-nation can be examined. Unique in the Venice Biennale is the fact that the organizers have nations arrange the exhibition independently<sup>iii</sup>. The presented art has obtained a representative quality and with almost all participations became an object of the state affair. Every state has an official cultural policy and one part of it is the international exhibiting. Pavilions are like embassies, where the national externalizes internationally.

The formation of national states hasn't isolated them politically. On the contrary, a network of international relations has been created. Nationalism has a universal claim, in its opinion the world consists of nations. Therefore, the national ideology determinates an international one.

A communication and cooperation network has been developed, which works internally, between nations. In this way the idea of the world divided into nations has been stabilized, unity in diversity. Until today the global political order consists of sovereign national states, which acknowledge each other and guard national conventions. For example each nation must "identify" itself with a national flag and a national anthem. This structure corresponds with the system of the Venice Biennale. The exhibition is an international stage for national affairs, a place to display national individuals through the individual art.

On the other hand, with the globalization process differences disperse between nations and the imagined national unity has been fragmented. The constructed national identity has been weakened by different "lifestyles" and the state is no longer able to provide a homogenous identity. With decentralization, local, regional and sub-cultural identities are revealed and become a subject on the political stage. Borders open every time more and decentralize the source of the social identity. The idea of a clear succession of addressee – message – receiver, as nation - national culture - nation cannot be maintained any longer. In Berlin or Prague you can eat Italian, Chinese or Greek food; in seconds we "appear" elsewhere on the planet via internet.

Due to these tendencies, several national pavilions have recently opened their doors to "foreign influences". For instance some national organizations let foreign curators make an exhibition, like in the Austrian Pavilion in 2003 or in the Greek Pavilion in 2009, or let foreign artists exhibit, like in the Polish Pavilion in 2011. However, this hasn't broken with the national principle of the Biennale. Artists are still chosen according to the nationality or the exhibition embraces a national topic. Only the perspective has been changed. The nation as an issue persists. In the face of the fix idea of the own national identity, the point of reference has only been relocated. Although the nation could be explored from the outsider's position, rooted in the own national context, with the usual perception, there is only the imagination of the Italian or Chinese culture to be consumed.

Secondly, the impact of globalization, the tendency to unify the cultures worldwide, is hindered by a counter process of regression<sup>iv</sup>. The obliteration of borders causes a feeling of being "homeless" and being unsafe. The "ontological uncertainty of the present day" (Michael Billig) creates the need for a stable identity and makes regressive reactions appear. National, ethnic or religious myths promise the psychological safety, a sense of order. "They say globalization causes nationalist reactions."<sup>v</sup>

The Venice Biennale constantly operates with the national language. Participants are called nations, exhibition buildings - national pavilions, exhibited works - national contributions; the Golden Lion is an award for the best national participation. That's what shapes the character of the Biennale. Europe of nations is a guiding idea of the European Union and the biennale of nations has a place in Venice.

## The Polish Pavilion and the Polish art

Already in 1887 Polish artists were present at the Biennale and in 1910 they were given a Polish hall in the main pavilion<sup>vi</sup>. With the possession of the Polish Pavilion (inaugurated in 1930), certain procedures of organization and control of exhibiting art were developed<sup>vii</sup>. The idea of showing Polish art was institutionalized. The Polish Pavilion is a state and a national institution. It is organized by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and, according to the name, the Polish Pavilion aims to represent the Polish nation through art. The Polish state is a national state for about one hundred years now<sup>viii</sup>. But the relationship between the Polish national idea and the Polish state has been subject of change. The exhibition policy in the Polish Pavilion shows how states can influence the image of the nation, externally und internally, through promoting and, if necessary, through censorship. We can speak about three periods of the representation in the Polish Pavilion in three political contexts: the nationalist period, the communist period and the time after 1989.

At the time of the Polish national movement, a political role was given to Polish artists<sup>ix</sup>. A national art should prove a national existence on the international scene (and a national existence should manifest a right to have their own state), so their art should be Polish. This was the atmosphere in which the Polish participation in the Venice Biennale began. Art from two artistic groups, the Art and the Rhythm, had dominated the Polish exhibition at the Biennale until World War II started. They were involved in creating the "Polish national style", which should integrate a Polish nation in a partitioned Poland as well as in a united Poland. Artistic themes were inspired by the folk's culture; on a formal level the Polish style was inspired by the folk art, by their rhythmic and decorative quality.

