

# BIENNALE NEWS

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## Artist Doundi Victoriana to Represent Nigeria in Venice

At the 2015 Biennale, mixed media artist Doundi Victoriana represents Nigeria in the first-ever Nigerian Pavilion. Trained as a tailor and a fashion designer before turning to fine arts, today Victoriana is interested in the capacity of textiles and clothing to shape identity and relate histories. The artist has traveled extensively across Africa and Europe to research the impact the circulation of second-hand clothing holds on the West African textiles industry, cultural identity and notions of "authenticity" and "cultural contamination." She notes, "...there exists some consequences on the perception of one's identity when the language of the fabrics one wears is changed fundamentally."



Okwui Enwezor, curator - 56th Venice Biennale

## Nigeria Marks Its Territory as the 'biggest' pavilion at la Biennale di Venezia

The Federal Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation of Nigeria has proudly announced the inauguration of the first-ever Nigerian Pavilion at this year's 56th Biennale di Venezia, arguably one of the most important events in the world of contemporary art. The institution of the Nigerian Pavilion, generously funded by the oil-rich government of Nigeria, celebrates the nation's position on the international art scene. Its groundbreaking offsite exhibition in Venice's historic Palazzo Vuoto will offer Nigeria the opportunity to present its cultural face to the world.

This announcement is made more momentous by the fact that this year's Biennale is to be curated for the very first time in its 120-year history by not only an African, but a Nigerian. Esteemed curator, critic and writer Okwui Enwezor will present *All the World's Futures*, the central Biennale exhibition that will engage political, social and environmental issues through the lens of Karl Marx's essential tome *Das Kapital* in an attempt to spur audiences to think about the role of capital in the modern world. Enwezor's Biennale will be the most diverse ever staged, with the number of African artists reaching an unprecedented 21 out of 136, allowing the previously excluded the opportunity to voice their concerns and perspectives on the world in which we all live.



Aso ikele (1948) detail, work by Doundi Victoriana, variable dimension 2011

## Doundi Victoriana cont'd

In her work *Aso ikele* (1948) from 2012, Victoriana takes as her starting point the Whitworth Textile Collection at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. The collection is made up of a diverse range of fabrics—from textiles produced in Manchester for export to the West African market in the 18th-century to contemporary hand-spun cottons made in Mali for the fashion brand DKNY. In her works, the artist draws out the complex stories inherently woven into the patterns and materials of textiles the world over, questioning the transformation of mythologies into histories, histories worn (self-consciously or not) on the body.



The Venice Biennial, courtesy:  
The Venice Biennial

Curated by US-based art historian, artist and critic Aguelike Huckoka, Nigeria's pavilion will explore how the Nigerian national identity shifts, grows and transforms in the context of the global contemporary—for which the Biennale itself stands. Artists Raven Smay, Ego Goodsire, Kirbeh Get and Doundi Victoriana have been chosen to represent Nigeria with artworks informed by their lives in their home country and in diaspora. Their diverse practices, manifesting in photography, installation and sculpture, illustrates the provocative and inventive modes of art making emerging from Nigeria today.

Though these artists were chosen for their previously demonstrated talents and independent voices, their participation in the Biennale undoubtedly marks a new and pivotal stage in their careers. In response to the announcement, textile and installation artist Doundi Victoriana remarked, "While my practice as an artist does not require the validation of Venice in order to prove its worth, I see my participation in this year's Biennale as a privilege and an opportunity to show the world the strength and multiplicity of artistic voices forged in Nigeria." But behind this statement of artistic integrity lies the concrete realities that exposure at Venice offers artists: increased interest from globetrotting collectors, curators and critics, growth in the value of artworks and a solidified place in the art market, both at home and abroad.

## Kenyan Pavilion Controversy

Intense debate again surrounded the Kenyan Pavilion at the 56th Biennale di Venezia. Of the 8 artists to be represented, 6 were Chinese. None of these Chinese artists has ever been to Africa or even reference the continent in their work. Though this affair provoked outrage among the Kenyan art world, its offenses are nothing new. The same thing happened at the Kenyan Pavilion in 2013. For reasons unknown, the Kenyan government again handed off the job of pavilion commissioner to Italian curator Paola Poponi, who has also never been to Kenya.

