

ZACHĘTA

La Biennale di Venezia

61. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali

LIQUID TONGUES

PLAIN ENGLISH



LIQUID TONGUES

BOGNA BURSKA, DANIEL KOTOWSKI

Liquid Tongues is an audio and video installation. In it, Bogna Burska and Daniel Kotowski explore new ways to communicate, and their inspiration extends far beyond human life. They invited the Choir in Motion (Chór w Ruchu) to perform. For this project, the Choir includes both hearing and Deaf performers who sing whale songs and sign in International Sign Language (IS). The result is a mix of visual, spatial, and sound fantasies about the meaning of communication.

Roger Payne's legendary *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1970) inspired the project. His recordings showed the whales' intelligence and rich cultures, which led to a ban on whale hunting and helped save them from dying out. At the same time, Payne's work showed that art can save unheard voices.

Liquid Tongues paints a picture of loss but also of cultural rebirth. The project looks at efforts to reclaim languages pushed aside by dominant voices. It shows Payne's work and the meaning of his recordings. It tells the story of hundreds of humpback whales off West Africa. These whales usually live alone, but here, they gather in groups. This may be a new behavior or an old one returning. The project brings to life the long-lost sound of the *quilaat*, a ritual drum Indigenous people in Greenland once played. It highlights efforts to revive Hand Talk, the Plains Indian Sign Language. This language was used by both hearing and Deaf Indigenous people in North America. The project pictures how Deaf people are stepping back from spoken-language training and taking control. Instead, they are creating their own sense of agency. The installation revives the feminist figure of the Whale Rider, inspired by a New Zealand myth. Together, these stories help us imagine alternatives for the world. They show how we can rebuild what dominant voices have destroyed. We might ask, as Sabrina Imbler does: "How will you regrow, and in how many ways?"

Based on the idea of Deaf Gain, deafness isn't seen as a disability. It is a separate culture. Identity which offers new perspectives and forms of expression. Most of the footage was shot in water. Deaf people can sign freely there, but hearing people can only make muffled sounds. The boundary between air and water is where artists experiment with communication. It is a mirror where different languages, bodies, and sensations meet.

For the 2026 Biennale, Koyo Kouoh uses the musical metaphor of a "minor key." She invites us to listen to soft voices, hidden stories, and forgotten memories we often overlook. She encourages us to find gentle ways to resist. To try sensitive experiments. To create communities that live in harmony. Within this vision, *Liquid Tongues* aims to change the way we communicate. It seeks to build communities where every voice counts, including the voices of animals.

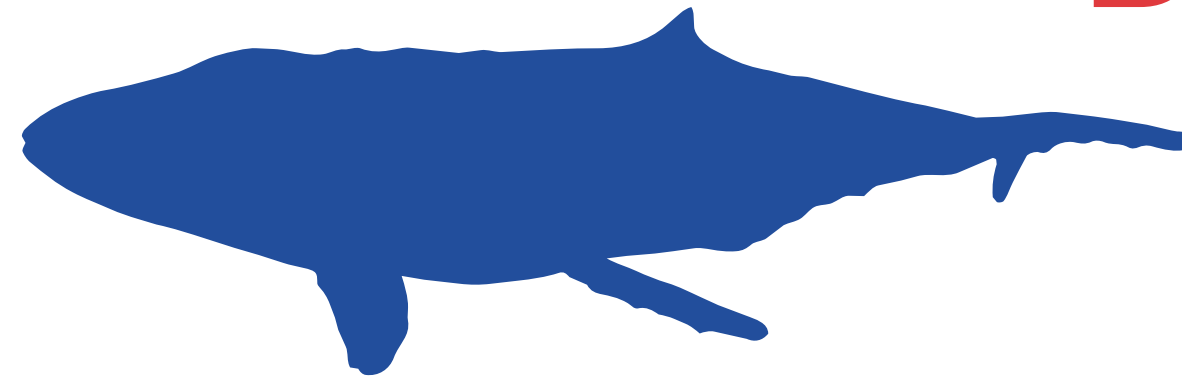
Curators:
EWA CHOMICKA, JOLANTA WOSZCZENKO

LIQUID TONGUES:

