

Historical Archive of La Biennale di Venezia

The **Historical Archive of La Biennale di Venezia** (ASAC) not only gathers the documents and the collections documenting the Institution's activities from 1895 to the present, it also serves an **International Centre for Research on Contemporary Arts**, where archival materials become living resources for new research and experimentation. This occurs through the actions of La Biennale itself, of the Artistic Directors of the different departments (Arte and Architettura, Cinema, Danza, Musica and Teatro), of the students and researchers from all over the world as well as through collaborations with Universities and cultural Institutions.

The **Historical Archive** is organized into the **Archive** proper and the **Library**.

The Archive — pending its transfer to the new home at the Arsenale, in the restored buildings known as the **Magazzini del Ferro and the Officine, covering over 8,000 sqm** — has been located since 2008 in the spaces of the VEGA Venice Gateway for Science and Technology in Porto Marghera. Set up to host archives and collections, the spaces of Marghera guarantee optimal microclimatic conditions for conservation on one hand, and access to scholars for the consultation of materials on the other. **The Archive** preserves documents related to the activities of the Fondazione as well as materials related to the arts since the end of the XIX century. The Archive is distinguished by the heterogeneity of its materials, which include press reviews, photographs, documents, audiovisuals, music scores, works of art, vinyl records, manifestos. It has also acquired the following archives: *Archivio Luca Ronconi, Fondo Palazzo Grassi/Fiat (1984-2005), Archivio Premio Architettura città di Oderzo, Archivio Lorenzo Capellini, Archivio Luca Massimo Barbero, Archivio Nuova Icona, Archivio Enzo Di Martino, Archivio Tullio Kezich, Archivio Gian Piero Brunetta, Archivio Paolo Valmarana, Archivio Sergio Asti, Archivio Sergio Fantoni, Archivio Luciano e Maud Giaccari, Archivio Lucia Ronchetti, Archivio Roberto Mazzucco.*

The Biennale Library has been an integral part of the Central Pavilion at Giardini since 2009. The Library specializes in contemporary arts, with a special focus on the documentation of La Biennale's activities, preserving all the Biennale catalogues and collecting bibliographic material related to the disciplines of visual arts, architecture, cinema, dance, photography, music, and theatre. Thanks to its collection of more than 164,000 volumes and 3,200 periodicals, it is one of the main libraries of contemporary arts in Italy. A selection of works from the Historical Fund is on display at the Biennale's headquarters in Ca' Giustinian.

History

The Origins

La Biennale di Venezia, which began its exhibition activity in 1895, felt the need in 1928 to establish a proper archive of contemporary art, connected to the International Exhibition. Its promoter was the sculptor Antonio Maraini, then Secretary General, who, having succeeded Fradeletto and Pica in October 1927, worked to obtain premises in San Marco, inside Palazzo Ducale. In this way, the correspondence and documentary material initially piled up in a storeroom on the first floor of Palazzo Loredan were transferred to a small room on the ground floor of Palazzo Ducale, forming the first nucleus of what would become the ASAC Library. On 8 November 1928, the Istituto Storico d'Arte Contemporanea was inaugurated, under the direction of Domenico Varagnolo, a dialect poet and playwright.

1928–1949

Under the direction of Domenico Varagnolo (1928–1949), a method for recovering and preserving materials was established. Initially, this involved collecting books and catalogues from Italy and abroad, and contacting artists in order to obtain documentation and photographic material relating to their work. In this way, press clippings on artistic events were collected, together with documentation still held in the municipal palace, which was also significant for its letters and notable autographs. Photographers who had worked for La Biennale for years began to offer the negatives of all the reproductions of works of art they had produced: this formed the first nucleus of the Photo Library. In 1930, when La Biennale was transformed into an autonomous body following Royal Decree-Law no. 33 of 13 January 1930, it expanded its premises to include other adjoining rooms in Palazzo Ducale, and the Istituto Storico di Arte Contemporanea took the name Archivio Storico d'Arte Contemporanea. Meanwhile, still under Varagnolo's direction, once the mechanisms for expanding the Archive's holdings had been set in motion, the work of collecting the collections was further strengthened and relationships were established with the major national and international publishing houses and bookshops. In 1934, the Archive also began its publishing activity with the publication of the periodical "*L'arte nelle mostre italiane*", issued until 1941, when the war caused its suspension.

