

La Biennale di Venezia

18th International Architecture Exhibition

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The Laboratory of the Future

Agents of Change

What does it mean to be ‘an agent of change’? The question has shadowed the gestation period of *The Laboratory of the Future*, acting as both counterfoil and lifeforce to the exhibition as it has unfolded in the mind’s eye, where it now hovers, *almost* at the moment of its birth. Over the past nine months, in hundreds of conversations, text messages, Zoom calls and meetings, the question of whether exhibitions of this scale — both in terms of carbon and cost — are justified, has surfaced time and again. In May last year, I referred to the exhibition several times as ‘a story’, a narrative unfolding in space. Today, my understanding has changed. An architecture exhibition is both a moment and a process. It borrows its structure and format from art exhibitions, but it differs from art in critical ways which often go unnoticed. Aside from the desire to tell a story, questions of production, resources and representation are central to the way an architecture exhibition comes into the world, yet are rarely acknowledged or discussed. From the outset, it was clear that the essential gesture of *The Laboratory of the Future* would be ‘change’. In those same discussions that sought to justify the exhibition’s existence were difficult and often emotional conversations to do with resources, rights, and risk. For the first time ever, the spotlight has fallen on Africa and the African Diaspora, that fluid and enmeshed culture of people of African descent that now straddles the globe. What do we wish to say? How will what we say change anything? And, perhaps most importantly of all, how will what we say interact with and infuse what ‘others’ say, so that the exhibition is not a single story, but multiple stories that reflect the vexing, gorgeous kaleidoscope of ideas, contexts, aspirations, and meanings that is *every* voice responding to the issues of its time?

It is often said that culture is the sum total of the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves. Whilst it is true, what is missing in the statement is any acknowledgement of who the ‘we’ in question is. In architecture particularly, the dominant voice has historically been a singular, exclusive voice, whose reach and power ignores huge swathes of humanity — financially, creatively, conceptually — as though we have been listening and speaking in one tongue only. The ‘story’ of architecture is therefore incomplete. Not wrong, but incomplete. It is in this context particularly that exhibitions matter. They are a unique moment in which to augment, change, or re-tell a story, whose audience and impact is felt far beyond the physical walls and spaces that hold it. What we say publicly matters because it is the ground on which change is built, in tiny increments as well as giant leaps.

Exhibition Structure

The Laboratory of the Future is an exhibition of six parts. It includes 89 participants, over half of whom are from Africa or the African Diaspora. The gender balance is 50/50, and the average age of all participants is 43, dropping to 37 in the Curator’s Special Projects, where the youngest is 24.

46% of participants count education as a form of practice, and, for the first time ever, nearly half of participants are from sole or individual practices of five people or less. Across all the parts of *The Laboratory of the Future*, over 70% of exhibits are by practices run by an individual or a very small team. These statistics reflect a seismic change in the culture of architectural production at large, and an even greater shift in participation in international exhibitions. The balance has shifted. *Things fall apart. The centre can no longer hold.*

Central to all the projects is the primacy and potency of one tool: the imagination. It is impossible to build a better world if one cannot first imagine it. *The Laboratory of the Future* begins in the Central Pavilion in the Giardini, where 16 practices who represent a distilled *force majeure* of African and Diasporic architectural production have been gathered. It moves to the Arsenale complex, where participants in the *Dangerous Liaisons* section – represented also in Forte Marghera in Mestre, Venice mainland, with a large-scale installation by Emmanuel Pratt - rub shoulders with the *Curator's Special Projects*, for the first time a category that is as large as the others. Threaded through and amongst the works in both venues are young African and Diasporan practitioners, our *Guests from the Future*, whose work engages directly with the twin themes of this exhibition, decolonisation and decarbonisation, providing a snapshot, a glimpse of future practices and ways of seeing and being in the world. All participants in this Biennale Architettura speak from the richly creative 'both/and' position that is specific to those who occupy more than one identity, speak more than one language, or speak from locations long considered outside the centre. We have deliberately chosen to frame participants as 'practitioners', not 'architects' and/or 'urbanists', 'designers', 'landscape architects', 'engineers' or 'academics' because it is our contention that the rich, complex conditions of both Africa and a rapidly hybridising world call for a different and broader understanding of the term 'architect'.

Practitioners in the Exhibition

At the heart of the Exhibition in the Central Pavilion are some of the most significant African and African Diaspora practitioners working today. Adjaye Associates, Cave_bureau, MASS Design Group, SOFTLAB@PSU, Kéré Architecture, Ibrahim Mahama, Koffi & Diabaté Architectes, atelier masōmī, Olalekan Jeyifous, Studio Sean Canty, Sumayya Vally and Moad Musbahi, Thandi Loewenson, Theaster Gates Studio, Urban American City (Toni Griffin), Hood Design Studio and Basis all represent a distilled snapshot of the myriad roles, models and fields in which they all work, teach and practice. Those gathered here represent a *fraction* of the exploding community of African and African Diaspora practitioners who are redefining the term 'practice' in ways that could not have been imagined a decade ago.