LIBRETTO

BOGNA BURSKA

DANIEL KOTOWSKI



whup
swops
swops
growl
teepee
ascending shriek
 *
 a dead body
 a dead pile of meat
 a dead mountain on the beach
 it lies there and people carve words in it
 'I love Jane'
 people extinguish cigarettes in a nostril
 of the whale that died
 his heart almost burst
 he almost died of sadness
 *
 the waves of the hand sweep across the rocks
 movements carved in the rocks of the Great Plains
 Plain Indian Sign Language
 a gaping Spanish coloniser wrote in his diary:
 'People speak with their hands'
 HAND TALK
 HAND TALK
 HAND TALK
 *
 Deaf and hearing equally
 *
 she came on the back of the whale
 she came on the back of the whale
 she came on the back of the whale
 *
 today the sperm whales spoke to me

 f-i-n-g-e-r-s-p-e-l-l-i-n-g i-s b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l f-o-r e-y-e-s
 f-i-n-g-e-r-s-p-e-l-l-i-n-g i-s f-r-u-s-t-r-a-t-i-n-g f-o-r d-e-a-f-i-e-s
 f-i-n-g-e-r-s-p-e-l-l-i-n-g i-s n-e-e-d-e-d f-o-r r-e-m-e-m-b-r-a-n-c-e

 today we tried to understand
 what the sperm whales are saying to us
 *
 I see the air
 straining upwards
 the air in my lungs
 (may burst)

y-o-u-r e-y-e-s a-r-e b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l l-i-k-e a-q-u-a-m-a-r-i-n-e *

 tomorrow we'll talk to the whales *

 she came on the back of the whale *
 she came on the back of the whale *
 she came on the back of the whale *
 *
 I AM CO-LO-NIZED *
 I AM CO-LO-NIZED *
 *
 the bear's stomach fell silent
 not even the notes were left
 the polar night lost its rhythm
 the polar day lost its rhythm
 the rituals melted
 Mother Sea combed the fishes' hair
 seaweed and urchins, slower and slower
 he brought home
ulu knives big and small
 he got them from one of the last shamans
 right after
 his wife gave birth to a daughter
 the *ulu* knives are calm
 again the drums ring out from the guts
 his daughter and her daughter say
 that although no one remembers the old melodies
 when you hear the *qilaat* drum
 you feel a root in your belly *
 *
 you mustn't whistle during the northern lights
 because the ghosts
 play ball with skulls
 they might tear off your head

 you can't play ball
 you can't play ball
 you can't play ball *
 *
whup
whup
whup
whup

whup
whup
whup
whup
 *
 she came on the back of the whale
 she came on the back of the whale
 she came on the back of the whale
 *
 black spines
 black, black spines
 spiky, veiny maws
 surfacing vertically
 agape
 like great clapping clams
 straining live protein with baleens
 overgrown bulging
 covered in lumps
 a bell
 a great mussel

 hundreds
 hundreds of lonely animals
 began to meet
 what are they doing there?
 what are they doing there?
 what are they doing there?
 what are they doing there?
 *
 people depart
 others take their places
 I sign, I sign, I sign
 pam, pam, pam
 I try, but I miss
 others take their places
 I sign, I sign, I sign
 pam, pam, pam
 time and again
 I try, the hollowness remains...
 I sign, I sign, I sign
 until someone finally notices something
 I sign, I sign, I sign
 maybe finally they'll hear
 I sign, I sign, I sign

my patience is not in vain
 like on an assembly line

 rain in the water *
 *
 what burst
 what burst
 what bursts
 what bursts
 what bursts *
 sing like me—you're underwater
 here only the whales sing
 here people sing with their hands
 look like me—you're underwater

 slay, slay, slay, slay

 sing like me—you're underwater
 sing like me—you're underwater
 sing like me—you're underwater

 water, water, water, water *
 *
swops
swops
growl
growl
 *
 she came on the back of the whale

 we're not signing for you, we're signing for us
 not you, not us
 not you, not us

 she came on the back of the whale

 we're not singing for you, we're singing for us
 not you, not us
 not you, not us

 she came on the back of the whale
 she came on the back of the whale
 she came on the back of the whale

SELECTED STORIES FROM THE LIBRETTO

Whup, swops...

This scene shows how humpback whales communicate. To do so, the Choir uses sound, sign language, and movement. *Whup, swop, growl, teepee, and ascending shriek* are some of the calls whales make. The Choir performs them first by the swimming pool and then underwater. Scientists study these sounds as part of the humpbacks' social life. The calls featured here are from the work of Dr. Michelle Fournet. To learn more, visit her site: www.michellefournet.wordpress.com.

