

COMMENTARY

Do You Read Me? Text-Based Art at Venice 60th Art Biennale 2024

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A survey of text-based art in the 60th Venice Art Biennale 2024 in connection to politics and the Anthropocene.

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1.

The 60th Venice Art Biennale is all about text. Throughout the national and other participations, text has been used as word game, protest, critique, genealogy, law and museology. It reads as report, family tree, manifesto, opera, and of course concrete poetry. Text seems this year's preferred way to establish one's position in today's radically polarised and destabilised realities. More than other years, it seems that the artists this time really want to be understood.

Text has a long history as a medium of art. From Rene Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, to Ed Ruscha's superimposition of phrases on his landscapes, Jenny Holzer's neon runways with poetic slogans and truisms, or Barbara Kruger's bigger than life political messaging, whose artistic impact is concentrated on the typography and the setting-up of the text, text-based art is both well-established and varied. But this year there was something of a textual resurrection, with many national pavilions and collateral participations setting text centrally. Vociferous pronouncements (even when quietly delivered) made the whole biennale vibrate with slogans. One could feel everywhere the urge to insert text in the visual folds of as many artworks and installations as possible.

Text-based art is a broad church, from typography and advertising to non-linguistic text. Dadaism, pop art and conceptual art are just some of the art movements that consistently used text. There are different ways of incorporating text in art. The most obvious one is conceiving and presenting text as art, namely treating text as art both in meaning and form. In this manner, the text becomes visual and visual becomes typographic – what is often referred to as concrete poetry (e.g., Solt 1996). Another way has been to introduce text along with more visual/aural etc elements as a commentary that explains and assists by providing context. Or to do the above but by employing ambiguity and creating tension between textual and non-textual elements.

Whatever the way of introducing text in an artwork, the intention of text-based art is often to have a distinct material effect on reality. Text adds another discipline to the constellations of disciplines contemporary artists are expected to excel in. Writing, composing poetry, and using typography all contribute to the multidisciplinary and often academic inclination of many works. So using multiple disciplinary expressions ensures that reality is captured from many perspectives. In text-based art, artistic and linguistic ambiguity are often instrumentalised, contained and directed towards specific goals. Text-based art employs linguistic and aesthetic ambivalence in order to open up a space of deeper engagement with the audience. This is easier because the viewer is called to read and therefore have direct access to specific meaning. Reading is by definition aesthetically more determinable than looking, as Peter Osborne (2011: 27) writes: “reading” opposes itself to “looking,” as a different kind of visual attention, perceived to be closer to thinking and imagining than the supposedly purely perceptual discipline prized by modernist aestheticism as the distinctive value of art’.

One could even include in the definition the Lubang Jeriji Saléh cave art dating back to more than 40,000 years (Daley Wilson 2022). Despite the absence of text, there is compelling argumentation to consider it as one of the first specimens of text-based art: from the message communicated in it to the addressees and how they would understand it as potential hunting aid, including its visual artistic dimension, the bull depicted on the cave wall offers the surface of its body as a material text. In that sense, text-based art could indeed be everything that follows Roman Jakobson's scheme of a 'speech event' (1960: 353), as analysed in the context of text-based art by Kristen Kreider (2015).¹

Although in this article I will limit myself to more recognisable forms of text, there is something especially important in this expansive way of defining text-based art: it sets the scene for a materiality of language that moves beyond its format of expression. This means that every writing is a creation of a layer of meaning, even if it does

not refer to language. In a sense, Roland Barthes's famous expression 'a signifier without signified' has now become a signifier *as* signified. The text itself, the act of writing, the layers of movement embedded onto a surface, is the signified.

In that sense, in recent years, we have been alerted to a different use of text: stratigraphy, or the branch of geology that gave us the Anthropocene by studying the superposition of the geological strata (the signifier as signified). Stratigraphy comes from the Greek «γραφή» (-graphy), which means writing. The textuality of the term is not coincidental: humans both write the earth and read the layers of meaning deposited on it. But with the progressive deeper analysis of Anthropocene beyond the simple 'humans alter the surface of the earth', or even humans are responsible for this, we are beginning to understand how the earth is also writing itself, independently of us. In the Anthropocene, the addresser is the planet itself, slowly writing humans out of the communication process, leaving the addressee position vacant. The stratification of human structures as text has an aesthetic value that goes to the heart of human extinction. In that sense, the realisation of human ubiquity has awoken us to its deleterious effects, giving rise to a strand of urgent environmental thought that has deeply affected eco-art and other artistic expressions.

