

Curating Unity: A Multi-modal Reading of *Archaic*, the National Pavilion of Iraq at the 57th Venice Biennale

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Abstract:

The paper investigates meaning communicated by the exhibition *Archaic*, the national pavilion of Iraq at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017). The Venice Biennale is the only global art event that allows countries and nations to represent themselves on their own terms. In this sense, the system of national pavilions is traditionally regarded as an arena for soft power. The paper applies multimodal analysis both on the macro-level (Halliday metafunctions) and micro-level (investigation of artworks for meaning potentials) to understand the image of Iraq curated in the exhibition. The analysis shows that the curators did not shy away from showing a negative image of Iraq with its outdated governmental system and existing ethno-religious divides. However, the main narrative communicated by the exhibition emphasized the theme of historical, cultural, geographical, and human connections binding social diversity into an inclusive national unity.

Key words: Venice Biennale; national pavilions; multimodal analysis; Iraq; contemporary art

Introduction

If we accept that an exhibition is a form of communication, then we need a way to comprehend the meanings that it communicates. Meanings are crucial, because they lead to the construction of a specific system of knowledge on a particular issue (Greenhill 1992). This is especially important with regard to exhibitions featuring artists from the Middle East. Art historian Silvia Naef (2017) has argued that ever since 9/11 exhibitions of Middle East art do not only pursue art-historical goals, but have also been viewed as tools that help alter the popular image of the region in Western society, which is produced mostly by the media. The need to counter the image created by the media has been echoed by Iraqi curator Adalet R. Garmiany, who recently lamented: 'Whilst most of the media focus on ethnic conflicts, civil wars... in the Middle East and in Iraq in particular, less is known about contemporary Iraqi life and the multitude of hopes and aspirations for the future' (Garmiany 2014: 110).

This frustration over the external representation of the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular is fuelled by the fact that Iraq has not had the opportunity to represent itself for a long time: 'it is the exception, not the rule to hear from an Iraqi about Iraq' (Al-Ali and Al-Najjar 2013). In this light, the Venice Biennale (with its system of national pavilions) can be regarded as today's only global art event that allows countries and nations to represent themselves. The Biennale is a unique opportunity for Iraq to present its artistic production to the international public on its own terms. Tamara Chalabi, chair and co-founder of the Ruya Foundation, which is responsible for the national pavilions of Iraq at four consecutive biennials (2013-2019), clearly recognized this opportunity. In the introduction to the catalogue *Welcome to Iraq* (2013), the first national pavilion of Iraq commissioned by the foundation, she writes: 'Iraq is what you see in media – it is a war-torn country [...] but it is so much more. There are other images that ordinary people should think of' (Chalabi and Watkins 2013).

Building on the assertion of the art historian and philosopher Boris Groys that '[t]he desire to get rid of any image can be realized only through a new image – the image of a critique of the image' (Groys 2008: 8), the Iraqi national pavilion can be seen as a potential

source of images, a particular system of knowledge, which can contest the dominant image of Iraq put forward by the media.

Since exhibitions often combine several modes and media, the audience might not always easily comprehend the message(s) they try to transmit. For instance, political ideology may not be visible right away (Kress and Leeuwen 2001; Meng 2004). Therefore, in order to understand the meaning communicated by an exhibition, it is crucial to comprehend how this meaning was constructed within the exhibition space. This paper explores the image of Iraq communicated to the audience by *Archaic*, the national pavilion of Iraq at the 57th Venice Biennale. To do so, it uses a multimodal analysis combining both micro and macro approaches to the analysis of exhibitions.

Although *Archaic* acknowledged the image of Iraq as a socially fragmented country with an obsolete mode of governance, this paper argues that, by focusing on the theme of *connections* expressed on multiple levels, the exhibition's overall message was one of hope and ways to look past ethno-religious conflicts to imagine a future in the *united* country.