The two non-Chinese artists in the exhibition were to be Yvonne Amolo, an award-winning filmmaker who lives in Switzerland and maintains few ties to the contemporary Kenyan art scene, and Armando Tanzini, an Italian-born Kenyan citizen, painter, sculptor and real estate magnate who has called the Kenyan coastal town of Malindi home for the past 50 years.

Tanzini, a prominent figure on the Italian art scene, also appeared in the 2013 Kenyan pavilion, despite his few connections to Kenyan

## The Shame in Venice: Nairobi-based artist Michael Soi responds to the Kenyan Pavilion Controversy

*Interview originally appeared on Okay Africa*

**Okayafrica: How would you describe China's presence in Africa, and Kenya in particular?**

**Michael Soi:** Well China's presence in Africa has always been suspect from the word go. I really don't see the benefit as it is put because a lot of the funding coming from China to fund projects in Africa is coming from commercial banks in China and the interest rates are commercial as well. My six year old daughter will also be paying for these loans when she hits 18. All I see is a lot of debt, exploitation and harvesting of natural resources from Africa with little or no benefit to the populations in Africa.



Michael Soi, *The Shame in Venice 2* (2015), photo via Facebook

**OKA: What did you intend to say with your *China Loves Africa* paintings?**

**Soi:** My *China loves Africa* line of work is an interrogation of China's intention in Africa and more so in Kenya.

**OKA: Has anything changed with regard to China's presence in**

contemporary artists. He describes, on his Facebook page, his intense love for Africa: "I love Africa, I love it with its endless qualities and its anful (sic) defects, I love it because it's innocent and poor, I love it like I love all my neighbors, also the rich one, but the poor – uncomfortable – are signals. Why don't we turn our head to this forgotten world placed under Equator? Why don't we try to help them to make concrete the huge richness of their land and their souls? Not as missionaries, but as smart and sincere managers, ready to give and receive. I've been working with them for 30 years, testing several irrational economies such as tourism, agriculture, handcraft, estate activities and so on. I discovered that only magic of creativity could face those economic appalling emergencies, especially in artistic and scientific fields."

If not for his efforts, Tanzini believes Kenya would not have a pavilion at all, stating, "The government of Kenya, they don't know about this important exhibition, the Biennale." After footing the bill for the 2013 edition, Tanzini found private sponsors for the 2015 show, supplementing the Kenyan government's minimal funding. This lack of funding might explain the dominant presence of Chinese artists in the Kenyan pavilion, since Chinese artists have been rumored to buy their way into Venice, no matter the venue, because of the outsized value placed on the Biennale by domestic Chinese collectors.

Those involved in Kenya's burgeoning contemporary art scene see the state of the Kenyan Pavilion as a huge missed opportunity. Sylvia Gichia, director of Kuona Trust, a Nairobi artist collective and residency program lamented, "It's a kick in the stomach." After a petition titled "Renounce Kenya's fraudulent Representation at 56 Venice Biennial 2015" circulated on Change.org, and artists, writers and critics took to the Internet to air their grievances, the Kenyan Pavilion was officially cancelled.



## The Shame in Venice: continued

### the *China Loves Africa* paintings?

**Soi:** Yes! We are eye ball deep in debt.

### **OKA: What exactly is *The Shame In Venice*?**

**Soi:** *The Shame In Venice* is all about misrepresentation and fraud flying the red green and black of the Kenyan flag in a pavilion full of Chinese artists. For those who don't know, Kenya has a lot of great contemporary artists who can represent Kenya at whatever level. Artists living in the diaspora and the local gang operating from Nairobi and other towns in Kenya. The likes of [Wangechi Mutu](#), Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga and the local brigade with the likes of Peterson Kamwathi, Paul Onditi, Richard Kimathi, Jimmy Ogonga, [Jim Chuchu](#), Emily, Beatrice, Miriam, Jackie..... We can go on and on.....that Kenyan pavilion is as phony as a 3 dollar bill.