In what follows, I deal with a few exhibitions withing the Venice Biennale that employ text in this expansive, material and planetary way.

2.

Text-based art examples in this year's Venice Art Biennale are too many to mention meaningfully – if anything, it would be easier perhaps to list the art shows that did not, in some way or other, include text in the artwork. This might be less surprising considering this year's theme, *Foreigners Everywhere*. It is apparent that several notions pertaining to the foreign have been taken to heart by the participant artists: a strong, declaratory need for inclusion in view of global immigration issues; an urgent clarity of political positions in view of prevalent geopolitical conflicts; and a desire for communication across languages, embracing the foreigner in whatever language frame they appear.

Let me start with William Kentridge's *Self Portrait as a Coffee-Pot* at the Arsenale Institute for Politics of Representation, which is indeed a jewel of a show (**Figures 1–3**). In a small but perfectly laid-out space, two screens show nine half-hour films made by Kentridge. Screens and seating areas are surrounded by paper objects, posters, cutouts and other paraphernalia, all of which reminded one more of a research study space than a white cube gallery: a place to sit down and read. The films' themes vary and, in a typical Kentridge way, are strongly political, philosophically informed, situated in South Africa (where Kentridge is from) and invariably seriously funny. While indeed Kentridge's work is always textual in one way or another, the specific body of work *relies* on language as mis/communication avenue. The central conceit in many of the films is the doubling up of the artist in his studio, the two image versions sitting opposite each other

and exchanging soliloquies in a perfectly orchestrated dialogical format, paper cuts with words and sentences written on them, newspaper clippings, and other linguistic dispositifs.



Figure 1: William Kentridge, *Self Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*.

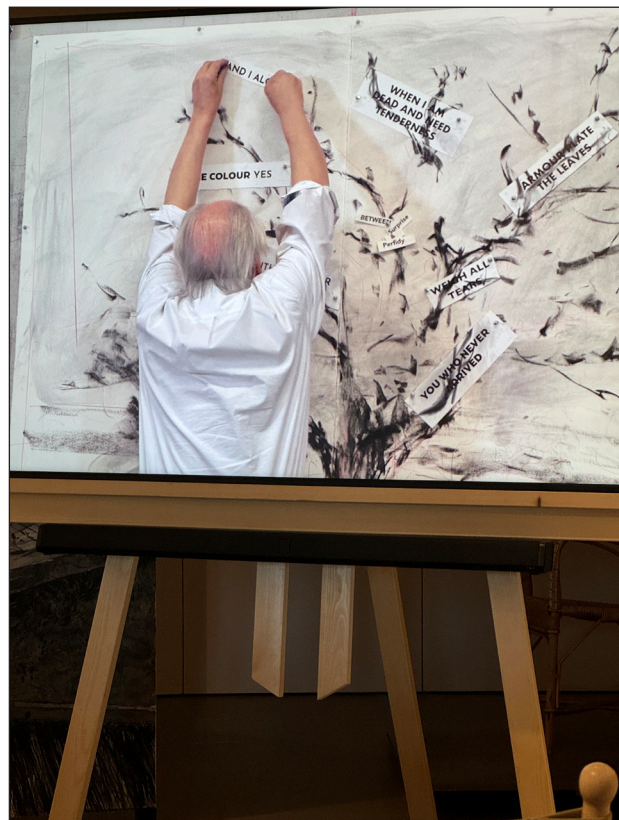


Figure 2: William Kentridge, *Self Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*.

Perhaps the most significant film for the present context is *Episode 6: Harvest of Devotion*, where Kentridge recreates parts of his performance *The Head & the Load* (2018) 'in which the collapse of language at a time in which the world seemed to have gone mad is foregrounded' (Christov-Bakargiev 2024: 12). In what appears to be a reading of languages beyond comprehension, two texts are being rehearsed: Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonata*, a sprawling phonetic poem from the early 20th century, expressing the breakdown of European rationality in the wake of totalitarianism; and John Chilembwe's 1915 letter

to the *Nyasaland Times* arguing for equal standing of all, here translated in the highly phonetic Xhosa language of South Africa. The historicopolitical background to this is the British opposition and suppression of Chilembwe's ideas of equality while imposing a colonial language of intense formalism 'as if injustice and lack of shame were embedded in it' (Christov-Bakargiev 2024: 12). Text here becomes the material: it yields power that affects material reality in an unmediated and direct way. Its pronouncement, even when unintelligible, carries the power of its history and the earth of its origin. The signified here is fully inscribed, indeed embodied, in the bodies of its utterance, indistinguishable, one would say, from the way these bodies move through empires and colonies.