I start the main body of the paper by providing a brief overview of the growing field of studies on national representations at the Venice Biennale. Then, I explain the multimodal framework of analysis and argue for its usefulness when it comes to the analysis of visual art exhibitions. Next, I apply the framework to the *Archaic* exhibition, discussing the explicit and implicit meanings conveyed by the exhibition to the audience. I conclude by analysing the reception of *Archaic* by art critics and suggest that in order to fully understand the message of the exhibition, one needs to be familiar with the history of the nation presenting the exhibition.

Understanding national pavilions

Throughout its history, but especially after the 1990s and the turn to globalization in art, the Venice Biennale attracted much interest from scholars of various disciplines (see for example, Philipsen 2010; Jones 2010 Niemojewski 2010; Vega 2018). Their debate mostly revolved around changing characteristics of the Biennale over time and the festival's inclusivity of non-Western artists. However, these studies focus their analysis on the main exhibition of the Biennale. National pavilions have not received such scholarly attention until recently. With contemporary art being understood as transnational, the system of national pavilions that configures artistic identity in relation to the nation-state binomial is argued to be outdated (Ricci 2020).

However, the number of countries and nations participating in the festival grows every year as more of them from what could be called 'the margins of the art world' claim their place at the Biennale (Naylor 2020). For these countries the issue of political representation and cultural diplomacy at the Biennale is paramount. Several recent studies took interest in the political aspect of their participation. Chu-Chiun Wei (2013), analysing Taiwanese participation at the festival from 1995 until 2011, argues that broader geo-political context affects the curatorial strategies. Isabelle Zaugg and Emi Nishimura (2015) investigated strategies of cultural diplomacy at the Angolan and Kenyan national pavilions at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Solely focusing on the political side of national pavilions, both studies overlook their aesthetic side. Eliza Garnsey (2019) analysed three artworks to explore multiple layers of representation of violence at the South African national pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. She argues that artists whose works are exhibited at the national pavilion play a double role as representatives of both the state and the citizens. However, Garnsey's focus is not on the curatorial role and strategies with respect to the presentation of a national image to the international audience in the context of the Venice Biennale.

Both the aesthetics (artwork) and the curatorial strategies are investigated in this paper as part of a multi-level analysis of the meaning produced by the national pavilion of Iraq at the 57th Venice Biennale. The need for a multi-level analysis stems from the recognition that objects in an exhibition do not transmit meaning to the visitors on their own, but are affected by a multiform construction of meaning throughout the whole exhibition environment (Ferguson 1996; Meng 2004). Meanings are constructed by and construed from a combination of various aspects employed by the exhibition producers, such as displayed objects, written texts, organization of space and lighting. In other words, each part of the exhibition, such

as design, labels, and wall texts, carries a meaning potential and plays a role in the/that meaning's construction. Displayed objects are part of a story that exhibition organizers are trying to tell (Vergo 1989). In this perspective, exhibitions are thought of as systems of signs, which contain certain meanings communicated by the producers to the audience. Therefore, to understand the meaning one needs to thoroughly analyse the national pavilions on multiple levels, not just by focusing on the presented art works. In addition, this paper will integrate the geo-political context, whose importance was stressed by Chu-Chiun Wei (2013), into the analysis of the curated narrative of the *Archaic*.

A multimodal approach to studying art exhibitions

A number of studies have successfully used semiotic approaches in exhibition analysis to investigate curatorial strategies in meaning construction and communication (Maroevic 1995; Meng 2004; Lindstrand and Insulander 2012; Insulander 2019). Following this approach, the material forms of an exhibition can be understood as sign complexes. Meaning-making occurs when sign complexes, the signifier, are connected to specific mental concepts, the signified (Kress 1993).

The research on the production of knowledge by museums employs various semiological approaches. Broadly speaking, these approaches can be divided into two groups or models: the first investigates meanings communicated by the exhibition on a macro-level, whereas the second does so on a micro-level.