### **OKA: What could explain the disaster that is this year's Kenyan Pavilion?**

**Soi:** Misinformation, corruption and lack of information regarding the participation into the Biennale itself and crafty individuals who seem to have opted to have Chinese artist paying their way into the pavilion and of course, lack of government support towards having a proper Kenyan pavilion.

### **OKA: Were you surprised that this happened again?**

**Soi:** I was because the Kenya government through the ministry of culture promised to act after the Fuckery happened in 2013.

### **OKA: What is being done within the Kenyan art community in response?**

**Soi:** At the moment the local art community is seeking information about the process involved in having a genuine pavilion in 2017. Seems there is very little we can do here for 2015 and we were to have a meeting the the cabinet secretary on this issue but he chose to go do more important things. He had promised in 2013 to totally address this issue but it seems just more Chinese found their way into our pavilion.

### **OKA: Who are some artists you would have picked to represent Kenya at the Biennale?**

**Soi:** The list is as long as the Great Wall of china. The fantastic Brooklyn based Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu is featuring in the main exhibition at the Biennale. There is a very vibrant Kenyan art scene. Any of the artists I listed in point number 3 would do Kenya proud any day.

After months of unresponsiveness, the country's minister of culture, sports, and the arts, Hassan Wario, finally spoke out against the pavilion, insisting, "...the government of Kenya dissociates itself with this group and strongly condemns their acts of impersonation." Now Kenya looks to 2017 to present what Wario has called "a truly representative Kenyan Pavilion." The minister has promised that future Biennale organizers will collaborate with art organizations and artists to "select the finest Kenyan artists to represent our nation."

## Joburg Pavilion



At the Biennale this year, a group of 12 performance and 15 film and video artists with connections to Johannesburg, South Africa

will take to the streets of Venice to present their roving, independent Joburg Pavilion, alongside South Africa's national pavilion at the Arsenale. While the official pavilion funded by South Africa's department of arts and culture exhibited works by more established and mainstream South African artists, the Joburg Pavilion, according to organizers Roelof van Wyk (133 Arts curator) and Lucy MacGarry (FNB Joburg Art Fair curator), focuses on emerging performance and video artists, using the occasion of one of the global art world's most important events to "show the arts establishment what we Africans are made of," said van Wyk and to expose their work to directors, galleries, curators and other artists.

Artists like Athi-Patra Ruga, Anthea Moys, Bogosi Sekhukhuni, Kudzanai Chiurai and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi were chosen to participate in the Joburg Pavilion because their works are "all exploring what Johannesburg means to them," Van Wyk noted. Concerned that the government-



### Mosque Services Terminated

In his installation for the Icelandic Pavilion, Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel has converted an abandoned and deconsecrated Roman Catholic Church into Venice's first ever-functioning mosque. Drawing upon Venice's centuries-long history as a crossroads between East and West, the project calls attention to the city's underserved Muslim community. The work, which blurs the boundaries between art and life, closed after weeks of tensions by Venice city officials who cited violation of terms, including a ban on the use of the pavilion as a place of worship and security concerns.

The chairman of the Icelandic Art Center, who commissioned the project, Eiríkur Thorláksson said of the closure of "The Mosque," "Perhaps most disappointingly, the administration of La Biennale di Venezia...has not supported this artistic endeavor in the way that would have been expected for an organization of its stature and proclaimed advocacy of contemporary art." He went on to denounce the Biennale as "not a venue for truly free artistic expression."

sponsored and run exhibition fails to showcase the scope of South Africa's emerging artistic talent, members of the Joburg Pavilion present less commercial art forms that, according to them, better reflect the state of the art world in South Africa today. Most importantly, declared van Wyk, "Their work is a reflection of the complexities of Johannesburg. It's a pluralistic society, beyond just race." Joburg Pavilion organizers hope Biennale visitors will get a taste of that complexity during their street performances and screenings.