In a similarly material textuality, one can meaningfully read Wael Shawky's *Drama 1882*, a fully staged opera, scored and directed by the artist, who with this almost hour-long film represents Egypt at this year's Biennale (Figure 4). This *Gesamtkunstwerk* deals with the British aggression in Egypt at the end of the 19th century. The opera is sung in Arabic (already a departure from the usual central European operatic libretti) and narrates a different, partly documented and partly fictional account of a fight between a Maltese and an Egyptian man in the then-exceptionally cosmopolitan city of Alexandria. The fight caused city-wide riots that affected all ethnicities, connected to a nationalist revolt by Urabi, the founder of the Egyptian Nationalist Party. This precipitated the bombing of Alexandria by the British in order to overthrow the nationalist regime that did not suit the empire's interests. What is remarkable is that the riots were largely linguistically ignited: a book by al-Marsafi, a university professor, had tried to capture the nationalist sentiment by focusing on eight words: nation, homeland, government, justice, oppression, politics, liberty and education (El Rashidi 2024: 14). Shawky takes these texts and fleshes out their aural and visual materiality, making them a purely atmospheric, all-enfolding text: floating pages that envelop the viewer/reader, surrounding them from all angles like an inescapable affect-producing machine,

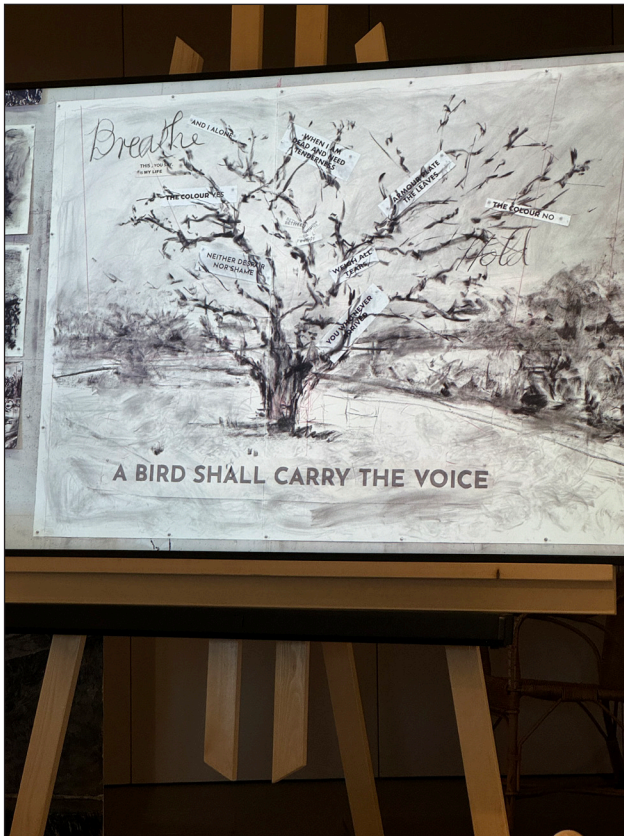


Figure 3: William Kentridge, *Self Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*.



Figure 4: Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*.

In both works, we see that colonisation and imperialism work through a linguistic aggression that overwhelms other languages, whether ethnic or cultural, and becomes fully embodied in the bodies of its speakers. We are shown the powerful connection between colonising language use and planetary destruction, the seeds of which have been planted early on in the history of empires but have been reaching their full blast from the 19th century onwards. We are reminded that Anthropocenic stratigraphy is a colonial enterprise that carries on parsing planetary injustice towards humans and other species. As Andrea Villani (2024: 11) writing about Shawky says, ‘can we ever be, or go back to being, or finally become, human beings who are fair towards each other and our fellow species?’ The text of the artworks aligns itself with the multiplicity of geological layers, showing the violence and attributing responsibility with a clarity that only manifesto-like texts can do.

3.

