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# ART/ARCHITECTURE; The Venice Biennale's Palestine Problem

By CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE JUNE 1, 2003

IF the title of this year's Venice Biennale, "Dreams and Conflicts," sounds like the name of a documentary on Middle East politics, well, you don't have to point that out to the man who came up with it. Francesco Bonami, the Chicago-based Italian curator who is the director of the 50th Biennale, has learned a sharp lesson over the last year about how, when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian divide, those words are practically synonymous.

Not long after taking up the Venice directorship in March 2002, Mr. Bonami mentioned in a briefing to the Biennale's board that he was considering adding a Palestinian pavilion to this year's exhibition, which opens June 15. The next morning he woke up to find an article on the plan in *Il Gazzettino*, the major Venetian daily, which included criticism of it as needlessly provocative or even anti-Semitic.

Mr. Bonami said he didn't exactly find comfort in the proclamations of support that surfaced, either. "There were these idiotic journalists who were talking about how great it would be to have Arafat at the opening, before they even knew the details," Mr. Bonami said in an interview in the Biennale's offices in the Ca' Giustinian, a handsome but dilapidated 15th-century building in the San Marco district here. "With this issue there is a prepackaged response, on both sides."

Following what Mr. Bonami now calls simply "the turmoil," he scaled back his original plan. Instead of a building filled with Palestinian art, the show will include an installation on Palestinian identity in the form of 10 seven-foot-high

passports that will be dispersed around the grounds. The work, called "Stateless Nation," was designed by Sandi Hilal, a Palestinian born in Bethlehem, and her Italian husband, Alessandro Petti, both of whom are trained as architects.

From the outset, the issue has been complicated by the Biennale's unusual two-tiered structure. Each edition of the show features a large group of artworks selected by the director -- and by guest curators, a group Mr. Bonami has expanded this year -- and arranged around a guiding theme. These works are shown in locations around the city, including the old shipbuilding yards called the Arsenale and the Giardini, gardens on the eastern edge of Venice.

But the gardens also include 32 national pavilions: permanent, free-standing buildings, from mansion- to maisonette-size, that line a series of shaded walkways. The pavilions, designed by architects including Alvar Aalto, Gerrit Rietveld and Carlo Scarpa, are filled with art chosen by their host countries. It was here that Mr. Bonami considered adding a building representing the Palestinians, though he admitted he hadn't thought much about the art or who might have selected it.

As a group the pavilions make up a sort of imperfect United Nations for the art world. While newly established or reconstituted nations like Estonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been added to the Biennale, some countries share pavilions, and more than 100, including most African and South American countries, are not represented at all. Israel has had a pavilion since 1952. Among Arab nations, only Egypt has one. Artists often criticize the system of pavilions as a Euro-centric relic.

At the same time that the political controversy was erupting, Mr. Bonami learned that his plans faced bureaucratic obstacles, too. It turns out that the state-financed Biennale is subject to what he called "certain foreign-policy regulations" -- notably, that pavilions can represent only those countries officially recognized by Rome.

"I actually think that if I had tried to add a Palestinian pavilion there would be a member of the state foreign office who would come and say, 'No, you can't do it, it's illegal,' or something like that," Mr. Bonami said. Even a one-time-only building for Palestinian artists in the Giardini would likely have been rejected, he added.

Last fall, eager to find a compromise, Mr. Bonami approached Ms. Hilal, 30, who was researching issues related to citizenship and globalization for her doctorate at a university in Gorizia, on the Italian border with Slovenia. She suggested that she collaborate with her husband, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in urban studies in Venice, and Mr. Bonami agreed.

She and Mr. Petti chose passports, Ms. Hilal said, because Palestinians, whose movement in Israel and the occupied territories is often restricted, "are absolutely obsessed with travel documents of all kinds; we can't afford not to be."

She added: "If you consider that more than half of all Palestinians are living outside of Palestine, then what is Palestine right now? Is it simply a limited geographic area? If Palestinians are dispersed all over the world, and if we think of the Biennale as a metaphor for the world, then Palestinians should be dispersed all over the Biennale. I would have represented the Palestinians this way even if he had asked us specifically to design a pavilion. For us, this is the Palestinian pavilion."

The installation, which includes identification cards and travel documents issued by the Palestinian Authority and the governments of Israel and Lebanon, among others, blown up to Brobdingnagian scale, is part of continuing research on Palestinian identity, Ms. Hilal said. An accompanying book, to be published this month by Marsilio, features interviews she and Mr. Petti conducted with 34 Palestinians around the world.

The giant passports suggest to Mr. Bonami a more general critique as well. "We live now in the midst of this huge conflict between the rise of globalization, where in some significant ways there are no borders and no limitations," he said, "and at the same time we see this growing need for, or growing imposition of, defined borders. The Palestinian reality is a kind of extreme case study in defining what a nation is or can be."

Indeed, the conceptual and generally inoffensive nature of "Stateless Nation" was a stroke of luck for Mr. Bonami -- or, to take a more cynical view, the product of canny curatorial strategy. The work offered a way to represent Palestinians that neither required the construction of a pavilion nor smacked too obviously of a retreat.

Still, even what turned out to be a minor shift in the Biennale's membership policies has emboldened supporters of other aggrieved populations, Mr. Bonami said. "I've had all the possible questions: 'What about the Kashmiri pavilion?' 'Why don't you do Kurdistan?' It's never-ending."

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