# Humanise event reignites controversy over Russian Pavilion's reopening at Venice Biennale



The upcoming "Humanise" event hosted by Heatherwick Studio at the Russian Pavilion in Venice has ignited significant controversy, marking an uncomfortable moment for the Venice Biennale as it reopens the venue for the first architectural show since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Scheduled for May 10, the event is presented as part of the official educational programme of the Biennale, repurposed under the label of the Biennale Educational Pavilion. The event will feature a panel led by Thomas Heatherwick alongside experts like Davide Ruzzon and postgraduate students from Milan Polytechnic.

However, this initiative has drawn fierce criticism from various quarters. Michal Murawski, a Polish-born curator for the Ukrainian pavilion, categorically labelled Heatherwick an "opportunist," arguing that hosting an event in such a historically charged venue is inappropriate. “It’s deeply concerning,” he commented, expressing his discomfort over the Biennale’s collaboration with the Russian Federation. Murawski emphasised that, as curator of Ukraine's pavilion, he feels the need to voice dissent against what he sees as an unacceptable endorsement of a controversial government. He urged BIS visitors to boycott the event outright.

Heatherwick Studio, amidst the backlash, has responded robustly. In a statement reacting to protests on social media, the studio asserted that despite the pavilion's historical name, "Russia isn’t involved in the Biennale." Thomas Heatherwick himself expressed dismay at Murawski’s remarks, insisting on the disconnection between their event and the prevailing political climate. “Our studio withdrew from any projects in Russia following the invasion,” he stated.

The context surrounding this reopening adds another layer to the situation. Historically, the Russian Pavilion had been a significant presence since its inception in the early 20th century but was closed in 2022 due to widespread condemnation of Russia's military actions. During its absence from events, Bolivia hosted a project at the venue during last year's art biennale. Now, as the pavilion reopens, tensions remain high as other nations, such as Israel, similarly grapple with international criticism over military operations, leading to their own closure of artistic venues like Israel's pavilion amid the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

The Venice Biennale stands at a crossroads; it faces scrutiny over how it navigates the balance between artistic freedom and political realities. While it seeks to provide a platform for dissenting voices from Russia, the logistical choices made in hosting events like "Humanise" inevitably spark debate about complicity and moral responsibility in the current geopolitical landscape. Ultimately, the event highlights deep fissures within the art community regarding engagement with politically sensitive spaces, echoing similar debates throughout the history of the Biennale, notably in years of conflict involving Ukraine, such as during its participation in the biennale across significant years like 1993, 2025, and beyond.

As the Biennale organisers continue to grapple with these pressing issues, it remains to be seen how both participation and the legacy of locations like the Russian Pavilion will evolve in response to ongoing world events and the complexities they entail. With the architectural landscape waiting to be defined, all eyes will be on the pavilions as they come to life amidst heavy ethical considerations.

**Reference Map**

1. Paragraph 1: (1), (2)
2. Paragraph 2: (1), (2)
3. Paragraph 3: (1), (2)
4. Paragraph 4: (3), (4), (5), (6)
5. Paragraph 5: (1), (4), (6)
6. Paragraph 6: (3), (1)
7. Paragraph 7: (6), (7)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/heatherwicks-venice-show-in-russian-pavilion-faces-boycott-calls> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/heatherwicks-venice-show-in-russian-pavilion-faces-boycott-calls> - The London-based design studio Heatherwick Studio has announced a 'Humanise' event at the previously closed Russian Pavilion in Venice, marking its first use for an architectural show since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Michal Murawski, curator for Ukraine at the Biennale, criticized Heatherwick as an 'opportunist' and expressed concerns over the Biennale's collaboration with the Russian Federation. Heatherwick Studio denied involvement with Russia, stating that the venue's name has been unchanged for a century. The event is scheduled for May 10, featuring Thomas Heatherwick and other panelists.
3. <https://www.iwm.at/documenting-ukraine/blog/ukraine-at-the-venice-biennale-years-of-attention-1914-1993-2025-2026> - This article discusses Ukraine's participation in the Venice Biennale, highlighting significant years such as 1914, 1993, and 2025–2026. It notes that after renovations, the Russian Pavilion was closed for the first time since 1934 due to the war in Ukraine. Curator Raimundas Malašauskas announced the termination of Russia's participation in the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, leading to protests and actions against the Russian Pavilion. The article also mentions the reopening of the pavilion for Bolivia's project in 2024.
4. <https://www.dw.com/en/israel-hamas-war-impacts-venice-art-biennale/a-68806799> - The article reports on the impact of the Israel-Hamas war on the Venice Art Biennale. Activists criticized Israel's military actions in Gaza, leading to calls for a boycott of the Biennale. In response, Israeli artist Ruth Patir decided not to open her pavilion until a ceasefire and hostage release agreement are reached. The Biennale organizers rejected the boycott calls, emphasizing the importance of artistic freedom and dialogue amidst the conflict.
5. <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/artists-and-curator-of-the-russian-pavilion-resign-from-venice-biennale-03-01-2022/> - In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, curator Raimundas Malašauskas and artists Alexandra Sukhareva and Kirill Savchenkov resigned from participating in the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Malašauskas described the situation as 'politically and emotionally unbearable,' while Savchenkov stated, 'There is no place for art when civilians are dying under the fire of missiles.' The Biennale supported their decision, condemning the violence and expressing solidarity with Ukraine.
6. <https://www.the-independent.com/news/russia-italy-rome-vladimir-putin-venice-b2027066.html> - The article discusses the Venice Biennale's stance on Russian participation following the invasion of Ukraine. The Biennale stated it would continue to welcome Russian artists who oppose the invasion and support freedom of expression but would not collaborate with official Russian delegations or individuals affiliated with the Kremlin. This policy led to the resignation of the curator and members of the Russian Pavilion, a decision hailed as a 'noble act of courage' by the Biennale.
7. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-industry-news-march-1-other-stories-2079228> - This article covers various art industry news, including the controversy surrounding the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It highlights concerns about the pavilion's ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin, noting that the commissioner is the daughter of a prominent associate of Putin. The article also mentions the cancellation of the pavilion's planned stop in Paris and the broader implications of the pavilion's connections to the Russian government.