To explore the idea of an expanding definition of architecture further, in the next section, *Dangerous Liaisons*, which unfolds in the Arsenale complex, the 37 practitioners chosen all work in hybrid ways, across disciplinary boundaries, across geographies, and across new forms of partnership and collaboration. There are single practitioners (Gloria Cabral, Liam Young, Suzanne Dhaliwal, Huda Tayob, Killing Architects); medium-sized architectural firms (MMA Design Studio, Kate Otten Architects) as well as two- or three-person firms who combine teaching and practice equally (Office 24-7 Architecture and Lemon Pebble Architects, Wolff Architects). There are larger practices that focus on decarbonisation in novel ways (White Arkitekter, BDR bureau & carton123 architecten, Flores & Prats Architects, and Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation), as well as experimental practices (Gbolade Design Studio, Studio Barnes, Le laboratoire d'architecture) whose work seeks to expand our understanding of what it means to decolonise knowledge and production. Work from every continent is represented here (RMA Architects, Neri&Hu Design and Research Office, ZAO/standardarchitecture, Grandeza Studio, Ursula Biemann, Gloria Cabral, Paulo Tavares, Studio Barnes, orizzontale, SCAPE Landscape Architecture, Studio of Serge

Attukwei Clotey, Twenty Nine Studio, Low Design Office, AMAA Collaborative Architecture, DAAR - Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, David Wengrow and Eyal Weizman with Forensic Architecture and Nebelivka project) and from disciplines such as film, investigative journalism, adaptive reuse, land reclamation, grass roots community-based practice.

For the first time ever in the Biennale Architettura, the *Curator's Special Projects* and *Special Participants* are a large category, out of competition. They are designated 'special' because of the close relationship with the Curator and her Curator's Assistants, working together to produce work in specific categories chosen by the Curator to complement the Exhibition. Three of these categories, *Mnemonic; Food, Agriculture and Climate Change*; and *Geography and Gender* look specifically at the complex relationship between memory and architecture (Adjaye Associates with Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Craig McClenaghan Architecture, Looty, and Studio & and Höweler + Yoon); between climate change, land practices and food production (Margarida Waco, Gloria Pavita, BothAnd Group) and between gender, architecture and performance (Ines Weizman, J. Yolande Daniels, Gugulethu Sibonelelo Mthembu, Caroline Wanjiku Kihato, Clare Loveday and Mareli Stolp). An additional category, *Guests from the Future*, features 22 emerging practitioners of colour whose work is threaded throughout the Arsenale complex and the Central Pavilion, providing a glimpse into who the architect of the future is likely to be, and where their interests, concerns and ambitions may lie. Black Females in Architecture, Dele Adeyemo, Cartografia Negra, Ibiye Camp, Courage Dgidula Kpodo with Postbox Ghana, Elementerre with Nzinga Biegueng-Mboup and Chérif Tall, Folasade Okunribido, Lauren-Loïs, Miriam Hillawi Abraham, Arinjoy Sen, Faber Futures, Tanoa Sasraku, Riff Studio, Anusha Alamgir, Guada Labs, Banga Collective, New South, Aziza Chaouni Projects, Blac Spac, MOE+ Art Architecture, Juergen Strohmayr and Glenn DeRoché have been selected for their ground-breaking work at all scales, in multiple contexts, from the 'real' to the imaginary and in between. The *Curator's Special Projects* are additionally supported by Ford Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Three *Special Participations*, filmmaker Amos Gitaï; architecture's first poet laureate Rhael 'LionHeart' Cape, Hon FRIBA and photographer James Morris are located in the Arsenale at key moments. Participants' work here is both archival and experiential, complementing the Curator's *Footnotes*, which comprise short texts by the Curator and photographs by Curator's Assistant Alice Clancy, Curator's Research Team Member Festus Jackson-Davis, that run throughout the Exhibition. Again, for the first time ever, the Biennale Architettura will include the Biennale College Architettura, which will run from 25 June to 22 July 2023. Fifteen renowned international tutors, Samia Henni, Marina Otero, Nana Biamah-Ofosu, Thireshen Govender, Lorenzo Romito, Jacopo Galli, Philippa Tumubweinee, Ngillan Gbadebo Faal, Rahesh Ram, Guillermo Fernández-Abascal, Urtzi Grau, Samir Pandya, Alice Clancy, Sarah de Villiers and Manijeh Verghese will work with fifty students, early career practitioners and academics from around the world, selected through an Open Call process over the four weeks of the teaching programme. A documentary of the educational experience will be filmed by Ángel Borrego Cubero and released in October this year. An international cast of critics will join the College in July. The Exhibition was designed with the support of the Curator's Assistants, Emmett Scanlon, Laurence Lord, Alice Clancy and Sarah de Villiers in tandem with Fred Swart's graphic and visual identity.

Carnival

The Exhibition programme is enriched by *Carnival*, a six-month-long cycle of events, lectures, panel discussions, films, and performances, that explore the themes of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition, starting in May 2023 and culminating in November 2023, supported by Rolex: exclusive Partner and official timepiece of the Exhibition. Conceived as a space of liberation rather than a spectacle or entertainment, *Carnival* offers a space for communication in which words, views, perspectives, and opinions are traded, heard, analysed, and remembered.

Politicians, policymakers, poets, filmmakers, documentary makers, writers, activists, community organisers and public intellectuals will share the stage with architects, academics, and students. Curating a public event programme is increasingly a form of architectural practice that attempts to bridge the gulf between architects and the public.

The Archive of the Future

Like Hemingway, who famously ended each day's work mid-sentence, *The Laboratory of the Future* closes with an open-ended question: what next? *The Archive of the Future* is a visual account of the processes, drawings, discussions, ideas, conversations, old arguments, propositions and new understandings that collectively brought this exhibition to life. *The Laboratory of the Future* is not didactic. It does not confirm directions, offer solutions, or deliver lessons. Instead, it is intended as a kind of rupture, an agent of change, where the exchange between participant, exhibit and visitor is not passive or predetermined. The exchange is intended as reciprocal, a form of glorious, unpredictable exchange, each transformed by the encounter, each emboldened to go forward into another future.