Text is layered on the earth like hands writing on a page. In UAE’s participation, Abdullah Al Saadi brings a stratigraphy of traces where language layers are superimposed and then codified in a multitude of new alphabets. In his show *Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*, Al Saadi creates ‘traces of being in the world, in the wilderness and in the present’ (El Fetouh & Salti 2024: 15). Building on the traditional Arab, pre-Islamic and Islamic art of writing as representation, the artist works with a tellurian divine emerging through his mapping of his wanderings, his sketches, and most importantly the rich tapestry of languages and grammars he invents: from the potato alphabet, to the duck walking in the desert alphabet, to the beads alphabet that reminds one of a colourful calculus (Figures 5–7).

The writing is poetic and immersive, and it looks into a time and space that ‘existed before us and will endure after us’ (Mashish 2004: 60). It is waiting for us to discover it, hidden in tin boxes, biscuit containers and large chests, all at our disposal, with the helpful and patient exhibition attendants rolling out all the scrolls and opening up all the tin boxes for us to muse on (Figure 8). In Al Saadi’s

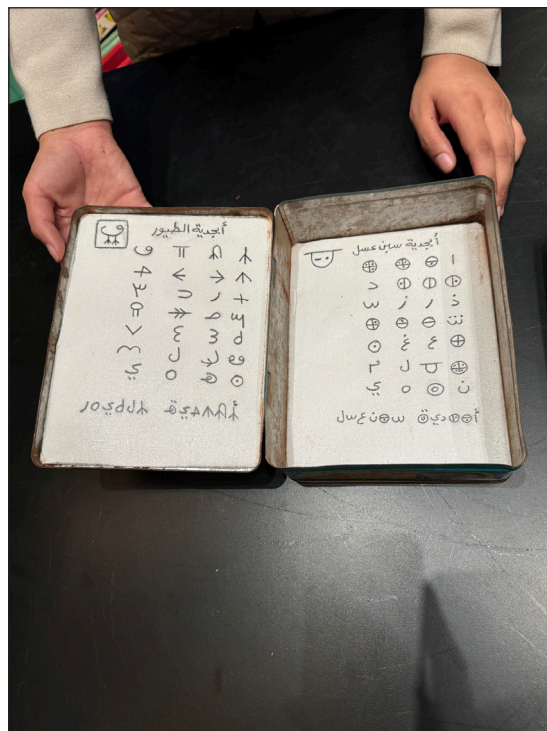


Figure 6: Abdullah Al Saadi, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*.



Figure 7: Abdullah Al Saadi, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*.



Figure 5: Abdullah Al Saadi, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*.

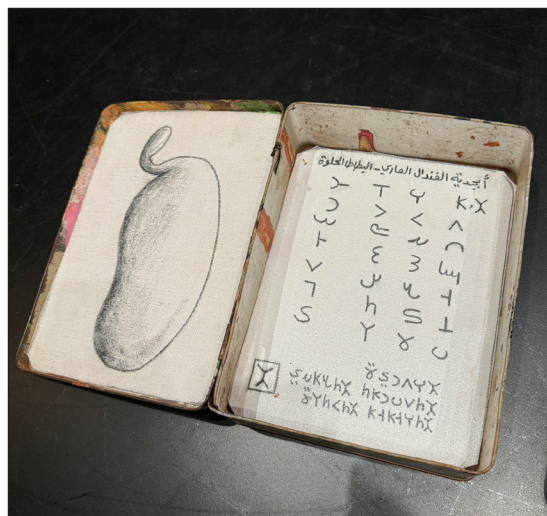


Figure 8: Abdullah Al Saadi, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*.

work, the text is both everywhere and disappearing. Even when displayed, it is rarely written in a legible format: the text is often coded, and while the alphabet keys are offered, the meaning remains inaccessible but to the most dedicated reader.

A similarly veiled textual approach emerges at the Australian Pavilion, the winner of this year's Golden Lion for the Best National Pavilion. Indigenous artist Archie Moore with his *Kith and Kin* has converted the building into a black cube where his genealogical tree takes over all four massive walls in white chalk. The ancestry mindmap goes back 65,000 years and covers more than 2,400 generations. In the words of the curator Ellie Buttrose (2024), 'the words that appear in this linguistic taxonomy are taken from archives, newspapers and government documents, and include names, racist slurs, and gamilaraay (the kamilaroi nation's language) and bigambul kinship terms...derogatory terms and diminutive names attest to how language has been used to classify and disempower first nations peoples. speculative names appear amongst the ancestors to redress omissions in the written records on oral indigenous cultures'. The lines extend like songs, exploring indigenous country and extending their reach to new ways of thinking of historical and geographical wanderings.

