

Why the Venice Biennale matters

The importance of the politics, social commentary, and aesthetic trends on view
at the Olympics of contemporary art

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That sentiment has spread yet further. Three former Soviet states are among the eight countries showing in Venice for the first time, namely Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, defiantly demonstrating their identities as separate from Russia. Arrangements have not been straightforward. The artists behind the Kazakhstan pavilion, ORTA collective, faced severe tribulation when the art had to be re-routed around Ukraine and got stuck at the Georgian border. The vernissage, by necessity, became a triumph of improvisation. The artists bought up all the brown paper and tin foil in Venice, and created a womb-like chamber at Spazio Arco – the Centre for the New Genius – from which to perform their immersive, philosophical and pedagogical experiments into the fourth dimension.

It draws on and furthers the legacy of legendary avant-gardist Sergey Kalmykov, who is described as Russian even by Wikipedia (he did briefly work with Malevich in Moscow in the Twenties) but in fact was born in what is now Uzbekistan, and, post-Moscow sojourn, moved to Almaty, deliberately leaving the Soviet centre. Thus, they are reclaiming and correcting their immediate heritage while showcasing *keste* – traditional Kazakh embroidery – which has been used to depict some of Kalmykov's declarations in his handwriting: “I foresee a happy and real future”. There is collaborative joy to be found in experiencing their performance, which encourages us all to connect with our dreams and find our inner genius. “We believe that this can change the world,” says Rustem Begenov. (Malevich, incidentally, was born in Kyiv.)



Politically and socially the world has been through the wringer in the three years since the last Biennale. While some progress has been made – the patriarchy is on its way out, a long history of racial inequality and colonialism is being addressed – the pandemic is not over (masks are still *de rigueur* in Italy) and there is a war in Europe, a refugee crisis, and global warming (for which see the Chilean pavilion). Importantly, this glorious and sprawling exhibition shows us just how much further we've got to go to achieve that utopia that the Kazakhstan pavilion is inviting us to find, while placing the dream in tantalising reach.