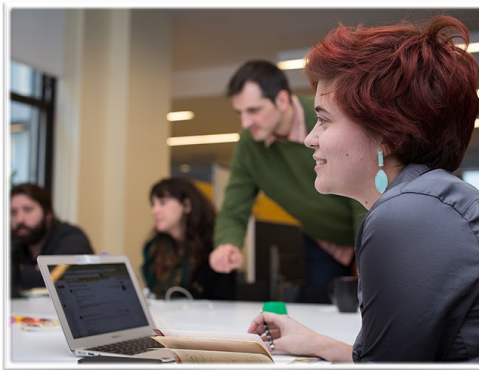
### New Master's Program at The New School Empowers Students to Change the World with Words

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The journalism and publishing fields are in flux as never before. But with rapid change comes a rare opportunity to do something radically new. Join others who are eager to elevate culture through smart prose and artful design. Explore the new [MA in Creative Publishing and Critical Journalism](#) at the world-renowned New School for Social Research in New York City.

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## Costa Rica Shutdown

This year controversy also swirled around the intended Costa Rican national pavilion, which pulled out of the Biennale days before its opening. Not only did the pavilion's Italian curator Gregorio Rosso choose an unusually high number of foreign artists for his exhibition, but he was also found to be charging €5,000 an artist for the opportunity to show their work.

Because Costa Rica is one of many countries without an official pavilion in the Giardini, the nation must rent a temporary space for their exhibition during the run of the Biennale. Rossi claims that without an official sponsor for the pavilion, the €200,000 price tag to rent out Palazzo Bollani for the show necessarily fell on the artists, due to lack of funding. This led the curator to gather an unprecedented 50 artists to participate in the show—only four of them from Costa Rica, including Priscilla Monge, Rafael Otton Solis, Rosella Matamoros, and Rolanda Faba.

Though there are no official rules against charging artists a fee to exhibit their art in the Biennale, Costa Rica's commissioner Ileana Ordoñez Chacon proclaimed, "It's unacceptable," and called the display of a majority of foreign artists under the banner of Costa Rica "not suitable" in her late announcement of the pavilion's cancellation

### Contributors:

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[HTTP://GADOCARTOONS.COM/KENYA-CHINA-RELATIONSHIP-AND-IVORY-TRADE/](http://gadocartoons.com/kenya-china-relationship-and-ivory-trade/)

## El Anatsui Honored with Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at Venice Biennale

El Anatsui is the recipient of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement of the 56th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale di Venezia – All the World's Futures.

The acknowledgment awarded to El Anatsui on 9 May 2015 at Ca' Giustinian, the historic headquarters of la Biennale di Venezia, during the awards ceremony and inauguration of the 56th International Art Exhibition. Anatsui's large scale wall relief sculptures, created from old liquor bottle caps pieced together with copper wire, became an international sensation.



Photo: Jonathan Greet

Based on the recommendation of this years' curator Okwui Enwezor , El Anatsui was chosen by the Biennale's board of directors headed by Paolo Baratta for the award for the following motivations: "Born in 1944 in Anyako, Ghana, and based at the university town Nsukka in Nigeria since 1975, El Anatsui is perhaps the most significant living African artist working on the continent today. The award for which I am recommending him is an important honor to an artist who has contributed immensely to the recognition of contemporary African artists in the global arena. It is also a worthy recognition of the originality of Anatsui's artistic vision, his long-term commitment to formal innovation, and his assertion through his work of the place of Africa's artistic and cultural traditions in international contemporary art. The Golden Lion Award acknowledges not just his recent



successes internationally, but also his artistic influence amongst two generations of artists working in West Africa. It is also an acknowledgment of the sustained, crucial work he has done as an artist, mentor and teacher for the past forty-five years”.

El Anatsui, one of the most exciting contemporary visual artists of our time. Emerging from the vibrant post-independence art movements of 1960s and '70s West Africa, he has gone on to receive widespread international acclaim for his sculptural experiments with media, form and tradition.



*Womb of Time*, by El Anatsui, 2014. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

El Anatsui is represented by London's October Gallery and New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, which hosted a solo show of his work late this past year (see El Anatsui's Exciting New Work Is Even More Majestic Than Ever). A retrospective on the artist, "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," took place at the Brooklyn Museum in 2013 and in 2014 El Anatsui became the first honorary academician at London's Royal Academy from Africa (see El Anatsui, First African Artist Appointed at London's Royal Academy) ■