1950–1972

Following the death of Domenico Varagnolo in 1949, the Archive was directed from 1950 to 1972 by Umbro Apollonio, professor of contemporary art history at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Padua. During this period, the library and periodicals collection were developed in particular within the field of visual arts. The publication of the *Bollettino dell'Archivio Storico d'arte contemporanea* dates to 1950; it appeared as an independent section in the new magazine "*La Biennale di Venezia*", published until 1972 in collaboration with the institution's Press Office.

1973–1983

In 1973, Umbro Apollonio was succeeded by Wladimiro Dorigo, who served as curator until February 1983. That same year saw the reform of La Biennale, pursuant to Law no. 438 of 26 July 1973, which also determined the Archive's new name: Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee. Under Dorigo, the institution entered a new and important phase of renewal: new roles and premises, frequent and high-quality initiatives of various kinds, access to documents of diverse nature, the computerisation of the catalogues of the collections, and the authority of the figures invited to seminars and to contribute to the new journal — the *Annuario* of the current year, with

the Events of the previous year — a vast instrument for documenting all activities. The Archive, which was initially still located at Ca' Giustinian, included the Library, the Periodicals Collection, the Photo Library, the Film Library, the Media Library, the Historical Archive, the Documentary Collection and the Artistic Fund. In those years, it was the richest book and documentary collection for the study of contemporary arts in Italy. However, the condition of this vast and unique heritage was seriously deficient in terms of safety and accessibility at Ca' Giustinian and in the various warehouses and buildings scattered throughout the city that had housed it until 1975. It therefore became urgent to find a unified and permanent location, in keeping with the new and central role assigned to the Archive by the 1973 reform. This location was identified as Ca' Corner della Regina. On 1 September 1975, the offices, staff and holdings of ASAC were transferred there, while adaptation and arrangement works on the new premises were still underway. The new headquarters were officially inaugurated on 17 July 1976. In the new location, a large part of the Archive's materials was progressively made accessible to the public. That same year, an initial phase of automated access to a significant part of the library holdings was launched, with the entry of several thousand titles into electronic databases. After only a few years, however, the project to implement the databases came to a halt due to the financial and managerial difficulties facing the Archive. In 1983, these same difficulties led director Wladimiro Dorigo to resign.

1983–1997

From 1983 onwards, there was a progressive deterioration of both the service and the structure. During the decade from 1983 to 1992, the Archive was directed only formally by the various Secretaries General who succeeded one another on an interim basis. Only in the two-year period 1986–87, and for a brief time, was Luigi Scarpa — a historic executive of La Biennale — appointed curator. From the 1990s, the computerised cataloguing of the Library — books and periodicals — and of the Media Library — CDs — was launched, based on the standards established by the Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale (SBN), coordinated by the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico (ICCU) in Rome, in collaboration with the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice. In 1993, the Archive was directed by Gabriella Cecchini. From 1997, the Archive was closed to the public.

1998–2003

In 1998, with the new Law no. 19 of 29 January 1998, La Biennale became a Società di Cultura and the Archive, named A.S.A.C., was recognised as a permanent sector for research and cultural production, in addition to the other six sectors aimed at developing research activities in the fields of architecture, visual arts, cinema, dance, music and theatre. As with all sectors of La Biennale, in the same year the position of sector director was also established for A.S.A.C.; this role was held by Gianfranco Pontel (1998–2002) and Giuliano da Empoli (2002–2004). During the years of Paolo Baratta's first presidency (1998–2001), a project was proposed for the restructuring, reorganisation and computerisation of the Archive. Despite the uncertainty affecting A.S.A.C., in 2003, on the occasion of the 50. Biennale d'Arte, it obtained an event space at the Arsenale, where two important initiatives were organised: *Tipping Point and 99 - Tutte le idee meno una*. Also in 2003, while the Archive's offices and staff were transferred to a building inside VEGA, the Science and Technology Park in Marghera, the holdings and collections remained at Ca' Corner della Regina, the old headquarters, which was by then undergoing restoration and no longer accessible.

