

Interspecies Solidarities at the Carnival of Extinctions: The Non-Human Foreigner at the 60th Venice Biennial

Maja and Reuben Fowkes

'Foreigners Everywhere / Stranieri Ovunque', Biennale Arte 2024,
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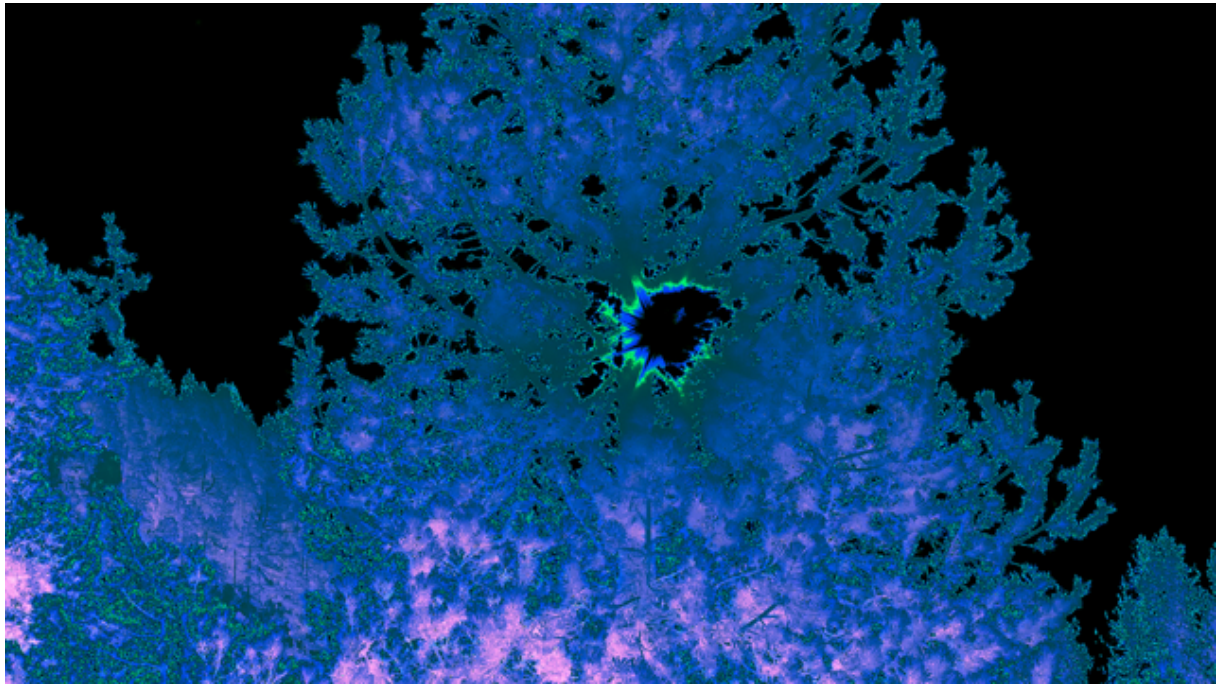
Huni Kuin Artists Movement (MAKHU), *Kapewê Pukeni*, 2024, Central Pavilion, Giardini,
Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, photo courtesy of the authors

The 2024 edition of the Venice Biennale, with its resolutely bilingual title 'Foreigners Everywhere – Stranieri Ovunque', is a demonstrative *we are here!* and an appropriation of the language of mistrust that speaks volumes to those of us whose translocal existence means a

practice of perpetual translation, a negotiation of multiple diasporic identities and an implacable struggle with the hierarchies that be. Curator Adriano Pedrosa has finally given the stage to the immigrants, the exiles, to displaced people, further extending the concept of the omnipresent foreigner to the Queer, the outsider and the Indigenous, to activists and artistic families – in other words to those who, due to prevailing colonial, heteronormative and patriarchal structures, have never before gained entry to the Biennale. Missing from the curatorial concept, however, despite the clamour of climate downfall, crashing ecosystems and anthropogenic extinctions, is the category of the non-human, encompassing all our fellow animals, plants and microbes, along with the rivers, mountains and other non-living entities with whom we share the planet. At a time when rights, solidarity, care, justice and even political representation are demanded for non-human persons across the world, there can be no doubt that their existence should be acknowledged in the family of foreigners at the biennial of art.

The Anthropocentrism pervading both the national pavilions and the main exhibition, where the focus is on non-western portraiture, modernisms, identities and genealogies, is tempered by sporadic eruptions of ecocentric Indigenous art practices, reckonings with the position of the more-than-human in colonialism, extractivism and migration, artistic attempts to transgress interspecies boundaries, and activist interventions in defence of nature. The exuberant mural on the façade of the Central Pavilion in the Giardini by the Huni Kuin Artists Movement (MAKHU) scales up the Brazilian collective's *Kapewë Pukeni* (2022) illustrating the Indigenous story of the alligator bridge. According to legend, the giant reptile first allowed people to cross the Bering Strait that separates the Asian and American continents on its back but then dived back into the ocean after it was betrayed by the humans who began to hunt it for food. The work is not only visually spectacular, the most dramatic of several artistic interventions on the outside of a pavilion at this year's biennial, but also resonates planetarily as a parable about the breakdown of interspecies solidarity and the consequences of the over-exploitation of the natural world.