There are a few things worth noting about the pavilion: first, the large white table in the centre of the black cube pavilion, neatly piled with redacted archival records of colonial inquests into aboriginal deaths in custody. The table is surrounded by a water moat that reflects the closure of the text. And this is the second point: neither the documents nor the genealogical tree is really readable by the visitor. One just gets glimpses of words, an impression of formality, complexity and history, and an overwhelming sense of textuality that relentlessly rains upon the visitor. The water, a reference to Venice but also to Australia, adds to the unapproachability of the texts by creating a barrier that cannot be crossed. Finally, there are gaping holes in the genealogical tree, large as dark moons: 'these absences signal the severing of familial ties through colonial invasion, massacres, diseases, displacement and the deliberate destruction and suppression of archival records' (Buttrose 2024) (Figure 9).

Both these text-based art exhibitions work as invitations: we are bidden to go through the spaces in which Al Saadi wandered and the times in which Moore dived and come up with layers of writing, alternative ways of imagining these surfaces, different societies inhabiting different versions of the planet. They are exercises in both earth-rootedness and flying imagination. In both, we are given the illusion of full access: open any box at Al Saadi, or read any word at Moore. Yet this is not so. These are palimpsests of human and nonhuman that are destined to remain half-revealed and half-concealed. Invitations that lead to one layer. This is planetary writing at its best: the alphabets and the timeline takes on a substance unto themselves. Their materiality is directly inscribed on the earth – for in the Anthropocene, the human is rock, river and reed. This is the inversion of our era: no longer central, authors of

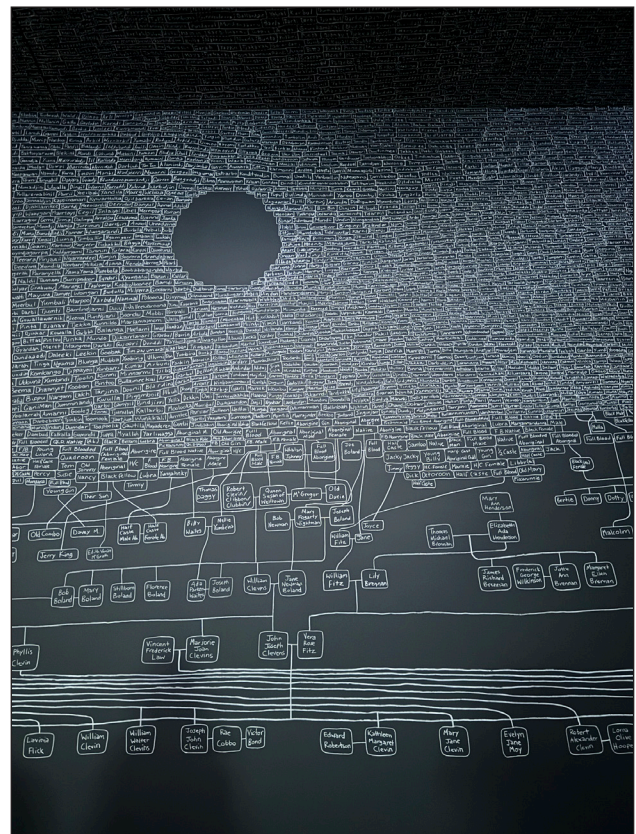


Figure 9: Archie Moore, *Kith and Kin*.

our history and future (if we ever were), humans are now written out by their very own languages. What survives is a layer.

4.

I would like to end with three important exhibitions for textual, political as well as artistic reasons.

The first one is the Polish Pavilion which was ceded to the Ukrainian artist collective Open Group for their work *Repeat After Me II*, a collection of filmed close-ups of Ukrainian war refugees reproducing, in their own voice, the sounds of weapons (sirens, rattling guns, explosions, etc). The audience is invited to repeat the sounds, following written cues reminiscent of karaoke. The effect is immediately gripping, with the text becoming a clear communication of horror, forcing the audience to take part in the responsibility of the violence. As a prelude to this, visitors are supplied with a leaflet that gives clear and practical instructions on how to act when under fire, and especially in cases of firearms and artillery shelling – all translated experts from the Ukrainian brochure released in February 2022 and presaging the Russian invasion (Figure 10).