Today, noise pollution from ships and sea technologies distorts whale communication.

A dead body

This part of the project is inspired by Roger Payne and his recordings. While he was walking along the shore, he found the body of a whale washed up on the beach. The body was badly hurt. Someone burned a cigarette in its blowhole, somebody else cut "I love Jane" into its skin. People's indifference to the animal shocked him. In 1970, he published *Songs of the Humpback Whale*. These legendary recordings helped lead to a ban on whale hunting and saved them from dying out.

Hand Talk

Many people think sign languages are only 200-300 years old. But Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) is much older. Its history appears in old stone drawings (petroglyphs) on the Great Plains. In the 1500s, Spanish explorers called it "Hand Talk." Deaf and hearing Indigenous Americans used PISL daily, in ceremonies, and for storytelling. It brought people together despite their differences.

By the late 1800s, U.S. government policies caused the language to fade away. Native children were forced to use English. Deaf Native Americans had to learn American Sign Language (ASL), and their native sign languages were banned. As a result, very few people continued to use PISL. Today, people are working hard to save it. Experts such as Professor Melanie McKay-Cody and Deaf Native American groups are working to keep it alive. You can still see the influence of PISL in the ASL used today.

She came on the back of the whale

In 1987, Witi Ihimaera wrote *The Whale Rider*, a book based on a Māori legend about an ancestor named Paikea. According to the myth, Paikea survived a disaster at sea because a whale carried him on its back to New Zealand. In Māori culture, whales are ancestors and protectors. *The Whale Rider* is a feminist version of the myth. The main character is a young girl from Paikea's family line. She has a special power: she can communicate with whales. The book was made into a movie in 2002. In 2026, a proposal was made in New Zealand's parliament to give whales "legal personhood." This would give whales the right to move freely, live in a healthy environment, and grow.

F-i-n-g-e-r-s-p-e-l-l-i-n-g

Many scientists are researching how whales communicate. Recent studies show that humpback whale sounds obey Zipf's law. This means they use some sounds more often than others. Researchers found "codes" in sperm whale calls. These codes act like vowels, shaping the calls' structure and rhythm.

In this scene, sound, sign language, and movement blend together. They aim to express "sperm-whale" and interpret vowels. The scene also refers to how Deaf people view fingerspelling. It is less seen as practical and more tied to the alphabet of spoken language. This perception makes it feel more like "translation" than natural communication.

I AM CO-LO-NIZED

The text talks about colonization. It is inspired by Harlan Lane and his book, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*. Lane compares the experience of Deaf people to the way Europeans colonized Africa. In both cases, a powerful people forced its language, rules, and values on others. This phrase illustrates the feeling of being controlled by others. It is about losing one's identity and the right to make choices within their culture. The scene refers to "speech therapy," which many Deaf people undergo to fit into "normal" society.

Drum qilaat

When Christian colonizers came to Greenland, they banned Indigenous rituals. This caused many traditions to fade away, like the *qilaat*. This shamanic frame drum was used in songs and ceremonies. Today, Greenlanders are making and using these drums again. The original melodies are gone. But making the drum helps bring back their language and culture. These instruments were once made from polar bear stomach skins. Now, makers use different materials. Many Native Greenlanders say they feel their bodies vibrate when they hear the drum.

You mustn't whistle during the northern lights

Greenland's Inuit think that during the Northern Lights, spirits play with human skulls. You shouldn't whistle then, or you might catch their attention and risk danger. This tale about "losing one's head" warns: don't cross the line between our world and the unknown.

Whup, whup, whup...

In humpback communication, the *whup* call likely means "hello" or "it's me." It is both a social signal and a way for whales to recognize each other. Dr. Michelle Fournet, a researcher of humpbacks, made her own *whup* sound. She then played it underwater. She probably made the first-ever exchange of information between a human and a humpback.

Black spines

Humpbacks typically live alone. However, for over ten years, large groups have been gathering off the coast of West Africa. These are groups of up to 200 whales. We do not know if this is a new habit or an old one returning as the population grows after the end of whaling. We also don't know why they gather. Perhaps to find food (krill) or to teach social behavior to the young ones. What we do know is that they are very active together; they hunt, dive, and sing as a group.

Pam, pam, pam

This text explores the experience of a sign language user. They must fight to be noticed and understood. Their phrases repeat, just like these difficult situations. With every new space and group of people, they need to re-explain themselves. The moments of visibility are very short-lived. It is a story about an endless battle for presence and the right to use sign language.





