

When Africa came to the Arsenale, and the Irish Biennale adventure



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International art fairs are like art supermarkets for the wealthy, and they have come to dominate the contemporary-art market. Art biennials, on the other hand, are supposedly above mere commerce, but in reality they have been increasingly infiltrated by the workings of the market, with, for example, commercial galleries playing a significant role in national representation. That applies even to the celebrated Venice Biennale Arte, as the gigantic yachts of the super-rich moored close to the main venue, the Giardini, attest.

Against this background of encroaching money the 56th Biennale has a new sheriff in town: the exhibition's first African-born curator, Okwui Enwezor, on a mission to clean up the art world's spiritual home and remind us of its social and political responsibilities.

The Biennale Arte is vast beyond belief, and it grows with every instalment. The Giardini are now like a prelude to the main act of the monumental Arsenale, more of which is restored and occupied every time.

If the name suggests that it is the city's arsenal, that doesn't really prepare you for the scale of the vast complex of buildings and docks you encounter. Far more than merely an arsenal, they once housed the Venetian republic's unrivalled shipyards and armouries, and they ensured its naval and economic dominance of the Mediterranean for centuries.

It is an early example of globalisation and a reminder that there is nothing new about something much maligned as a recent, dastardly phenomenon by many of the artists in the current biennale.

Beyond the Arsenale the national pavilions and the so-called collateral events have spread steadily through the city and the nearby islands. You could probably stay for the art biennale's entire run, which is well into November, if you conscientiously and calmly set out to see everything in the exhibition – chiefly because of the plethora of screen-based works, including, for example, a full retrospective of the 87 films by the German director [Harun Farocki](#), who died suddenly last year.

Blue chip curator

Enwezor, whose curatorial CV is impeccably blue chip, is director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich and has notched up a string of international exhibitions, including probably the biggest of them all, *Documenta 11*. Born in [Nigeria](#), he went to New York to study political science when he was 18 and was drawn into the city's vibrant cultural scene. He set about making a space in the landscape for contemporary African art.

In a 2009 interview with [Tom Greenwood](#) he sketched out his idea of the curator as an advocate for art outside the mainstream, someone whose exhibitions should embody a particular, well-argued view on the nature of art, and open up a transnational artists' space. What a curator is not, for him, is an arbiter of taste.

Venice he sees as another and, he suggests, final stage in his project of bringing worlds together, with an unerring focus on the wider world in turmoil. He looked, he says, to the displaced and dispossessed, “immigrants, refugees and desperate people”, calling his exhibition *All the World's Futures. The World's Uneasy Present* might have been closer to the mark, but Enwezor's proposition and aspiration are that a more promising future will emerge from a meeting of minds.

Venture into the Arsenale and immediately, in one of its many cavernous, darkened spaces, Bruce Nauman's flashing neon slogans, packed with menace, anxiety and aggression, are artfully paired with the *Nymphs* – “water lilies” in the form of clusters of rusty, dangerous-looking machetes – of the Algerian-born French artist [Adel Abdessemed](#) to tremendous effect. If that standard was maintained the Biennale Arte would be amazing. It isn't, but there are still many surprises and discoveries. Enwezor has put together an invigorating mix of avant-garde veterans, midcareer stalwarts and artists on or beyond the fringes.

There's an emphasis on political and social engagement, and a substantial amount of institutional critique, but a lot more besides. Such are the Biennale's resources that whole, generous exhibitions are given over to Chris Ofili, [Georg Baselitz](#), [Ricardo Brey](#), [Marlene Dumas](#), [Andreas Gursky](#), Joachim Schönfeldt and Walker Evans's photographs of impoverished sharecropper families in the American South, originally published in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Film-makers, including Alexander Kluge, [Chris Marker](#) and Steve McQueen, are strongly represented.

