Notes on Venice

Every two years, the Venice Biennale reenacts the city-wide theater of an international event that seeks to represent the artists of the world through encapsulating installations and exhibitions representative of nationality. Besides this manifestation of spectacle, the Biennale reaches beyond its physical limits—for months before each iteration artists, maintenance workers, unpaid interns, administrators, cultural embassies, and more, labor tirelessly towards the relatively short event. Despite all of the costs of all incurred through this labor, the Biennale remains as the producer of some of the most breath-taking, and culturally significant artwork seen today.

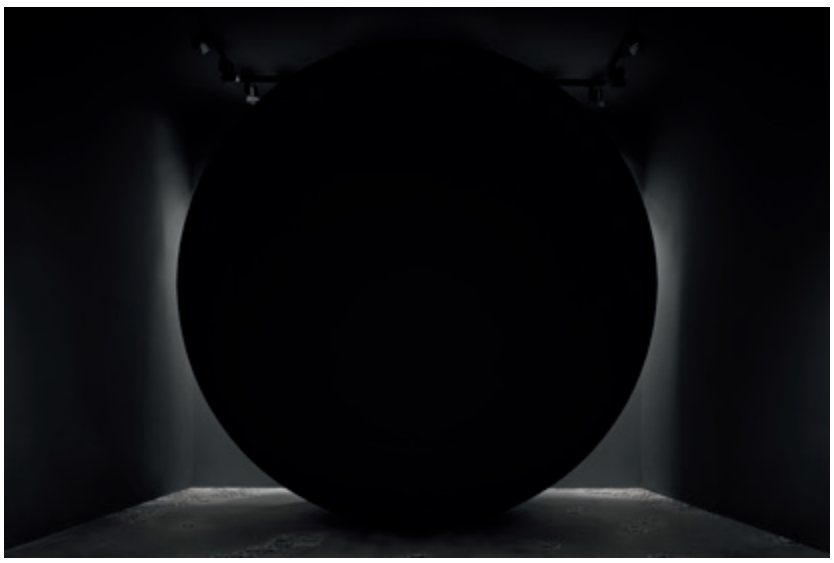
In celebration of the 58th iteration of the La Biennale di Venezia, THE SEEN gathers reviews and interviews in *Notes on Venice*, a collaborative feature by Staff Writers on the sprawling exhibition. Prefaced by a more telescopic review by Rashayla Marie Brown grounding the feature, interviews by Natalie Hegert with the artists of the Golden-Lion-winning Lithuanian Pavilion, Anna Searle Jones with Sean Edwards on Wales, and Dr. Kostas Prapoglou with Larissa Sansour on the Pavilion of Denmark follow.

Larissa Sansour

HEIRLOOM // PAVILION OF DENMARK

By Dr. Kostas Prapoglou

***Heirloom*, curated by Nat Muller, is the title of the Pavilion of Denmark, which encompasses the work of East Jerusalem-born and London-based artist Larissa Sansour. In *Heirloom*, the pavilion is divided into two conceptually interconnected parts; the first, a dark room with the mixed media installation *Monument for Lost Time* (2019), a gigantic black sphere whose presence occupies the entirety of the gallery volume to represent a type of repository of memories, which visually appears in the second room's two-channel film installation, entitled *In Vitro* (2019), directed by Søren Lind. ——————————————————————————————————The gravitas of the pavilion lies in the philosophical dialogue between the two women within *In Vitro*; Dunia is a survivor of a world disaster and Alia is a younger woman and a clone who carries in her DNA the memory and identity of the past. Set in a post-apocalyptic environment where the two women live underground, the film explores how the dynamics of socio-cultural, and personal or inter-personal, narratives can be organically inherited through generations, or whether it is a construct based on well-orchestrated parameters. An exchange on how the future can be built on the memories or experiences of the past gradually unfolds. The grayscale aesthetics of the film in combination with the brutalist architecture of the underground settlement and the images of the city of Bethlehem (from both historical footage and digitally processed images to depict science fiction scenes) pronounce the artist's interest in both human and environmental conditions—taking into consideration serious historical events for humanity—filtered through the need of continuity and survival.**



Kostas Prapoglou: The two protagonists of *In Vitro*, Dunia (a survivor from a world catastrophe) and Alia (a clone), engage in a philosophical debate embracing the sense of belonging and the polarities of existence. Did you conceive the clone as a liberated life-form, or as a trapped and troubled man-made being?

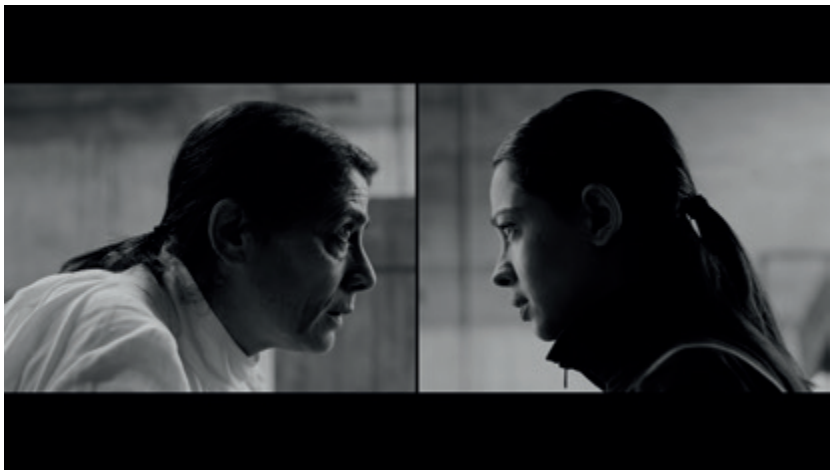
Larissa Sansour: *In Vitro's* clone, Alia, is born underground and has never seen the place she is destined to rebuild. She is raised on the stories passed onto her and is expected to recreate the future in the image of the past. Her inherited memories and traumas constitute her primary entrapment. She is brought up to see the underground compound she was born into as a temporary and involuntary exile, a place she is expected to eventually abandon. Liberation, she is taught, comes later, so her entire upbringing is based on the concept of entrapment—both physical and psychological—with even her future limited to a destiny long since mapped out for her. Throughout the film, her rebellion against her predicament increases. She resists the idea of her life underground as a state of exile, just as she rejects the memories of the past as a convincing foundation for a functional future. It is within these rebellions and dismissals that her own definition of liberation begins to take shape, and the conflict she is going through probably reflects that of many people born in a state of exile.

