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Foundations set the pace in Venice

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A recent feature on the Venice Biennale landscape is a plethora of “foundations”. These non-profit organisations, bearing the name of whoever supplied their hefty endowments, shore up national pavilions and “collateral events” as well as mounting independent displays. As public funds increasingly contract, foundations are stepping into the breach to subsidise key projects (and the biennale itself) and to showcase important, lesser-known artists.

The Dhaka-based Samdani Art Foundation, for instance, is sponsoring the Bangladeshi artist Naeem Mohaiemen and Raqs Media Collective in the main biennale exhibition (*All the World's Futures*), while the Abu Dhabi-based Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation is commissioner and backer of the United Arab Emirates pavilion.

But the question of who is profiting the most — the biennale, the artists, or the foundations themselves — remains a subject of debate. One curator explains that “the biennale is subsidised by these collateral events . . . the hire fees keep these palaces ticking over”. Collateral events are approved by the curator of the International Art Exhibition (this year, Okwui Enwezor). The various institutions and foundations pay €20,000 to be mentioned in the biennale’s official literature, and to use the official events logo.

Such exposure is the goal for everyone. Tagore Foundation International, set up by the New York and Hong Kong-based dealer Sundaram Tagore, is behind *Frontiers Reimagined*, a major show featuring 44 artists from 25 countries at the Museo di Palazzo Grimani. Focusing on “intercultural dialogue”, it includes works by Kim Joon of Korea and the Italian Vittorio Matino. Tagore says that the cost of mounting the show is “north of \$1m”.

“Transportation of works and insurance, for example, is just one of the areas to consider. However, the reward is in the wide exposure.”



'Subiteur' (1991) by Roberto Matta

Tagore gives insights into the red tape applicants need to negotiate to mount a collateral event. "We had to submit an 80-page dossier. We needed clearance on three levels: from the biennale committee, from the Venetian museum authority and from the Italian culture ministry."

Connections also count in Venice. Another key collateral event is driven by a Rome-based body, the Echaurren-Salaris Foundation, which will present an exhibition of 30 works by the late Chilean artist Roberto Sebastián Matta at the Palazzo Soranzo Cappello. "Finding a venue wasn't that difficult. The exhibition [commissioner] Franco Calarota, the chairman of the [private] Galleria d'Arte Maggiore GAM in Bologna, together with [foundation representatives] Claudia Salaris and Pablo Echaurren, are esteemed in the art world," says a spokeswoman for the foundation.

Some exhibition organisers, including national pavilions, are taking a different route. Through his foundation, the Ukrainian billionaire Victor Pinchuk has supported the Ukrainian pavilion in 2007, 2009 and now in 2015. Ukraine will present a group exhibition this year featuring emerging artists including Yevgenia Belorusetz and Nikita Kadan, and Pinchuk is building his own temporary glass pavilion on the Riva dei Sette Martiri near the Giardini.

In this instance, the foundation is acting because of a lack of government funding: Pinchuk is bankrolling the entire initiative. "This is part of a long-term strategy to develop Ukrainian art. It only recoups production costs if works are sold within a certain time," says a foundation spokesman. "Ukraine is under external attack, militarily, economically and also in terms of communication. Venice is a unique opportunity to show a new, open, democratic and self-critical Ukraine to the world."

Visibility is key for everyone at the biennale. Reem Shather-Kubba is a co-founder of the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq, a non-governmental body responsible for the Iraqi pavilion housed at the Ca' Dandolo.

“Exhibitions such as Venice are hugely important due to the visibility they afford both the participating artists and the organisations that put together the pavilions,” she says. Five artists based in Iraq and the diaspora will feature, including Cardiff-based Rabab Ghazoul. The event, and others like it, reflects Venice’s role as a platform for both culture and cultural diplomacy.

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