The macro-model is mostly based on the three metafunctions of language explained by Halliday (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004): ideational, interpersonal and textual. Through the ideational metafunction, the model investigates an overall idea of the exhibition, the subject matter with which the producers deal, and the choices made by these producers in order to communicate the idea to the audience. Analysis of interpersonal metafunction reveals the relationship between the producers and the audience. And, finally, analysis of the textual metafunction examines what kind of narrative is produced in the exhibition and how coherent this narrative is. The model has been successfully used in exhibition analyses of strategies of narrating nationhood in Sweden (Lindstrand and Insulander 2012) and presenting national history in Singapore (Meng 2004). The model proves useful for revealing the relationship between the producers and the visitors and understanding the coherence of the exhibition design. However, it also emphasizes the appropriation and even reinterpretation of displayed objects in relation to the composite design of an exhibition as a whole and consequently does not analyse displayed objects for meaning potentials. According to this model, the objects on display do not have isolated meaning potentials. They can only be seen in connection with other semiotic modalities, such as space, visual images and language.

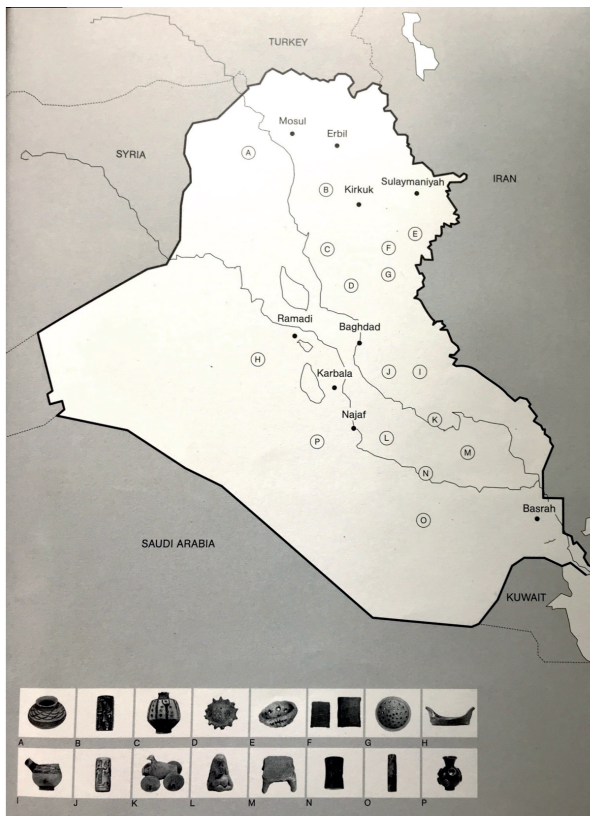
The second model of analysis based on semiotics that has been used in exploring the production of knowledge by exhibitions was originally developed for teachers to understand students' meaning-making in various disciplines in the classroom (Danielsson and Selander 2016). Later, the model was extended to analyse the representation of migration in exhibitions (Insulander 2019). What distinguishes this model from the first one is that it investigates displayed objects for meaning potentials. It is believed that meanings generated by objects on display can contribute to or contest the primary intended meaning constructed by the producers. Hence, close investigation of the displayed objects is encouraged. The model closely examines the general structure of the exhibition, the orchestration of semiotic resources (displayed objects), the use of figurative language and explicit/implicit values. Particular emphasis is placed on the use of metaphors and the expression of values in the exhibition. According to Insulander (2019), both 'reveal the assumptions that the exhibition makes' and could be expressed in the written text by choosing particular objects, or combinations of objects, and in images. While the first model investigates the meaning potentials of exhibitions on the macro-level, the second model focuses on the micro-level, assigning particular significance to displayed objects. This model can be particularly useful when analysing art exhibitions, since art exhibitions are in general less explicit and the meaning of the exhibition is more elusive.

On the other hand, the micro-model does not make it possible to understand what type of audience communication is involved, and more generally does not take visitors into account. To achieve this, there needs to be a balance between the macro-level and the micro-level

of analysis in relation to exhibition modes. As a result, this paper proposes that we should combine the two models described above. In order to reveal the implied meaning of the *Archaic* exhibition, I investigate the Iraqi pavilion on three levels: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday's metafunctions). When looking at the ideational metafunction, I focus on the subject matter as well as the way it is presented to the audience. Through interpersonal metafunction, I aim to understand the relationship between the curators and the audience, that is, the type of interaction involved in the exhibition. Then, I examine the artworks on display for meaning potentials in terms of values and figurative language. I conclude by analysing what kind of text the exhibition creates and how coherent the exhibition-as-text is for the visitor-as-reader.