The other two text-based instances are less of pavilions and more announcements which I choose here to read in a complementary way. The first is the printed Manifesto for a Palestinian Pavilion that was hosted in various pavilions and exhibitions around the city, often found next to the literature of the host show. Headed *What is the Future of Art? A Manifesto against the state of the world*, the text



Figure 10: Open Group, *Repeat After Me II*.

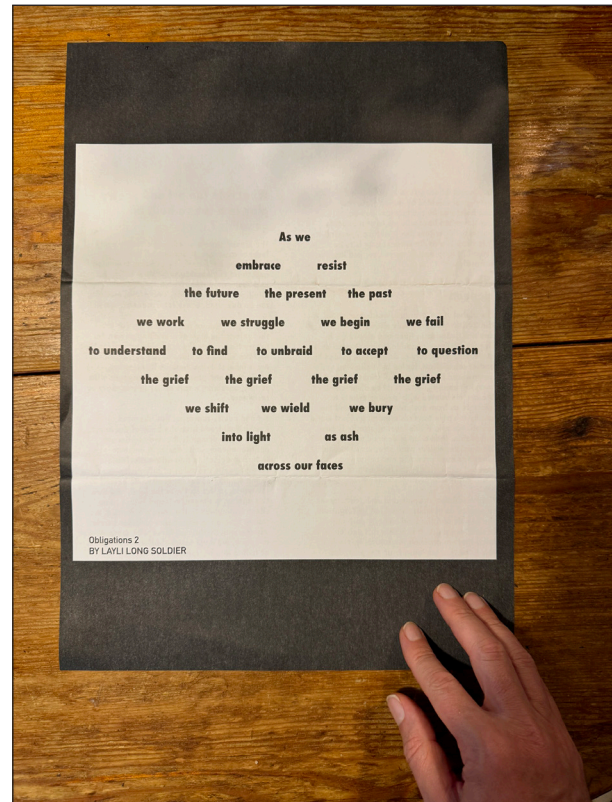


Figure 11: *Palestinian Pavilion: A Manifesto*.

urges the reader to see that ‘Now is the time for art and poetry. For art that rejects the logic of prevailing power. For poetry that resists the totalizing narratives that fuel the killing machines of the perpetrator. Art is inherently political- in its message, production, and presentation’ (Figure 11).

A mirroring text was to be found on the doors of the Israeli pavilion in the Giardini. Israeli artist Ruth Patir and her curators took the decision to keep the pavilion closed. A poster was put up on the building’s glass wall stating that the exhibition will open ‘when a ceasefire and hostage release agreement is reached’ (Figure 12). There has been a great deal of pressure on behalf of various organisation for Israel not to show. For the very first time in the Biennale gardens, a full-on protest was held, with the constantly growing pro-Palestinian crowd moving up the hill of the grand avenue (the only hill in Venice of course) that leads to the pavilions of the three European superpowers – Britain in the middle flanked by France and Germany – and then on to the heavily guarded Israeli pavilion, which, however, was shut throughout (Figure 13).

These two text-based art interventions, one closing off its own visibility, and the other opening and spreading its reach by nestling in various nooks and crannies in the city, echo across the city of Venice and the whole art world. Their effect on the material reality of current wars is minimal. But the intention is there to protect humanity and the planet against humanity itself. Any geopolitical battle, any act of aggression, any armed conflict, is now also a question of Anthropocenic layering, with mines, war detritus and targeted or unintended environmental destruction providing the lethal background of human mortality.



Figure 12: Ruth Patir, *Israeli Pavilion, Announcement on the Pavilion’s Glass Wall*.



Figure 13: Pro-Palestine Protest, Opening of Venice Biennale 2024, Giardini of the Biennale.

Text-based art remind us of the need, increasingly more pressing, to express as solidly and clearly as possible our positions in art and in life in the hope that reality will be affected. Text-based art serves this purpose, becoming protest, action and manifesto.

Note

1. According to Jakobson (1960), the elements of a speech event are, quite simply, an 'addresser' that sends a message to an 'addressee'. The message becomes communicated through 'code', 'context' and 'contact', where code would be the symbolic code, context is that of the addressee frame of reference, and contact is the physical and psychological channel between them.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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