ROGER PAYNE AND HIS RECORDINGS

In the early 1960s, biologist and animal sound expert Roger Payne was walking along the shore. He saw a whale's body washed up on the beach. People had treated the whale with such a lack of respect that it paralyzed the scientist. Someone burned a cigarette in its blowhole, and somebody else cut "I love Jane" into its skin. Deeply moved, Payne felt a strong urge to show the world the true value of whales. He wanted to connect humans with these amazing creatures.

Whales were once on the verge of dying out because of destructive human activity. The Industrial Revolution relied heavily on whale oil. Commercial whaling led to the loss of 90% to 99% of their population, depending on the species.

Roger Payne's famous *Songs of the Humpback Whale* from the 1970s led to a ban on whale hunting. This saved humpback whales from dying out. Payne's recordings of complex whale sounds showed the world how intelligent they are. People realized that whale songs have a structure like musical compositions. This story shows how art has the power to save voices that were once unheard.

Today, some whale species are returning, but others are still in danger of dying out.

POLISH PAVILION AT THE 61ST
INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION —
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

9.05–22.11.2026

CURATORS:

EWA CHOMICKA, JOLANTA WOSZCZENKO

ORGANISER:

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**BOGNA BURSKA
DANIEL KOTOWSKI**



THE WATER COMMUNITY

People once believed water creatures mirrored those living in the air. Aristotle's seed theory claimed that all creatures came from one seed. They then grew into either land or water animals, depending on where the seed had landed. Today, Steve Mentz, who coined the term "Blue Humanities," looks at Shakespeare's view of the ocean. He describes water as a "terrifyingly lost paradise" (*At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*). It's the home we all come from, but one we can't go back to. However, Astrida Neimanis (*Bodies of Water*) argues that this home is actually "within us." She describes our bodies as "bodies of water," shaped by the liquid substance that flows through us all. She sees water as an active, strong force that can control, help, and create. All at the same time. We exist in this world of water, moving across and beyond it, and living within and between it. Water is not just H₂O, but a complex network of relations and flows—a fluid presence that is everywhere. It changes how we see identity, both human and nonhuman. It shows us a world that is fragile, ever-changing, and liquid.

The idea of a more-than-human hydro-community helps us rethink social connections and survival. It invites us to pay attention to signals from non-human animals and the environment. "Though [sea mammals] spend most or all their time in water, they do not have gills. We, too, on land, are often navigating contexts that seem impossible for us to breathe in, and yet we must," writes Alexis Pauline Gumbs (*Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*).

She views sea mammals as our water cousins. By observing them, she learns lessons about care, resilience, and respecting boundaries. Gumbs' writings send a clear activist message: systemic violence and a damaged environment mean species must unite and work together more closely. As she says, we are all constantly "undrowning."

WHALE COMMUNICATION AND SONGS

For a long time, we thought oceans and seas were silent. But recordings have revealed a complex world of underwater communication. Many whales, like humpbacks, sperm whales, orcas, and dolphins, communicate in ways similar to a language. This suggests they have one of the oldest social structures on Earth, with millions of years of history. Scientists from various fields are working together to study whale communication. Recent studies show that humpback whales communicate using Zipf's law. This means they use some sounds more often than others. Almost all human languages show this pattern. Additionally, researchers found that sperm whale sounds include parts that act like vowels in human speech.

Humpback whale songs are some of the most complex and interesting sounds animals make. Researcher Ellen C. Garland is among those who study them. They consist of small sound units that form phrases. These phrases create patterns that build into longer sequences. They can last anywhere from minutes to around half an hour and may repeat for longer periods. Even though the songs have a clear structure, they change over time. Whales add or remove parts as they learn from each other. This is like how birds learn songs or humans learn a language. Sometimes, a completely new song replaces the old one. This is called a "song revolution," and it can spread across the ocean as whales travel.

EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

Stories of exploitation mirror one another, no matter the species. We are all being divided and used—human and animal bodies and even whole landscapes. In the past, people thought the underwater world was silent. They viewed whales just as a resource. A speech-centered culture marginalized Deaf people and viewed deafness as a medical issue. The Deaf minority was forced to speak and forbidden to use sign language.

Sunaura Taylor, the creator of "disabled ecologies," connects these issues. She says that ableism and speciesism work in similar ways. One hurts disabled people, and the other harms animals. They are tied together; therefore, we must set ourselves free together as well.



