

La Biennale di Venezia

18th International Architecture Exhibition



Statement by Lesley Lokko

Curator of 18th International Architecture Exhibition

Venice, 18 May 2023 - Grazie Presidente Cicutto per all'introduzione. Benvenuti a tutti e grazie a tutti per essere qui. È divertente, ma ad ogni conferenza stampa, purtroppo, mi sembra di parlare sempre meno italiano. With every press conference, I seem to speak less and less Italian. That was not the plan.

Thank you, President Cicutto for your welcome and the very special home you have afforded our ideas, not just today, but all through the days and months of this exhibition's journey. I'd also like to thank the journalists and press who have followed the story of this exhibition from the very beginning until now. Lots of people had lots to say about the intensity of the press component but not very much about its content. Almost without exception, the interviews have been thoughtful, insightful, and often surprising.

The past fifteen months have been an extraordinary journey. The experience has brought some questions into sharp relief, uncovered previously hidden challenges and swiftly dissolved others. There are three sets of people to whom everything is owed: participants, teams and donors. They have formed an interlocking triangle to support and sustain this entire project, from start to finish. Firstly, I would like to thank Professor Hugh Campbell of University College Dublin, who wrote to me as soon as the appointment was announced to say — and I quote — *'if you don't mind me making an observation and a suggestion. The observation is simply that YOU CANNOT DO THIS WITHOUT A TEAM!'* He was absolutely right, of course. In December 2021, the African Futures Institute was four months old and consisted of me, a cleaner and a driver. In March last year, we grew to six people, with a team of four based largely in Dublin, and now to three teams of eighteen people, spread around the world. To my team of curatorial assistants, to whom all the accolades are due, I am beyond grateful for the energy and ambition you brought to this exhibition, for the creative risks you've taken, but above all for your determination to do every single participant proud. The job of a curatorial assistant takes place in the background, behind-the-scenes, but it is the essential lifeblood of the exhibition, the intellectual and physical labour on which the entire edifice depends. The research team who painstakingly unearthed the young talent whose work threads throughout the exhibition were the genesis for the cross-generational conversations between practitioners that underpins so much of this exhibition: they are all here this week to see their ideas made manifest, and to share in what has already become a collective outpouring of pride and joy. The Biennale team — too vast to call a team, but a small army of teams — have worked alongside us for nearly two years, forming and cementing relationships that I hope will last a lifetime. They have been the first and last pieces in a complex chain which, again, is invisible but without which, nothing would go up, stand up, take shape or form. ROLEX, Exclusive Partner and Official Timepiece of the event, the other sponsors and the donors who have sustained my teams and so many of the participants — Ford, Mellon, Bloomberg — placed their trust and money in an idea, nothing more, which is now in the world because of it.

But not all teams are equal. To the team based in Accra, who were denied visas to attend an exhibition to which they have contributed their time, ideas, work, and labour, for almost the first time in my life, words fail me. The rejection document from the Italian Embassy in Accra states, "There are reasonable doubts as to your intention to leave the territory of the member state before the expiry of your visa." No explanation has been given as to what the doubts were, reasonable or otherwise. In a press release in response to journalists seeking clarification on the issue, the Italian Ambassador to Ghana wrote, "Our Embassy is deeply committed to promote collaboration with Ghana in all sectors, including in the cultural field and we spare no efforts to facilitate the participation of Ghanaian artists to important Art Exhibitions or events scheduled in Italy where we are at the forefront of policies to promote African cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible." This is not the forefront of policy, this is its ugly rear.