Recent Years

From 1 September 2004, following the transformation of La Biennale into a Fondazione, President Davide Croff appointed Giorgio Busetto as director of the Archive, whose reorganisation was then undertaken. The implementation and reorganisation of the Archive's heterogeneous collections were therefore launched, together with the preparation of new consultation tools ahead of its reopening to the public. Inventorying, cataloguing, digitisation, the publication of catalogues and studies, and above all the progressive computerisation through the creation of new databases gave new impetus to the life of the Archive. The climate-control system of the Photo Library, which had remained at Ca' Corner della Regina, was restored, and the creation of a modernly equipped storage facility with digitisation and cataloguing laboratories was begun at VEGA-Cygnus. In September 2006, on the occasion of the 63rd Venice International Film Festival, ASAC presented the new multimedia information system *Asac dati* to the public. The database for managing all of the Archive's collections was then tested. It had been developed, beginning in September 2005, in collaboration with 3Deverywhere, a spin-off of the Department of Information Engineering of the University of Padua, promoted in 2004 by Guido Cortellazzo. From May 2007, the Archive's offices and staff moved from the building inside VEGA where they had been temporarily located and found a more stable home in the Cygnus building, still within the Science and Technology Park in Marghera. A substantial part of the documentary heritage preserved in the former headquarters at Ca' Corner della Regina also began to be transferred to this new site. From June 2008, public consultation was launched at the VEGA site for the various collections and holdings, as well as at the new Library headquarters in the Giardini. In June 2009, the exhibition *Macchina di visione. Futuristi in Biennale* was inaugurated at Ca' Giustinian, displaying letters, catalogue prefaces, manifestos, photographs, films and audio tapes, the result of research carried out on materials held by ASAC. This was the first in a series of exhibitions, staged in the Portego of Ca' Giustinian, entirely created through the use and enhancement of ASAC's archival holdings. To date — July 2017 — around a dozen have been realised; the latest, *Biennale Arte Duemila e Uno*, inaugurated in June 2016, was a restaging of the exhibition itinerary of the 49. International Art Exhibition – *Plateau of Humankind*, curated by Harald Szeemann. The Archive's scientific activity was consolidated through the organisation of four international conferences entitled *Archivi e Mostre* (2012–2015), which identified archival practice as a permanent theme for La Biennale, particularly significant in relation to the contemporary field. The relationship between archives and exhibitions evolved in this reflection from an occasional topic into one of the fundamental themes of an organisation such as La Biennale. Since 2009, lawyer Debora Rossi has been the organisational manager of the Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts, continuing the activities of implementing and enhancing the preserved material.

Historical Archive International Centre for Research on the Contemporary Arts at the Arsenale

La Biennale di Venezia is committed to planning and implementing the activities of its Historical Archive with a view to establishing, around it, an **International Centre for Research on the Contemporary Arts**: a permanent hub for research aimed at students, researchers, professionals and cultural institutions from Italy and abroad.

During the development of the project, particular attention was paid to establishing **a strategy for the enhancement and implementation of the archives and collections**, with the aim of making them available for research and study using the most advanced methods.

The activities that now form the core of the Archive's work are characterised by a strong emphasis on collaboration and exchange with students, researchers, institutions and external universities, starting with the project to **map the geopolitical origins of the artists who have participated in the activities of all the Biennale's Departments over the last twenty years**, developed since 2022 in collaboration with students from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, IUAV University of Venice, La Sapienza University of Rome, IULM University of Communication and Languages, the Academy of Fine Arts and the Benedetto Marcello Conservatory of Music in Venice, and, from 2025, the University of Bologna.

The **Artistic Directors** of the Architecture and Visual Arts, Danza, Musica and Teatro departments are also required, as part of their remit, to devise and develop research projects based on archive materials, which may result in exhibitions or special projects.