The opportunity to present an independent Poland internationally was of political importance. A manifestation of national art should serve to stabilize a status of the independent national state. In the nationalist period art was political.

In Communist Poland, after the breakdown of the Socialist Realism in art, the socialist ideology was expanded to other kinds of art<sup>x</sup>. State jobs and state awards made artists work in the service of the socialism. In this way, the *colourism* and abstraction, not ideological in itself, was turned into an official state art. This art should be involved in building the communist system. This art was politicized.

The participation in the Polish Pavilion was controlled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Art and also by the Communist Party. It was often used as an award for politically correct artists<sup>xi</sup>. Uncomfortable works and artists were censored and even the participation itself was cancelled twice. At international presentations of art exhibitions, it was important for the Polish government to manifest an ideological separation from the West. By means of Communist propaganda, the West was called a world of consumption and degeneration and Western art was devalued as a sign of that. The separation on the artistic level should demonstrate "communist art" and the ideological superiority.

The time after 1989 in Poland is marked by political transformations: the collapse of Communism, in which Poland became a post-communist country and its accession into the EU, through which Poland became a part of political Europe. As a consequence, the situation in the Polish art world has changed: a free art market inside the country and outside, in Europe and worldwide came into being. Artists have started to analyze the new social context of privatization, capitalism and consumption<sup>xii</sup>. Their art has received the name "the critical art". However, this has clashed with the expectations of the Polish society. Works of art were censored and destroyed, artists harassed and brought to trial<sup>xiii</sup>. The public opinion reproaches artists for their rejection of the national tradition and culture and for the attraction of international attention through scandals.

Art, which has been presented in the Polish Pavilion after 1989, doesn't have any national characteristics, like style or content, as it was before World War II. This art is not presented as an official Polish art, like in the communist period. The procedure of choosing artists for the exhibition has become democratic (there is free competition, open for every curator with his proposal)<sup>xiv</sup>. Though, the state decides about the Polish re-presentation. The competition is controlled by the state's institutions and the result needs to be accepted by the Minister of Culture and the National Heritage. But there are new tendencies to observe, which indicate the new national representation. At all times exhibitions were compatible with the main topic of the Biennale. For example "Guests" by Krzysztof Wodiczko, the world of emigrants, was presented during the Biennale in 2009, the topic of which was "Making Worlds"<sup>xv</sup>. Secondly, artists exhibited who were declared dissident artists in communist Poland, like Roman Opalka (French passport) and Krzysztof Wodiczko (Canadian passport). What was also different from before was that young unknown artists were chosen as well as controversial ones like Katarzyna Kozyra or Artur Zmijewski. The exhibited artworks touched global topics, like human existence, body reference, gender, or emigration. The transported messages were not in line with the Polish traditional national idea. The traditional Polish national art has constructed the image of the Polish as being patriotic, brave and Catholic<sup>xvi</sup>. Poland was stylized as a hero, a victim and a martyr. But this art was also critical. Weaknesses, such as conformism, or near-sightedness, which led to national enslavement, were targeted. The Polish contemporary art actually reflects, in my opinion, a realistic condition of the Polish nation of today.

This contemporary Polish nation is split between traditional and progressive tendencies. The entry of Poland into the European Union (2004) moved the national issue, the question of the national identity, again into the spotlight. The EU has been marked by politically conservative national groups as a danger to the national existence. Other identities, like a European, a Jewish or a homosexual one, are considered by the conservatives to be incompatible with the Polish national identity, because they don't correspond with nationally acknowledged values (Catholicism, love for the home country and family). Polarities also concern the overcoming of the history, which is visible in the problem of the anti-Semitism. According to a study from 2011 carried out by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation concerning intolerance and discrimination, 49.9% of the Poles think that Jews have too much influence<sup>xvii</sup>. On the contrary, 51.2% of the respondents think "Jews enrich our culture".

At present, the state's identity policy attempts to include "others" as part of the nation as well as to support other identities like a European one. The difficulty is that those, who don't fit into a traditional view, are not accepted by traditionalists as "real Poles". Maybe this is the reason why current national issues are presented on the international level in the Polish Pavilion by non-Polish artist.

