

La Biennale di Venezia
58th International Art Exhibition



Statement by Ralph Rugoff
Curator of the 58th International Art Exhibition

May You Live in Interesting Times

In a speech given in the late 1930s, British MP Sir Austen Chamberlain invoked an ancient Chinese curse that he had learned of from a British diplomat who had served in Asia, and which took the curious form of saying, “May you live in interesting times.” “There is no doubt that the curse has fallen on us,” Chamberlain observed. “We move from one crisis to another. We suffer one disturbance and shock after another.”

This summary sounds uncannily familiar today as the news cycle spins from crisis to crisis. Yet at a moment when the digital dissemination of fake news and “alternative facts” is corroding political discourse and the trust on which it depends, it is worth pausing whenever possible to reassess our terms of reference. In this case it turns out that there never was any such “ancient Chinese curse,” despite the fact that Western politicians have made reference to it in speeches for over a hundred years. It is an ersatz cultural relic, another Occidental “Orientalism,” and yet for all its fictional status it has had real rhetorical effects in significant public exchanges. At once suspect and rich in meaning, this kind of uncertain artefact suggests potential lines of exploration that are worth pursuing at present, especially when the “interesting times” it evokes seem to be with us once again. Hence the 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia will be titled after a counterfeit curse.

May You Live in Interesting Times will no doubt include artworks that reflect upon precarious aspects of existence today, including different threats to key traditions, institutions and relationships of the “post-war order.” But let us acknowledge at the outset that art does not exercise its forces in the domain of politics. Art cannot stem the rise of nationalist movements and authoritarian governments in different parts of the world, for instance, nor can it alleviate the tragic fate of displaced peoples across the globe (whose numbers now represent almost one percent of the world’s entire population).

But in an indirect fashion, perhaps art can be a kind of guide for how to live and think in ‘interesting times.’ The 58th International Art Exhibition will not have a theme per se, but will highlight a general approach to making art and a view of art’s social function as embracing both pleasure and critical thinking. The Exhibition will focus on the work of artists who challenge existing habits of thought and open up our readings of objects and images, gestures and situations. Art of this kind grows out of a practice of entertaining multiple perspectives: of holding in mind seemingly contradictory and incompatible notions, and juggling diverse ways of making sense of the world. Artists who think in this manner offer alternatives to the meaning of so-called facts by suggesting other ways of connecting and contextualising them. Animated by boundless curiosity and puncturing

wit, their work encourages us to look askance at all unquestioned categories, concepts and subjectivities. It invites us to consider multiple alternatives and unfamiliar vantage points, and to discern the ways in which “order” has become the simultaneous presence of diverse orders.

May You Live in Interesting Times will take seriously art’s potential as a method for looking into things that we do not already know - things that may be off-limits, under-the-radar, or otherwise inaccessible for various reasons. It will highlight artworks that explore the interconnectedness of diverse phenomena, and that convey an affinity with the idea, asserted by both Leonardo da Vinci and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, that *everything connects with everything else*.

May You Live in Interesting Times springs from a belief that interesting art creates forms whose particular character and delineation raise questions about the ways in which we mark cultural boundaries and borders. Intelligent artistic activity involves creating forms that call attention to what forms conceal, and the functions that they fulfil. The Exhibition will highlight art that exists in between categories, and which questions the rationales behind our categorical thinking.

May You Live in Interesting Times will aim to welcome its public to an expansive experience of the deep involvement, absorption and creative learning that art makes possible. This will entail engaging visitors in a series of encounters that are essentially playful, taking into account that it is when we play that we are most fully “human.” This will mean tweaking aspects of the exhibition format where possible to make sure they are sympathetically aligned with the character of the art being presented.

Finally, *May You Live in Interesting Times* will be formulated in the belief that human happiness depends on substantive conversations, because as social animals we are driven to both create and find meaning, and to connect with others. In this light, the Exhibition will aim to underscore the idea that the meaning of artworks are not embedded principally in objects but in conversations - first between artist and artwork, and then between artwork and audience, and later between different publics. Ultimately, Biennale Arte 2019 aspires to the ideal that what is most important about an exhibition is not what it puts on display, but how audiences can use their experience of the exhibition afterwards, to confront everyday realities from expanded viewpoints and with new energies. An exhibition should open people's eyes to previously unconsidered ways of being in the world and thus change their view of that world.

Ralph Rugoff