In collaboration with the Directors, the **Biennale College ASAC – Writing in Residence** programme is also being developed through open calls for young graduates under the age of thirty interested in the disciplines covered by the Biennale. Selected participants have the opportunity to conduct research focused on the themes of the Exhibitions and Festivals, not only by attending the current events but also by exploring those themes within the Biennale Archive. Supervised by a tutor, they then devote themselves to writing a text that is included in a publication.

The Archive also organises a wide-ranging **programme of conferences, book launches and publishing initiatives**, as well as lectures dedicated to artists who have participated in the Biennale from its beginning to the present day, in collaboration with leading figures from the arts world — including critics, journalists, university lecturers, current and former artistic directors, artists and industry professionals. The events are aimed in particular at students and researchers and serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, to promote knowledge of the contemporary arts and their leading figures; on the other, to stimulate interest in consulting the archives and visiting the venues and exhibitions associated with them, thereby strengthening the link between research, memory and cultural engagement.

With the support of the Artistic Directors, the Archive is simultaneously carrying out **four projects aimed at the comprehensive and professional documentation of current artistic events**, with a view to compiling video and photographic material from the Art and Architecture Exhibitions, as well as Danza, Musica, Teatro and Film Festivals, thereby establishing a platform for the collection of material produced by the Biennale departments.

The Archive as a Centre of Production: the Special Projects

The Historical Archive promotes and develops **Special Projects that engage with all the Departments of La Biennale di Venezia**.

Starting from 2022, the following have been carried out:

ARCHÈUS. LABIRINTO MOZART, an immersive installation in Forte Marghera, by Ophicina and Damiano Michieletto, in collaboration with the Teatro La Fenice in Venice for the 1600th anniversary of the foundation of Venice during the 2022 Carnival.

PROMETEO. TRAGEDIA DELL'ASCOLTO by Luigi Nono, an opera produced by Biennale Musica in 1984, and staged again in January 2024 in the same venue in which it premiered, the Church of San Lorenzo, now Ocean Space/TBA21–Academy. The special Project for the new

production of the opera involved a joint effort between the Biennale Archive and the Luigi Nono Archive, which reached an agreement with La Biennale to transfer its materials to the International Centre for Research on the Contemporary Arts and together organize a dedicated one-day seminar.

THE WIND MAKES THE SKY. LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA ON THE TRACES OF MARCO POLO, a Special Project to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the death of Marco Polo (1324 – 2024) curated by Luigia Lonardelli.

The first stage was held at the Art Museum of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou (Zhejiang, People's Republic of China), with the collective exhibition *The Perfect Path. Hangzhou, Marco Polo's "city of heaven"* (November 10th 2024 - January 10th 2025), a sign of the first collaboration arising from the three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) recently signed by La Biennale di Venezia and the China Academy of Art (CAA), with the intent to promote a cultural and artistic dialogue between Italy and China.

The second stage was held in Venice at the Biennale headquarters with the exhibition *Gulnur Mukazhanova. Memory of Hope* (December 10th 2024 - February 28th 2025).

The third stage took place in Istanbul, at Artİstanbul Feshane, with the travelling installation *Amfibio Sound Days* (2–5 October 2025), organized in collaboration with the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSİV).

The fourth stage was held in New Delhi, at Bikaner House, with the exhibition *Indian Interior* (2–28 December 2025), in collaboration with the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA).

LA BIENNALE DELLA PAROLA

In March 2025, the first edition of La Biennale della Parola took place, titled *Expositio Sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem (Commentary on John's Gospel)* by Johannes Eckhart (1260 - 1328 ca.), the Dominican theologian and mystic known as Meister Eckhart. The project staged the *Commentary on John's Gospel* in the Portego delle Colonne of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, the atrium of the monumental sixteenth-century complex known today as the Ospedale Civile SS. Giovanni e Paolo with actors Federica Fracassi, Leda Kreider, Dario Aita together with the Coro della Cappella Marciana led by Maestro Marco Gemmani. The dramaturgy and direction are by Antonello Pocetti and the stage concept by Antonino Viola, video images by Andrew Quinn and the sound diffusion by Thierry Coduys.