One of the most compelling attempts to challenge human-centred worldviews, while also addressing epistemological questions about the multiplicity of language and the boundaries of the untranslatable, is Carlos Casas's *Bestiari* for the Catalonia in Venice pavilion. Casas's audio-visual installation takes as its point of origin the medieval text *The Dispute of the Donkey* by the founder of Catalan literature, Anselm Turmeda, which tells the tale of a group of animals who put a man with the gift of understanding their speech on trial for humanity's exceptionalist belief in its innate superiority. The film features sounds and images of elephants, bats, dolphins, snakes, donkeys, parakeets and bees, employing infrasound technology to make perceptible the beyond-human sensory *Umwelt*. Justice for fellow species, whether in the pre-modern world or in the tumult of the Anthropocene, depends on the cultivation of understanding and empathy through interspecies communication – miraculously, in the Middle Ages, but through technology and art today.



Carlos Casas, *Bestiari*, 2024, *Batvision* (detail), Catalonia in Venice pavilion, Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, courtesy of the artist



Julien Creuzet, *Attila cataract your source at the feet of the green peaks will end up in the great sea blue abyss we drowned in the tidal tears of the moon*, 2024, French Pavilion, Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, photo courtesy of the authors

Julien Creuzet's presentation for the French Pavilion announces its ecological intentions with the poetic title *Attila cataract your source at the feet of the green peaks will end up in the great sea blue abyss we drowned in the tidal tears of the moon*. Liquifying the categories of foreign and familiar, natural and technological, human and non-human, Creuzet's all-enveloping multi-sensory installation dissolves the hybridity of human imaginaries into an abundance of waterfalls, undersea realms and spidery bodies. Weaving the pavilion into her web is the *matoutou falaise*, a tarantula endemic to the French overseas territory of Martinique where Creuzet grew up, making overlaps, coexistences and entanglements flourish in this sensuous vision of interspecies biocultural confluence. Political malaise and environmental distress also converge, disclosing the entanglements of ecology and colonialism, with one animated sequence showing turtles caught in fishing nets, while a reference to the open wound of the transatlantic slave trade is disclosed in the motif of 'drowning in the blue abyss'.

Towards the end of the main exhibition in the Arsenale is a large room devoted to the work of father and son artists of the Uitoto Aimeni people, Santiago Yahuarcani and Rember Yahuarcani. Using natural dyes and producing his own vegetable fabric *llanchama* for his paintings, Santiago Yahuarcani's largescale works *El mundo del agua* (2024) and *Aquí está caliente* (2024) show worlds populated by people, beasts, beyond-human creatures, forest animals and fish, trees and spirits, who engage in multispecies exchanges and interrelate beyond the confines of western rationality. Rember Yahuarcani's painting *El Territorio de los Abuelos* (2023) applies a florescent palette against a dark background to depict the disruption brought to the land of the ancestors by the unending violence of settler colonialism in its modern manifestation as cartels, loggers, paramilitaries, miners and deforesters. A textual element on the painting reveals it to be a tribute to thirty-two community leaders who have been killed defending their territories during the last decade, asserting that 'the Amazon is the most dangerous place for Indigenous citizens'.



Santiago Yahuarcani, *Aquí está caliente*, 2024, installation view, Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, photo courtesy of the authors



Rember Yahuarcani, *El Territorio de los Abuelos*, 2023, installation view, Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, photo courtesy of the authors

The canvas is alive with the unspeakable abundance of the more-than-human, a brilliant celebration of birds, fish, insects, leaves and microbes all interrelating and equally immersed in the delicately balanced lifeworld of the climax rainforest. This is a biocultural diversity made precarious by the inroads of colonial extractivism and the equally calamitous peril posed by global warming that threatens to turn the lush habitat into a dry zone.

The non-human is also present in the pavilion shared by the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which at this Biennale is split between the Czech presentation by Eva Kotátková on the inside and the work of Slovak artist Oto Hudec on the exterior. The fate of a displaced and incarcerated wild giraffe is at the centre of Kotátková's immersive installation *The heart of a giraffe in captivity is twelve kilos lighter*. The bare facts of Lenka the giraffe's life – from her capture in Kenya in 1954 and transport to Prague Zoo to two years of solitary existence, followed by death, brutal taxidermy and afterlife as a museum object – are the subject of empathetic stories accessed as audio recordings by visitors passing through the enlarged sculptural orifice of her hollowed-out neck. A sound piece by London and Delhi-based artists Himali Singh Soin and David Soin Tappaser activates the archival record of this transnational microhistory that illuminates the colonial cruelty of the objectification of non-human foreigners in zoos and museums, underlining the fact that socialist states were not exempt from the logic of colonialism. On the outside of the pavilion, Hudec's *Floating Arboretum* memorialises collective acts of tree defence in a series of interactive wall paintings. These monochrome portraits of individual trees on floating pedestals are linked to songs celebrating episodes of transnational environmental struggle. His utopian proposal to establish a floating tree sanctuary is a gesture of interspecies