National identity, affiliation, as well as intolerance were topics of the exhibition in the Polish Pavilion in 2011. An Israeli artist spoke for the Polish nation there. On the last Venice Biennale, entitled with "ILLUMInations", Poland was represented through a video trilogy "... and the Europe will be stunned" by Yael Bartana.

**"... and the Europe will be stunned"**

Before the Second World War, 3 million Jews lived in Poland. They were a part of the Polish culture. About 28 thousand survived the War; 20 thousand were forced to emigrate from communist Poland in the 1960s.

Those 3 million Jews are called by the leader of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP is an artistic political party initiated by Yael Bartana) in the video “Nightmares”, the first video of the trilogy<sup>xviii</sup>. They should go back to Poland. In the second video “Wall and Tower” a Jewish settlement, a kibbutz, is built in the place where the former Warsaw ghetto was located. In the last video “Assassination” the viewer takes part in a funeral, the leader of the JRMiP has been murdered.

This work of art operates with Polish and Israeli national symbols: red and white colors, the white eagle and the Polish national flag in connection with the Star of David. Poland is presented as a homeland of many nationalities, there is a wish of tolerance and brotherhood expressed. On the other hand, the work exposes the dark side of nationalism. The Polish conservative press reacted with the words: anti-Polish art<sup>xix</sup>.

## ILLUMInations

Nationalism tells "us" who "we" are and at the same time who “we” are not - there is no "us" without "they". This separation is threatened with stereotypes, fixation on the one and only identity and rejection of the "stranger". However, the acceptance of “others” is not against the nationalist idea. "Others" could be included politically into "we" without losing the originality on both sides. In this way also the EU is promoted: Europe is home to different nations and the European Union makes the unity in diversity happen.

New political agents such as the Liberals create public controversies and disputes. But even anti-conservative movements are in the national framework. They don't fight against the national idea, but about the "nature of the nation."<sup>xx</sup> They claim to be a part of the representation. To re-present means to present again and the act of re-presenting is a part of re-building the nation. The creation of a nation, according to Michael Billig, is a permanent activity. A nation must be reproduced, reconstructed and reinterpreted. At this point is, in my opinion, the Polish nation of today.

The interest of Polish artists on the national theme developed from spreading and defending national values to critically examining them<sup>xxi</sup>. Although the potential of identification is lost, I would describe this art as a "truly" national, in the patriotic sense. The political potential of art could be used again to spread a political idea, to build a new identity and a new collective memory, to awake solidarity, to reform the understanding of the nation from the ethnic definition into the idea of citizenship. The current Polish participation on the Venice Biennale could indicate a promotion for a new understanding of the idea of the nation through a symbolic system of art.

The presentation of art as a national product seems to be archaic. But the national structure of the Venice Biennale seems to stay. Nationality of art has remained as a frame for the presentation, even the national representation in the new political global context has been changed. The national idea of the 19th century made the Venice Biennale happen in the first place and after one hundred years art is presented in this same context – nations represent themselves through art. The case of the Polish Pavilion is an example that the principle of national representation continues.

ILLUMInations was the title of the 54th Biennale in Venice “(...) we seek the ways of the dialogue between the artist's work and our vision and our spirit (...) we wish “illumination“ (...) as members of the human community“, said the president of the Biennale Paolo Baratta<sup>xxii</sup>. The international world presents the human community as a national one. International politics is a form of identity politics. "In the rhetoric of the new world order is the rhetorical national consciousness reproduced in banal clichés (...) how the nation should behave and how “we ” and the world, the entire "international community" have to behave."<sup>xxiii</sup> Nations between nations - the international political constellation is limited to the national context. As well as the Venice Biennale.

**Bio-note:** Margareta Scherf finished the studies in Fine Arts and Art Education with Master of Arts graduation at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland in 2005. 2006-2008 she studied Art History and Media Studies at the Braunschweig University of Art (HBK), Germany. Since 2008 she has a teaching assignment at the HBK and at present is doing a PhD at the same university. Her main interest is contemporary art, focused on Polish art on the international scene. In particular, she researches on connections between politics and art.

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<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.labiennale.org>

<sup>iv</sup> Markus Schroer, *Räume, Orte, Grenzen: Auf dem Weg zu einer Soziologie des Raums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006).

<sup>v</sup> Michael Billig, *Banalny nacjonalizm* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2008), 244.

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