LE GUERRE E LA PACE (Wars and Peace) is an encounter focused on the theme of conflict in European thought. On 6 November 2025 at the Sala delle Colonne, Ca' Giustinian, the philosopher Massimo Cacciari held a Lectio Magistralis titled *The death of jus belli*, inspired by two fundamental writings: *Zum ewigen Frieden* (Perpetual Peace) by Immanuel Kant and *Der Friede* (The Peace: A word to the youth of Europe: A word to the youth of the world) by Ernst Jünger.

ARCIPELAGO BATTIATO is a tribute to the composer and philosopher Franco Battiato (1945-2021) in collaboration with the publishing company SZ Sugar on the eightieth anniversary of his birth, that was performed on 17 and 18 November 2025 at the Teatro alle Tese in the Arsenale. Conceived as a musical narrative that unfurls among island-stages distributed throughout the sixteenth-century spaces of the Teatro alle Tese at the Arsenale, *Arcipelago Battiato* presents the musician's materials in a new form, with transcriptions, arrangements, and elaborations by the composers Leonardo Marino and Michele Tadini, who is also responsible for the electronic texture and the sound projection with Thierry Coduys. On stage: Malika Ayane, author and performer with the vocal versatility to range across genres, is accompanied by Leonardo Marino on the piano and keyboards, Flavio Virzi on the guitar, Simone Beneventi on percussion, Silvia Mandolini on the violin, Elide Sulsenti on the cello, with the multi-instrumentalist Diego Ronzio. The sets and direction are by Antonello Pocetti and Antonino Viola.

CORO is the masterpiece composed by Luciano Berio between 1974 and 1976, which premiered in Italy at the Biennale Teatro e Musica directed by Luca Ronconi in 1976. Coro was presented on 6 and 7 December 2025 at the Teatro La Fenice in a new production that featured original choreographies by Sir Wayne McGregor. A tribute dedicated by La Biennale di Venezia to the great composer on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, in collaboration with the Fondazione Teatro La Fenice and with the contribution of the Ministry of Culture.

Magazine La Biennale di Venezia

In 2024, the Magazine La Biennale di Venezia was relaunched as an activity of the Archive. The magazine, whose launch issue was released in July 1950 and which remained active until 1971, publishing 68 issues, was reborn with the same spirit and nature that had characterised it since the first edition, guided by one key word, *research*.

Conceived and produced as a printed edition, and featuring a significant iconographic apparatus that draws largely from the Historical Archive of La Biennale and from national and international photographic research, the magazine will be published quarterly. Each issue will have a monographic focus, establishing a dialogue between the disciplines characteristic of La Biennale di Venezia – visual arts, architecture, dance, music, theatre, cinema – as well as the sciences and literature. Like the original magazine, fashion is also included among its areas of interest, by reason of the relation of its creative processes with art, archives, experimentation. Each issue will contain original and exclusive articles, testimonies, interviews, dialogues and contribution by artists, scholars, leading Italian and international figures in the world of culture and civil society.

The editor-in-chief of the magazine is Debora Rossi. The director is journalist and author Luigi Mascheroni. The Editorial team consists of the Office of Editorial Activities, the Press Offices and a team of professionals from the various Departments of La Biennale. The graphic design is by Tomo Tomo, a communication design firm founded in Milan by Davide Di Gennaro and Luca Pitoni.

The magazine is on sale in the Biennale's online store <https://www.labiennale.org/en/buy-online> and in major bookstores.

The issue 1/24 titled *Diluvi prossimi venturi / The Coming Floods* was published in October 2024. In 2025, six issues were released: 1/25 titled *La forma del caos / The Shape of Chaos* was published in February 2025; 2/25, titled *Anteguerra / Things to Come* was published in May 2025; 3/25, titled *Materia prima / Raw Material* was published in September 2025; 4/25, titled *Applicazioni/Applications* was published in December 2025; 1/26, titled *Alfabeti / Alphabets* was published in March 2026; The issue 2/26, titled *Emisferi / Emispheres*, was published in May 2026

For further information

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