Multimodal analysis of the pavilion

Ideational metafunction



Scanned with CamScanner

Figure 1. A map of Iraq showing excavation sites of the artefacts on display. The map is drawn from the accompanying publication to *Archaic*, the national pavilion of Iraq (Colombo & Chalabi, 2017, p. 19).

modern and contemporary Iraqi artists,² forty ancient Mesopotamian artefacts drawn from the Iraq Museum, and commissioned works by Belgian-born artist Francis Alÿs. The main theme of Alÿs' series of works presented at the pavilion, which included paintings, drawings and a video installation, was the role of an artist in war. The Mesopotamian artefacts had been chosen by one of the curators, Tamara Chalabi. According to the accompanying map

This part of the analysis focuses on the ideas of the curators and organizers of the pavilion, presented in the curatorial statements, press releases, catalogues, and interviews, and on the way these ideas were realized in the exhibition.

The curators of the pavilion, Paolo Colombo and Tamara Chalabi, explicitly stated in the press release and accompanying exhibition brochure (both available for the audience to take) that the idea of the exhibition was two-fold. First, the curators aimed to explore the tension in the word 'archaic', which has the connotation of something ancient and primordial, but also outdated, inefficient and obsolete. The curators underlined the particular relevance of this term to Iraq, 'a country whose existing political, administrative, social and economic reality is arguably as "archaic" as its ancient heritage' (Ruya Foundation 2017). Another idea of the curators was to explore the different ways in which Iraq's ancient past has affected its modern and contemporary visual languages, as well as display the connection between modern and contemporary Iraqi art.

Set in the neo-gothic library of Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti,¹ the pavilion featured the work of eight

(Fig. 1), they came from all over Iraq. The artefacts on display ranged from the Neolithic Age to the Neo-Babylonian Period and differed in nature: from pots and clay toys to cuneiform tablets and small figurines of deities.

The modern period was presented by two pioneers of Iraqi Modernism: Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said. Two works by the former, who is widely recognized as a father of Modern Iraqi art, *Hen Seller* (1951) and *Pastoral* (1955; Fig. 2), are exemplary works showing Selim's



Figure 2. Jewad Selim, *Pastoral*. Bronze relief made from the plaster maquette created in 1955. Courtesy of the Family of Mohamed Makiya and the Ruya Foundation



Figure 3. Vitrine with works by Shakir Hassan Al Said at the *Archaic*. Courtesy of the Ruya Foundation

fascination with abstract forms and Mesopotamian iconography. Shakir Hassan Al Said was a former student of Selim. Unlike his teacher, Al Said developed an intense interest in Arabic letters. All six works by Al Said selected for *Archaic* (all untitled) show the artist's exploration of the Arabic script (Fig. 3).

Contemporary artists presented works in different media – photography (Ali Arkady, Nadine Hattom), video (Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, Luya Fadhil and Sherko Abbas), and land art (Sakar Sleman). Each contemporary work could be read through the prism of one of the seven themes identified by the curators as precursors to any civilization – water, earth, the hunt, writing, music, conflict and exodus. Some of the artworks were directly

concerned with one of the themes. For example, a video installation by one of the leading Iraqi artists, Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, questioned the relationship between the hunter and the prey, understood metaphorically. Others, like Luya Fadhil's *Scribe*, just referenced the proposed theme, in this case writing. Some of the museum artefacts on display reflected the proposed themes, for example, there was a clay boat figurine relating to the theme of water, whereas the cuneiform tablets and seals related to the theme of writing, which emphasized the connection between ancient artefacts and contemporary artworks.