DEAF GAIN

A big part of the project takes place in water, which shows the advantage Deaf people have there. Underwater, Deaf people can communicate freely using sign language. In contrast, hearing people can only make strange, distorted sounds. The privilege and domination of hearing people end there. This shift is a key part of the project. It shows that in the right place, voices that seem "weak" can reveal their true strength.

Sound travels more than four times faster in water than in air. Underwater sound corridors let it travel hundreds or even thousands of kilometers. This allows whales to communicate across huge distances. However, modern oceans are full of noise pollution from ships and sea technology. As a result, whales go silent, leave their feeding areas, or change their travel routes. Some even die. Whales—many of which use sound to "see" (echolocation)—now face a major ecological and climate crisis. Another big threat to their lives is the new plan for deep-sea mining. In her book *Bodies of Water*, Astrida Neimanis writes that we feel the climate crisis most deeply in water.

CLIMATE CRISIS

Liquid Tongues is inspired by the Deaf Gain concept. In it, deafness isn't seen as a problem that needs repair or a cure. Instead, it is a culture and an identity that offers us unique perspectives and potential. Deaf Gain shows how Deaf individuals enrich our world. They bring diversity and value to everyone, including those who can hear. It highlights Deaf people's innovative problem-solving and adaptation skills. Deaf individuals live in a hearing world, so they have created unique ways to communicate. They have a strong sense of their surroundings and can process many visual cues. These skills are crucial in many areas, such as technology, design, and education. For example, a Deaf driver invented car side mirrors. TV captions were first made for Deaf people, but now everyone uses them.

This project challenges the idea that a "real" language must use a voice. This belief is called phonocentrism. The philosopher Jacques Derrida claimed that it isn't "a natural, universal rule." He argued it's a historical prejudice. Derrida maintained that speaking is not more important than writing. His ideas, though not about sign languages, help us see the link between spoken and sign languages. H-Dirksen L. Bauman looks at Derrida's work through *deaf eyes*. He shows how the focus on speech was used to push sign languages and Deaf people to the margins of society. Bauman emphasizes that we must treat sign language as a full, complete, and equal language.



LIQUID TONGUES —WHAT KIND OF LANGUAGES ARE THESE?

Deaf artist Daniel Kotowski collaborated with a hearing interpreter to create these translations. He relied on her visual and spatial signs, as well as choreographic tools and sound vibrations, to guide him. His goal was to turn whale sounds into a visual experience. Kotowski used facial expressions and gestures to interpret the codes and animal behavior. These are likely the first translations of their kind in International Sign (IS). In this project, "translation" means more than just swapping words between languages. It is a creative and critical act. A tool for imagination that invites us to look beyond ourselves and see the world in new ways.

Liquid Tongues features the Choir in Motion (Chór w Ruchu), a group of Deaf and hearing performers. Together, they use both voices and sign language to interpret whale songs.

Liquid Tongues is always in motion between different languages. The performance uses International Sign (IS), which is a global mix of signing systems. IS uses the whole body and facial expressions to tell a story better. Here, IS is combined with singing by both hearing and Deaf performers in certain scenes. These human sounds meet the voices of whales. Finally, the group uses movement and dance as another way to speak. Sometimes, the languages separate and each tells its own story. Other times, they unite for a powerful, dynamic mix of sound and movement. Sometimes, they "talk" to shape one another. All of it shows that communication is a process that people create and negotiate with each other.

Whale songs and codes flow through what you see and hear in this project. The Choir performs multi-layered songs, inspired by humpback whales. The electronic sounds echo the rhythmic clicks of sperm whales. The project experiments with "speaking sperm-whale", based on the latest science. These experiments blend with attempts to translate whale calls into sign language.

A key part of *Liquid Tongues* is a series of sound experiments. In one of them, the project explores how human breath and voice change between air and water. Much of the video and audio was recorded underwater. This setting shows that Deaf people can use sign language freely in the water. In contrast, hearing people can only make broken and distorted sounds.

Liquid Tongues are languages that go beyond "normal" rules. This is the space for voices that are usually quiet. For non-verbal language systems and non-standard ways to build relationships. A space where all of them get an equal say and grow stronger. Alexis Pauline Gumbs (*Undrowned*) explains that they can learn how to survive from marine mammals. They learn that resistance can come from play and love. You can find it in refusal, but also in respecting each other's limits. The animals teach us how to stay on the surface together and remain "undrowned."

