# Heatherwick Studio sparks controversy with event in Russian Pavilion at Venice Biennale



The Venice Biennale, a prestigious international art and architecture exhibition, is once again facing intense scrutiny. This time, the attention is centred on a forthcoming event by Heatherwick Studio, set to occur in the Russian Pavilion—an emblematic venue historically entrusted to showcase diverse architectural innovations. The event, titled "Humanise," marks the first time the pavilion has been used for an architectural show since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The choice of location has prompted a flurry of controversy, with calls for a boycott echoing throughout the artistic community.

Michal Murawski, the Polish-born curator for Ukraine at the biennale, has taken a particularly vocal stance against the event. He has labelled British designer Thomas Heatherwick an "opportunist" for deciding to host the event in a pavilion associated with the Russian state. According to Murawski, "I don’t think Thomas Heatherwick is a representative of any broader current. He jumps on the opportunity to do an event in a fancy building and just takes it." His concern extends beyond the participation of Heatherwick; he is alarmed by the biennale's collaboration with the Russian Federation itself, describing it as "deeply concerning." In highlighting the moral ramifications of such a partnership, he urged attendees to avoid the Humanise event, calling the pavilion's use "unacceptable."

In a statement addressing these criticisms, Heatherwick Studio has distanced itself from any affiliation with the Russian government. The studio asserted that their engagement is limited to the educational programming of the biennale and that they have withdrawn from any projects in Russia since the invasion. "Russia isn’t involved in the biennale," they stated, emphasising that the venue in question carries its historical title and has hosted various events over the decades. In response to Murawski's comments, Heatherwick expressed being "shocked and saddened," reinforcing that their project aims to foster conversation about the humanisation of architecture, featuring discussions with notable panellists and students.

The backdrop against which this controversy unfolds is significant. During the 2022 Biennale, numerous Russian artists, including Kirill Savchenkov and Alexandra Sukhareva, withdrew in protest of their country’s military actions in Ukraine, declaring a strong ethical stance against participating in a cultural event under conditions of war. Vadim Zakharov, another Russian artist, poignantly protested in front of the pavilion by displaying a banner condemning the violence against civilians in Ukraine. These actions represented not just a rejection of the war but also a refusal to engage with cultural institutions under the complicity of governmental policies that executed such acts of aggression. The Russian Pavilion was closed for the first time since 1978 as a direct result of the conflict, signalling a dramatic shift in the intersection of art and geopolitics.

Additionally, the Biennale this year is defined by its own political complexities, not only concerning Russia but also in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict. Israeli participation has been affected, with artist Ruth Patir postponing her pavilion's opening until a ceasefire is achieved, reflecting a broader sentiment within the artistic community to address current conflicts with sensitivity. The closure of Israel’s pavilion stands in contrast to the reopening of the Russian Pavilion, highlighting a nuanced dialogue among global attendees about how art institutions respond to political crises.

Looking ahead, the decision to employ the Russian Pavilion as a space for the educational programme comes amidst discussions about the future of arts and collaboration in a landscape burdened by war. The biennale's organizers have stated that this initiative allows for cooperation that prioritises education to engage the public and future generations. However, critics argue that such moves risk normalising the engagement with a state accused of war crimes and aggression on a global scale.

As the biennale approaches, the tension between artistic expression and political responsibility looms large, compelling participants and attendees to navigate a landscape fraught with ethical considerations. The question of whether Heatherwick's Humanise event will proceed without protest remains uncertain, as the voices of artists who advocate for an ethical stance in the face of conflict resonate throughout the international art community, urging a critical reevaluation of the parameters that define artistic collaboration and the venues in which it occurs.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: 1, 2
2. Paragraph 2: 1, 2
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5. Paragraph 5: 3, 6
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8. Paragraph 8: 1, 2, 7
9. Paragraph 9: 2, 3, 6

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

## References

* <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/heatherwicks-venice-show-in-russian-pavilion-faces-boycott-calls> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/heatherwicks-venice-show-in-russian-pavilion-faces-boycott-calls> - The article discusses the controversy surrounding Heatherwick Studio's 'Humanise' event at the Russian Pavilion during the Venice Biennale. Michal Murawski, curator for Ukraine, criticizes the event's location, labeling Heatherwick an 'opportunist' and expressing discomfort with the Biennale's collaboration with Russia. Heatherwick Studio denies involvement with the Russian Federation, emphasizing the venue's longstanding name and their withdrawal from Russian projects post-2022 invasion. The event features Heatherwick alongside experts discussing architectural humanization, amidst broader debates on the Biennale's political affiliations.
* <https://www.dw.com/en/israel-hamas-war-impacts-venice-art-biennale/a-68806799> - The article highlights the impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on the Venice Art Biennale. Israeli artist Ruth Patir chose not to open her pavilion, 'Motherhood,' until a ceasefire and hostage release agreement are reached. This decision follows demands from the Art Not Genocide Alliance and criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza. The Biennale organizers support Patir's stance, emphasizing artistic freedom amid the contentious political backdrop. The article also notes the closure of the Russian pavilion due to the war in Ukraine.
* <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/28/russian-artists-pull-out-of-venice-biennale-over-war-a76659> - The article reports on Russian artists Kirill Savchenkov, Alexandra Sukhareva, and curator Raimundas Malašauskas withdrawing from the 2022 Venice Biennale in protest of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They expressed that there is no place for art when civilians are dying under missile fire and that they cannot support the illusion of normality amid such events. This marks the first time the Russian pavilion will be closed since 1978, highlighting the artists' strong opposition to the invasion.
* <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/04/21/artist-protests-against-war-outside-russian-pavilion-at-venice-biennale> - The article details Russian artist Vadim Zakharov's protest against the war in Ukraine outside the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Zakharov displayed a banner stating, 'the murder of women, children, [and] people of Ukraine is a disgrace to Russia.' He was removed by Italian police but emphasized the importance of individual decisions regarding the war. This protest follows the withdrawal of Russian artists and curators from the Biennale in response to the invasion.
* <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-20/the-war-in-ukraine-has-seeped-into-venice-s-glamorous-art-biennale> - The article discusses the influence of the war in Ukraine on the Venice Art Biennale. It highlights the protest by artist Vadim Zakharov outside the Russian Pavilion, where he displayed a sign opposing the war and Russian government cultural ties. The Biennale's organizers did not immediately comment on the protest. The article also notes the absence of Russian representation at the Biennale due to the invasion, marking a significant political statement within the art world.
* <https://hyperallergic.com/119602/director-of-russian-pavilion-at-venice-architecture-biennale-ousted-over-politics/> - The article reports on the dismissal of Grigory Revzin, the commissioner of the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale, due to his political views on Crimea. Revzin alleged that his firing was politically motivated, specifically mentioning Crimea. The Ministry of Culture cited his 'extremely active' public positions as the reason for his dismissal. This incident highlights the intersection of politics and art within the context of the Biennale.