

A Creepy, Entrancing German Pavilion Is This Venice Biennale's Big Hit

artnews.com/art-news/reviews/german-pavilion-venice-biennale-2024-review-1234703292/



Ersan Mondtag, *Monument eines unbekanntes Menschen (Monument to an unknown person)*, 2024
Photo Thomas Aurin

In more senses than one, this year's German Pavilion is the most out-there national pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale.

For one, it's the most unsettling experience on offer: Space travel, somnambulant beings, booming noises, a humungous pile of dirt, and an all-around air of mystery can be found at this pavilion.

For another, it's geographically expansive, with art set not only in the Giardini, where Germany has a dedicated pavilion, but also on La Certosa, an island with almost nothing on it. Mass transit does run there, albeit infrequently, but there's not much to do once you arrive, other than seeing the art. That makes viewing this pavilion in full an odyssey in its own right, and that appears to be by design.

Çağla İlk, the pavilion's curator and the director of Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, writes in the text accompanying the exhibition that its title, "Thresholds," came to her while she was walking the length of the metal dock that connects the vaporetto to La Certosa. This is a transitional space that one generally ignores. After exiting the vaporetto, most will focus

on the connecting trail that brings viewers through this forested island, not on what leads up to it. But the German Pavilion draws attention to and confers value on these in-between places, perhaps even more than the sites bordering them.

To underline the point, Ilk has placed a sound work by Nigerian-born, US-based writer Louis Chude-Sokei along that dock. “We move through doorways too quickly,” Chude-Sokei can be heard saying, his voice echoing as he somberly speaks. In slowing down to experience this work, visitors end up having to pay mind to one such threshold that’s usually rushed through.

Notably, Chude-Sokei is one of several artists here who was born outside the country where they are now based, and that, too, is part of this pavilion’s endgame. Ilk has devised a show that attempts to move away from the national pavilion model, which, in the case of Germany, has historically relied on fixed understandings of what constitutes Germanness—a problem made all the more evident by its structure’s infamous fascist architecture. She and the German Pavilion’s artists refute the idea that borders define Germany—or any other nation, for that matter.

Past Germany representatives have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to undertake a similar project. In 2022, Maria Eichhorn blasted out portions of the pavilion’s floor, in an attempt to excavate the pavilion’s fascist origins and leave them exposed. It was a limp, unconvincing gesture, because a true subversion of the pavilion’s history requires something more dramatic. And that, thankfully, is what Ersan Mondtag has done with *Monument eines unbekanntes Menschen* (Monument to an unknown person), 2024, a work which partially involves covering the German Pavilion’s building in a mound of dirt that obscures it.

This is an ominous, menacing work, and one which finds an even spookier counterpart inside, where Mondtag has built a three-level, walk-in structure. Its exterior is covered in Eternit, a branded form of asbestos and the name of the company that produces it. Eternit employed Mondtag’s father, who ended up dying prematurely from the toxic fruits of his labor. Inside, Mondtag has created something like a disused home caked in dirt and scum; performers slowly walk around, alienated from each other and seemingly ignorant of the people observing them. When I visited, up top, a nude man standing in for Mondtag’s dad lay against a wall like a corpse. Mondtag is saying that the dead never really disappear—they return periodically to scare the crap out of those who don’t suspect their presence.



Yael Bartana, *Farewell*, 2024. Photo Andrea Rossetti

Outside that installation, on a gigantic screen, there's Yael Bartana's *Farewell* (2024), a video in which a circle of women and a nearly naked man appear to summon—or perhaps guide—an alien vessel. The women dance around in a circle, seemingly moving this computer-generated ship through the stars. Drawing on kabbalistic thinking about the interconnectedness of our inner and outer lives, Bartana suggests that Earth and the vast reaches of spaces are bound in ways we might not always realize.

During the Biennale's opening days, lengthy lines formed to enter the Giardini part of the German Pavilion. It's understandable why: in a Biennale largely free of spectacle, the German Pavilion offers big, extravagant sights that are best experienced in person. The dark lighting inside appears to intentionally discourage those who come to post on social media and depart soon afterward, anyway.

But the people that queued up for the Giardini portion generally seem not to have ventured over to La Certosa, which was nearly empty when I visited today. Their loss. The portion on the island is the better half of this pavilion, whose disturbances function best within a more unusual setting.

Think of the environmentally uninhabitable Shimmer of the 2018 sci-fi film *Annihilation*, and you might be able to imagine La Certosa, an island that consists mostly of trees, unruly grass, and half-destroyed buildings. (A resort is tucked away on one side of it, but you wouldn't know that unless you went looking for it.) The artists play up the extraterrestrial feel of it all, with Jan St. Werner setting an installation called *Volumes Inverted* within the ruins of a monastery. The piece consists mostly of a rotating speaker

that emits a repeated high-frequency sound. That tinkling noise, which reverberates across the brick walls nearby, can produce auditory hallucinations. Appropriately, given this pavilion's creepiness, those imagined tones are known as ghost sounds.



Jan St. Werner, *Volumes Inverted*, 2024. Photo Andrea Rossetti

In an area that is literally off the beaten path, there's *Scattered by the Trees* (2024), a mind-warping piece by Michael Akstaller that features dripping and chirping noises that play from two tall speakers. Those sounds, it turns out, come from two nearby trees, whom the artist proposes are actually conversing with one another.

It's easy to miss all this, partly because the noises fade into the island's larger soundscape, and partly because the German Pavilion's website contains no information about these works, supplying only a map that appears once on La Certosa, toward the end of the dock. Without much help here, your ear becomes your guide. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this is a pavilion that urges viewers to listen harder to those whose voices are not always the loudest.



Nicole L'Huillier, *Encuentros* (Encounters), 2024. Photo Andrea Rossetti

It's also a pavilion about communion across realms, using sound as means to jump through borders. This seems to be the aim of the pavilion's strangest contribution, Nicole L'Huillier's *Encuentros* (Encounters, 2024), a group of microphones inset within sheets of plastic. They hang skin-like across tree branches, blowing as hard gusts of wind hit them. The microphones held within pick up the sounds of the forest and relay it all around via a speaker that blends into the surroundings.

A faint hum played softly from within a grouping of canes when I visited. Periodically, I also heard a whumping noise—similar to that of a sonogram machine—beneath the hum. Then I realized that I had caused it by stepping across the gravel path. At that moment, my movements might have been audible to people across the island willing to do some deep listening.