You can negotiate the venues without feeling battered by theory, but there is an übertext at the heart of the show, with, day by day, actors reading the entirety of Karl Marx's three-volume *Das Kapital* in a designated arena, designed by the architect

David Adjaye and overseen by the artist Isaac Julien.

It's an extravagant gesture, but it does make Marx an abiding presence in an event concerned with a world in crisis, albeit without indicating whether he might be part of the problem or part of the solution. Perhaps he's more a neutral if benign deity in the context of exploited workers and glaring inequality. In all Enwezor has delivered a Biennale with an edge and a lot of substance.

There's a Marxist ring to the title of Ireland's entry, *Adventure: Capital*, a class act by Sean Lynch. After a succession of off-site venues Ireland has moved into a generous space in the Arsenale this year. It's an encouraging development, and the team – including Lynch, the Irish commissioner, Mike Fitzpatrick, and the Irish curator, Woodrow Kernohan, director of *EVA International*, the Irish biennale – make the most of it with a polished and approachable presentation.

Seanchai's tale

Lynch, who shows with the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery in Dublin, is known for his multifaceted multimedia projects, usually hingeing on research into arcane aspects of cultural history, from Joseph Beuys's tour of Ireland to the fate of the DeLorean factory fittings and prototypes.

For Venice he combines several strands of research in a picaresque video narrative (Gina Moxley and Carl Doran provide the voiceover) that traces an idiosyncratic path, linking the engraved head on old Irish banknotes, a proposed public sculpture for Belfast City Airport and a discarded public sculpture that once occupied a roundabout in Cork.

It is essentially a seanchai's tall tale. The abiding metaphor is one of flow: there's a version of an ancient bullaun, a hollow ground into a block of once molten granite

and invested with prophetic curse-or-cure powers. The head on the banknote is a Greek river god, engraved from a stone carving on Custom House on the River Liffey in Dublin.

The flow of raw materials, metal and stone, shape cities and empires and the art that embellishes them, and wealth flows from the periphery to the centre of empire.

People flow, too, to build those cities, and money flows with them. But the vagrant spirit that is present throughout is dissatisfied, unsure who is being served as the earth is looted of its resources.

The roundabout sculpture is by the Cork artist John Burke, a pioneering modernist who died in 2006. His abstract steel sculpture *Uniflow* was removed at the request of residents in 1988.

Lynch tracked it to the storage yard where it was ignominiously dumped and decaying. With computer animation he brings it back to life and sets it free. He imagines a similar sad fate for a proposed and rejected memorial to George Best at the airport named after him.

Next to the video an expansive table plinth is occupied by the main elements that feature in it. All are provisional and incomplete, works in progress: a bullaun, the partly constructed elements of a facsimile of Burke's sculpture, versions of the river god in clay, of George Best in stone, and more. We can piece together their role in the video.

Lynch's work is accessible, entertaining and thoughtful, throwing light into many dark historical corners and opening up areas for speculation. It was appropriate that the party to launch the Irish pavilion featured a performance by The Rubberbandits. Their mordantly satirical take on Irish mores seems thoroughly in keeping with his work.

Of the other 88 national pavilions, Fiona Hall for Australia, Herman de Vries of the Netherlands, Chiharu Shiota's dazzling installation for Japan, Simon Denny's post-Edward Snowden exploration of the workings of intelligence agencies for New Zealand, Poland's CT Jasper and Joanna Malinowska, and the US – with a new work by Joan Jonas, no less – all rate highly. For Britain, Sarah Lucas's school-of-Benny Hill sculptures polarised opinion.

Among the collateral events, Sean Scully's *Land Sea*, at Palazzo Faller, close to Accademia, and Ursula von Rydingsvard's cedar, bronze and resin sculptures, in a small park on the Grand Canal, are both outstanding. As so often in Venice, the settings are sublime.

All the World's Futures, the Venice Biennale Arte, is at the Giardini, the Arsenale and other venues until November 22nd; labiennale.org/en; irelandvenice.ie