Liquid Tongues is a project about songs and singing, including signing-as-singing. But at the core, it's about listening and mindfulness. Whales were saved because their songs were finally "heard." This proves that listening leads to change. In this project, listening is not just about the physical ability to hear. It is a transformative resource. It comes from being open to other voices, silences, vibrations, and "tuning in" to others. It is about truly hearing what is around us.

Bogna Burska and Daniel Kotowski teamed up in 2018 for the play *Rebellion of the Deaf*. Burska directed, and Kotowski served as a consultant. The play was inspired by the 1988 protests at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. Because of these events, the first Deaf university president was appointed. The project looked at how language shapes society. It also studied universal languages and what accessibility means. After that, Burska and Kotowski continued collaborating. In 2025, they launched the *Rebellion of the Deaf. Renewal*. This project featured a large choir with both hearing and Deaf performers. They also appeared together in the video *Breathe* (2025). In it, they looked at how communication changes underwater for Deaf and hearing people. Kotowski also completed his doctoral studies under Burska's supervision at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk (2021–2024). *Liquid Tongues* is their latest collaboration. In their cooperation they always focus on how people communicate despite their differences. Alongside their joint efforts, they pursue their own unique art careers.

Bogna Burska is a versatile artist. She works with painting, photography, video, and installation. She is also a playwright and a director of experimental films and theater. In 2025, she decided to become a performer herself. Her work explores the body, memory, and emotions. She often challenges popular culture and the way we look at the world. She enjoys blending things that are beautiful with elements often seen as “ugly.” Recently, she has concentrated on communication. This helps her understand our connections in changing environments. She graduated with a painting degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Then, she worked at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk from 2006 to 2024. She is now a professor back at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

BOGNA BURSKA

DANIEL KOTOWSKI

Daniel Kotowski is a multimedia and intermedia artist. He creates videos, performances, installations, photographs, and objects. He also directs plays. His work examines social and linguistic communication, biopower, and biopolitics. He questions social norms. He shows how hierarchies support some people and leave others behind. He describes himself by saying: “I am a marker of incompleteness. I don't fit the norm because I am Deaf and I do not speak.” He creates his own communication strategies and art by navigating the “in between.” This includes the worlds of Deaf and hearing people, as well as queer and heteronormative spaces. He got his degree from the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Currently, he is preparing to defend his PhD dissertation.



CHOIR IN MOTION

Choir in Motion (Chór w Ruchu) is a social and experimental group. It mixes music, performance, visual arts, and spatial work. For nine years, the group developed under a different name at one of Warsaw's museums. They created musical performances, art interventions, and soundtracks for films and plays. When they lost their original home at the institution, they chose to rebuild the group as a grassroots movement. In early 2024, the Choir was reborn in its current form. It is an independently organized effort outside institutional frameworks. It stays open to new ideas and experiments.

The Choir first sang and signed for the project *Rebellion of the Deaf. Renewal* (2025). It was directed by Bogna Burska, with Daniel Kotowski's collaboration. In that project, the artists explored the themes of communication and accessibility. This collaboration built a special community of hearing and Deaf people. They learned from each other, even with language barriers. They performed together, using both phonic and sign languages. *Liquid Tongues* continues this process. It pushes the limits of how we view communication. It also reshapes our ideas about communities and worlds, including those that are more-than-human.

THE POLISH PAVILION

For the last seventy years the caretaker of the Polish Pavilion has been Zachęta—National Gallery of Art, the organizer of the exhibition during the 61st International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia. Poland has been participating at Biennale Arte since 1932, and at the Biennale Architettura since 1991. The construction of the Polish Pavilion in Venice was financed in the 1930s by the Polish government, whose property it remains to this day. The Pavilion's mission is focused on the promotion of contemporary art, the exchange of artistic ideas and drawing attention to problems of the contemporary world.

Curatorial text in IS:



The Polish Pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia

May 9–November 22, 2026

Liquid Tongues

artists:

Bogna Burska, Daniel Kotowski

curators:

Ewa Chomicka, Jolanta Woszczenko

Polish Pavilion commissioner:

Agnieszka Pindera, director of Zachęta—National Gallery of Art

texts:

Ewa Chomicka, Jolanta Woszczenko, Bogna Burska, Daniel Kotowski

Plain Language expert:

Alicja Sekret

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