Much will be said about the story of these three young Ghanaian men, much of it in the heat of the moment with a microphone or camera lens recording the myriad emotions that it evokes. Throughout this exhibition, I have included the words and images of those who've walked the path to get here beside all of us today. Twenty years ago, in 2004, the day after the election of George W Bush, Toni Morrison wrote, *'I am staring out of the window in an extremely dark mood, feeling helpless. Then a friend, a fellow artist, calls to wish me happy holidays. He asks, "How are you?" And instead of "Oh, fine — and you?", I blurt out the truth: "Not well. Not only am I depressed, I can't seem to work, to write; it's as though I am paralyzed. I've never felt this way before, but the election..." I am about to explain with further detail when he interrupts, shouting: "No! No, no, no! This is precisely the time when artists go to work — not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That's our job!" This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal. I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge — even wisdom.*

For the moment, this is a headline story. It cannot become the defining story of this exhibition. That's too easy, too predictable, too cheap. This is not a new story. It's an old and familiar tale, if not to many in this audience, at least to the global majority who are not here. There are participants in this show who understand that 'this is precisely the time to go to work.' Over the coming months — thoughtfully, intelligently, carefully — participants will use the platform of this exhibition to work together to address the complex questions that have been raised.

In line with our ambition to 'do things differently', both in terms of participants and environmental impact, this exhibition had two major departures from tradition. One, we decided not to rebuild a new exhibition, but rather to adaptively re-use the framework we inherited from Cecilia Alemani, the Curator of the previous Art Biennale. Second, we asked participants to touch the Corderie and Central Pavilion as lightly as possible. Although certainly not carbon free, the use of screens, films, projections, and drawings in place of models and artefacts wherever possible sets a different tone. We're well aware of the need to quantify one's efforts statistically, with hard numbers instead of warm and vague 'aims', but we recognise too that changes must also be cultural — that the culture of architectural exhibitions must change. The changes had to happen on both sides: participants and audience.

So much has already been written about the expectation that this Biennale will change everything, simply by virtue of having more Black and African participants than previous exhibitions. But this

misses the point. For difference — however you construct it — to make a difference, it has to do more. It cannot simply be. The invitation to participants was therefore threefold: bring yourselves — your authentic selves, freed from expectations, professional mores and masks. Frame your work in terms of the two guiding principles: decolonisation and decarbonisation. Think deeply and carefully about your choice of representation. Unlike artists, architects invited to take part in exhibitions make work largely to represent something that exists ‘out there’, beyond the gallery, in the so-called real world. The traditional voice of architecture is the drawing, model or text. But, as Oprah once famously said, ‘no one remembers what you said or did, people only remember how you made them feel.’ This time, we asked participants to think about representation slightly differently, to make work appropriately, not just in terms of the traditions, but more importantly, in terms of how they wished the audience to feel. The exhibition aims to be experiential as well as informative; to produce a backdrop for participants’ work that does not overwhelm or compete but supports the work in every way possible; generously, conscientiously, ethically. In the past couple of days, I’ve heard many responses to the exhibition, but one in particular stands out. A journalist remarked, ‘It seems to stop short of architecture.’ Whilst I appreciate and understand the comment, for me, the opposite is true: it is our conventional understanding of architecture that stops short. I have said it over and over again since this extraordinary project began. The intention is not to replace, but to augment. To expand, not to contract. To add, not subtract.

I would like to end this short press conference with something I wrote to the team just after my appointment.

Dear Team,

There are many ways to start a creative project. Sometimes it begins with an idea, a kernel of truth that the author or curator hatches in the wee hours of the morning when the rest of the world is asleep and the mind wanders fluidly, easily. The idea grows, acquiring depth and weight, until it is formed enough to be shared. At other times, an idea or concept appears fully formed, usually born out of the conversations that preceded it. Occasionally, however, it is not ignited by a single spark, but is rather the crystallisation of many ideas whose provenance can be traced back over years, sometimes decades.

This letter is addressed to the team of disparate and dispersed people who make up both the AFI and the Biennale Project. It is available in both print and digital form. It is akin to a manifesto but written in a different key. Think of it as a love letter, a passionate description of the task that lies ahead. It is both personal and public. It is for you, but is also about, and of, you. It was written in one place, in one go, but I have been writing this all my life.