

Venice Biennale - Philippines and Uzbekistan Pavilions

2026 has been the year of feel-good internationalism, between the Winter Olympics, the FIFA World Cup, and now the Venice Biennale. This ideology is one that praises cultural portability and believes in the fantasy of being a citizen of the world. Amidst war and genocide, this feels more than disingenuous. For the 61st Venice Biennale, the late Cameroonian-Swiss curator Koyo Kouoh's *In Minor Keys* offers a place for the voices of non cultural hegemons. The minor keys referenced include small islands vulnerable to current surges and sea-level changes. While larger nations are buoyed up by their cultural export and offshore labor sourcing, controlling the flow of resources, the minor keys seemingly become lost in the blind spots and swallowed up by rising waters.

Often taken simply as negative space between continents and countries on the map, the sea has never been empty nor neutral territory; it is a medium through which nationstates express and enact power and sovereignty. Shipping corridors enable the global art trade, and they also allow for the export of arms to genocidal states; the sea facilitates what we call globalization and internationalism, but does not promise peace or cooperation. Nor does the Venice Biennale itself. As a vehicle for cultural hegemony, the Venice Biennale follows an Olympics-style format of national pavilions, inadvertently pitting nations against each other for millions of visitors, and treating nationality as fixed. But Kouoh's chosen theme makes for an interesting twist.

Italian poet and playwright Tiziano Scarpa speaks of "flat waves", invisible waves that lap against the walls of Venice's internal canals ¹. Though almost completely imperceptible from the surface, they perform important work: renewing the water to prevent stagnation and rot. The flat wave is Kouoh's proverbial minor key that goes unheard, that is fundamental to our survival. Though the flat wave is conceptualized through a Venetian context, I find traces of the flat wave in the works of the Philippines and Uzbekistan respectively.

The Philippines may well be the backbone of global maritime commerce, having endured centuries of colonialism due to its strategic position in the Pacific Ocean between Asia and the Americas. We would not have our transnationalism, our globalization without its provision of 25% of the maritime labor force. Cuyson's piece *Sea of Love/Dagat ng Pag-Ibig* is a multi-channel installation incorporates painting, sculpture, and filmmaking to tell the tale of a queer Filipino maritime worker named Kerel, their pre-colonialist shaman mother Nanay Cleo, and their trans lover Mutya. Set at sea, featuring luscious shots of mussel farming, docks and worker lodging on container ships, *Sea of Love* is a portrait of the Filipino seafarer as a lover and worker.



Jon Cuyson, *Sea of Love*. Image: Chloe Marchal

The framework that props this story up is the shipping container – Cuyson casts the sea as not only as a condition for love and longing, but also as a brutal, unforgiving workplace and the medium for global capitalism and transoceanic empires. The tempo of waves crashing on a faraway shore reminds us of who gets to stay rooted, and who must be unmoored. Entering the installation, we are surrounded by contemporary resin-cast artefacts such as mussels, plastic water bottles, a karaoke microphone, a suitcase, and bubblewrap. This is the true face of transnationalism and power: our lives must be arranged to be as portable as possible, hyper-mobile for labor's sake, whilst our loved ones look on from the shore.

While a coating of silver paint renders everything chrome and impersonal, sedentarizing living processes, the message shared by Cuyson is this: though these objects resemble fossils of global capitalism, they more importantly represent rituals of care, and signs of endurance beyond the dichotomy of conquer/be conquered. Love was here.



Jon Cuyson, *Sea of Love*. Image: Chloe Marchal

If the waterways of Cuyson's *Sea of Love* represent a transoceanic history of power and empire, at the Uzbekistan pavilion we see the legacy of another kind of crossroads. Located in the middle of the historic Silk Road, Uzbekistan is one more nation caught between global superpowers. *The Aural Sea*, curated by a young cohort at the Bukhara Biennial Curatorial School, honors the Aral Sea, an inland lake disastrously dried up by the Soviet Union diverting its water to agricultural projects circa the 1950s. Inspired by the contemporary mythology of young writer Allayar Darmanov which grapples with the extreme environmental degradation, *The Aural Sea* brings together seven artists from across Central, East and Southeast Asia to reimagine the Aral Sea as an exercise in agency and radical world-building. Their approach is multiple and constellatory: Xin Liu's biodegradable sculptures evoke notions of slow violence and reconsiderations of sustainable infrastructure prompted by the Anthropocene, Nguyen Phuong Linh's *Qi* depicts the land as a living, breathing thing whose body continually evolves alongside ours. *The Sun Sets In A Shell* by A. A. Murakami utilizes industrial knitting technology to memorialize the zebra-mussel that once lived in the Aral Sea. Each work commemorates the ecological legacy of the lake and the cultural legacy of the Karakalpak people who once settled the surrounding area. After being managed to death through

Soviet industrialization, the Aral Sea now represents to the younger generation a site of memory, knowledge and hope. Here, international collaboration plays out as a means for collective dreaming in the wake of destruction and conquest. *The Aral Sea* directs new flows of thought into otherwise seemingly barren landscapes.



Xin Liu, *The Permanent and the Insatiable: Born to Sea*. Image: Chloe Marchal

When we speak of “making waves”, we refer to influence, power and scale. In this regard, the flat wave is comparatively humble. It is also vital. The submissions of the Philippines and Uzbekistan at the 61st Venice Biennale respectively illustrate Kouoh’s principle of minor keys thoughtfully and with great sincerity. Their vulnerability as minor countries on the periphery of global cultural hegemony is transmuted into radical and creative world-building, and reflects sharp insights of global power dynamics.

To attend the Venice Biennale without criticality is to have faith in the prestige of institutions and art that is sanitized by the cultural embassy, the tourist board, the committee and the department of foreign affairs. It is also a glimpse at how contemporary art crystallizes a moment of international relations. Free circulation of goods and resources create conditions of hostility and oppression, but through contemporary art we have a shot at starting conversations about legacies

of love and liberation. From the margins, the Philippines and Uzbekistan remind us that the paradoxical flat wave, invisible at the surface, represents the crucial work of worlds unseen by those above.

(Word count: 1098)

Footnotes

¹ Tiziano Scarpa and Anna Zemella, *Catalogo delle onde: A Catalogue of Waves* (Venezia: Wetlands, 2024), 136.