KP: Dunia states in her dialogue with Alia, "Entire nations are built on fairy tales. Facts alone are too sterile for a cohesive understanding." How significant are the ways in which nations construct their cultural identity and collective memory to your work, and how do you interpret them?

LS: I have been dealing with the iconography and symbols of national identity frequently in recent projects—the topic interests me a great deal, especially in cases where cultural heritage and national self-understanding are under threat. With no 'present' to speak of, the Palestinian psyche is suspended between past and future, between the collective memory of pre-disaster and shared ambitions for a future state. The present is mainly defined by its absences, its voids, its lack of clear definitions. This accentuates the need to pin down a sense of identity—of who you are as a person—but the very urgency of this need also makes the attempt at a unifying gesture, manifest and unyielding in its simplicity. I tend to reach for the most basic and simplistic tropes, which applies to national narratives generally. The urge to identify indubitable signifiers of heritage and belonging is a reductive and revisionist endeavor. The need for a national pathos increases in times of despair and disunity, as emotional content lends a gravity that is difficult to challenge. Nation-building and the preservation of national identity are difficult disciplines. These challenges are central to the generational showdown in *In Vitro* between an older scientist who has experienced the world before the apocalypse, and her younger successor who has been chosen to lead the rebuilding of the future in the image of a past she has never seen.

KP: Why did you choose the Palestinian city of Bethlehem as the conceptual setting of your narrative? What are those symbolic parameters that collide with your own origins?

LS: I grew up in Bethlehem, and my family still has a home there. It is a city I know intimately, and it has gone through many transformations during my lifetime due to the political situation. Today, Bethlehem is a very busy, overcrowded, and in many



ways stifled town—very different from the sleepy and quaint Bethlehem of the 1970s and '80s when I grew up. In a sense, the city has undergone and is still experiencing an apocalypse of sorts, starting with a direct Israeli military occupation, and finally being suffocated with the completion of the Israeli separation wall. For *In Vitro*, I wanted the setting to be close to my own experience in order to cultivate the emotional aspect of the otherwise cold rational argument between the film's two protagonists. Everyone knows Bethlehem, and for many, it is a mythical or Biblical place very far removed from the politically-marred Bethlehem I know. This contrast is also accentuated in my work via the interplay between fact and fiction.

KP: The element of archaeology seems to play a key role in your practice. What are the mechanisms that inspire you or trigger your creative thinking when it comes to negotiating with notions of the present and the future?

LS: Archaeology is interesting, as it appears to offer the kind of indisputable evidence of belonging necessary to confirm nationalist narratives—if you can demonstrate an ancestral presence, this validates your sense of territorial entitlement. In the Middle East, archaeology has been part of nationalist projects for a long time, with the instrumentalization of the discipline at risk of rendering it scientifically dubious. If your interest in unearthing artifacts is driven by a desire to confirm rather than to understand, then you are in effect politicizing an inherently neutral scientific method. I used the notion of archaeology as warfare as the basis for a short film, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015), in which the protagonist decides to play the archaeological game to her own advantage. By planting artifacts for future archaeologists to excavate, she hopes to confirm a politically advantageous narrative and alter the foundations for future political dialogue.

KP: How do you envisage *Heirloom* will speak to such diverse audiences in Venice, and what kind of reactions have you received so far?

LS: I am hoping that the themes explored in *Heirloom* will resonate with people on many levels and beyond any regional context. The first indications are that they do. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. While the narratives may unfold within a local framework, the exhibition is about memory, nostalgia, inherited trauma, and generational conflict—all of which are concepts of universal validity. The film's ambition is to challenge understandings of authenticity and question the constructs of national identity, heritage, and belonging. At a time where nationalism is on the rise around the world, these concepts are staples in political debates reaching far beyond the Middle East.

KP: What are your plans post-*Heirloom*? Will this narrative evolve further, or will you be working on something completely diverse?

LS: I am currently working on two new projects, both of them further developing ideas already present in *Heirloom*. One project is a feature film based on the short I did for Venice. This film will focus on collective and personal memories and their role in shaping our historical narrative. It is my first feature-length project, and I am looking forward to this challenge. My other project is a short film dealing with genetics, history, and identity, exploring among other things the relation between genetics and inherited trauma.

—

Larissa Sansour: Heirloom runs through November 24, 2019.

—

Larissa Sansour (b. 1973) studied Fine Arts in Copenhagen, London, and New York. Her visual lexicon embraces film, photography, installation and sculpture. Sansour has presented her work in several solo shows internationally–most recently at Dar El-Nimer in Beirut. Her works have been shown in Cardiff, Copenhagen, Dubai Jerusalem, Liverpool, Paris, and Rome, among other places, and are part of various collections including the Wolverhampton Gallery, UK; the Imperial War Museum, UK; Fondation Louis Vuitton, France; the Carlsberg Foundation, Denmark; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark; N.B.K., Germany; Nadour, Germany; Salsali Private Museum, UAE; and the Barjeel Foundation, UAE.