Eva Kotátková, *The heart of a giraffe in captivity is twelve kilos lighter* (detail), 2024, Czech presentation at the Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, photo courtesy of the authors



Oto Hudec, *Floating Arboretum*, 2024, Slovak presentation at the Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, photo courtesy of the authors

solidarity towards arboreal beings caught in the pincer of extractivism and shifting climatic zones.

The hybrid ecosystems of secondary forests that find a foothold on ground altered by industrial development, specifically the ruderal vegetation that ebbs and flows in the wastelands of Singapore, are central to the work of Robert Zhao Renhui in the pavilion of the hypermodern city state. The introductory graphic print *A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore* (2024) maps onto a drawing of the regenerative Albizia tree the changing contours of these liminal semi-wildernesses and the adaptability of their non-human inhabitants, including a buffy fish owl trying to ‘remember a river that is covered by a cement drain’. His video installation *Trash Stratum* (2024), built from items of salvaged debris and incorporating footage shot with a zoom lens from his high-rise apartment, uncovers the furtive lifeworlds of a marginal woodland. Unexpected reciprocities between its human and non-human transient populations emerge when a rubbish bin discarded by sheltering economic migrants becomes a watering hole for migratory birds. Rather than unwelcome invasive species, the non-native settlers from the plant and animal kingdoms that proliferate in human-damaged environments should, as the work implies, be recognised as ecological pioneers best adapted to cope with dramatic anthropogenic changes to the natural world.



Robert Zhao Renhui, *Trash Stratum*, 2024, mixed media installation, Singapore Pavilion, Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, courtesy of the artist

The intuition shared by contemporary science that there is no rigid boundary between the living and the non-living, and that physical matter also actively partakes in the ecological process

of worldmaking, permeates the practice of a number of artists at the Biennale. In John Akomfrah's work in the British Pavilion, stories of migrant diasporas in Britain are interwoven with reflections on environmental devastation in a concatenation of video and sound installations presented as a series of musical movements or 'cantos' entitled *Listening All Night to the Rain*. The second canto is an ode to the aquatic, in which depictions of mist, floods and rain loop into the diasporic experience of dispersal over water. In Kapwani Kiwanga's *Trinket* for the Canadian Pavilion, the artist creates hanging abstract forms from the glass beads of Murano, which were traded around the world from the sixteenth century onwards. Identifying *conterie* as markers of the material histories of colonialism, the work assembles non-human archival traces of the environmental devastation brought by earlier waves of global expansion. In the Pavilion of the Republic of Kosovo, Doruntina Kastrati's installation *The Echoing Silences of Metal and Skin* consists of acoustically activated sculptural forms that refer to surgical interventions in the failing knees of women workers in a post-socialist Turkish delight factory. Reflecting on the hybridisation of bodies through metallic implants, the work dismantles the boundaries of the human.



Doruntina Kastrati, *The Echoing Silences of Metal and Skin*, 2024, Pavilion of Kosovo, Biennale Arte 2024, Venice, photo courtesy of Silke Neumann

When the human body itself is not a single entity but an ecosystem that consists of a myriad other organisms, the entry of non-humans into the anthropocentric theme of 'Foreigners Everywhere' is a matter of course. The superabundance of exhibitions and events organised

within and alongside the official programme of the Biennale reflects the constantly expanding frontiers of the artworld, while the attention and care lavished on the most privileged attendees comes across as a residue of an era when social and ecological responsibility could be regarded as optional. In that sense, every participant and visitor, the authors of this text included, has to reckon with their carbon burden, the unchecked baggage of art travel as a calculable factor in the choking disaster of fossil fuel emissions. The processes of interlocked extinctions that are ongoing in the background of this international forum for the exchange of artistic visions, which balances between a carnival of Anthropocentrism and advocacy of interspecies solidarities, are a clarion call to embrace the fleeting presence of the non-human foreigner.

Maja and Reuben Fowkes are art historians, curators and directors of the Postsocialist Art Centre (PACT) at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London. Their publications include *Art and Climate Change* (Thames & Hudson, 2022), *Ilona Németh: Eastern Sugar* (Sternberg Press, 2021) and Maja's *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (CEU Press, 2015). Recent curatorial projects include the exhibitions 'Colliding Epistemes' at Bozar Brussels (2022) and 'Potential Agrarianism' at Kunsthalle Bratislava (2021). Their Horizon Europe research project into the Socialist Anthropocene in the Visual Arts (SAVA) is supported by UKRI and they are co-founders of the Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art. www.translocal.org