Both artefacts and artworks were displayed in vitrines bearing a similarity to a display of antiquities and rarities. This added to the archaic atmosphere of the pavilion. Each modern and contemporary artist was assigned a separate vitrine to show their works, while a separate vitrine contained the Mesopotamian artefacts (Fig. 4). The vitrines were arranged chronologically – from the ancient period, through the modern and to the contemporary. The exhibition culminated with the works of Francis Alÿs. However, his works were not shown in the vitrine, but outside of it – on the walls of the pavilion.



Figure 4. *Archaic (2017)*, exhibition view. Courtesy of the Ruya Foundation

To make the themes and connection between contemporary artworks and artefacts more explicit, the vitrines, in addition to artworks, featured other materials such as books, maps and clay objects. Thus, the vitrine containing works by Sherko Abbas also displayed sheet music, and the vitrine of Luya Fadhil, whose video work *Script* explored the theme of writing, displayed pages featuring Arabic calligraphy (Fig. 5). The vitrine designated to Alÿs contained a map of Greater Syria as divided by the Sykes-Picot agreement.

Each vitrine contained a label presenting basic information about the artist (name, place and date of birth/death, place of residence) and each artwork (title, date, medium and collection). Next to the vitrine with museum artefacts there was a laminated set of pages containing more detailed information about each object.

In addition to the objects in the vitrines, the curators placed a tablet and a set of headphones in one of the multiple wooden drawers (Fig. 6). The tablet ran a documentary film in Arabic with English subtitles about one of Jewad Selim's most famous oeuvres, *Monument of Freedom* – a large-scale bas-relief celebrating the 1958 July Revolution and currently located on the Tahrir Square in Baghdad.



Figure 5. *Archaic* (2017), view of the vitrine containing Luya Fadhil's 'Scribe'. Courtesy of the Ruya Foundation.



In summary, the idea of 'archaic' was expressed in the choice of the location of the pavilion (a historically listed disused library), the display of the objects in the vitrines (which, although they contained works of contemporary art, were reminders of the way antiquities and rarities are exhibited), the subject matter of some of the artworks, and, finally, in the displayed artefacts from the Iraq Museum. Texts in the press release and the brochure contained words such as 'ancient', 'outdated', or 'out of use', which also related to the notion of 'archaic'.

The idea of exploring how the Iraqi ancient past has affected its modern and contemporary visual languages and to display the connection between modern and contemporary Iraqi art was expressed through the choice of artworks, where such aesthetic connection was clearly visible

Figure 6. *Archaic* (2017). A tablet showing a documentary about Jewad Selim's 'Monument of Freedom'.

(works by Jewad Selim, Sakar Sleman and Sadik Kwaish Alfraji). Chronological arrangement of the pavilion – from the ancient Mesopotamian artefacts to the works of Iraqi modernism and contemporary artworks (Fig. 7) – embodied this idea in a direct fashion.

Interpersonal metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction enacts ‘social interactions and social relations between participants in communication’ (Lindstrand and Insulander 2012). Based on the analysis of the organization of exhibition space and the texts offered to the visitors, I argue that the relationship within the exhibition is one of ‘power-knowledge’ in nature. The curators appear to have aimed at creating and transmitting intended meanings to the audience without necessarily entering into a dialogue with them.

To start with, the exhibition layout of *Archaic* implied a certain reading path – a chronological presentation of Iraqi art historiography. The exhibition brochure contained the exhibition plan (Fig. 7), emphasizing that the audience should follow the intended path. Moreover, the text in the brochure, unlike the text of the press release, was organized chronologically (as was the space of the pavilion), thus highlighting the path that visitors should follow.

On the other hand, in the press release the curators mentioned that the visitors were welcome to look at each vitrine individually or read it as part of a bigger story (Ruya Foundation 2017). It seemed that the curators gave their audience a choice, but it was a dubious choice given the fact that the vitrines were arranged in a specific sequence. Moreover, due to the narrow space of the pavilion, it was difficult for the visitors to deviate from the path anyway.

Power-knowledge relations between the producers and the audience were also reflected in the fact that the producers controlled the audience’s gaze. All the artworks and Mesopotamian artefacts were shown in the vitrines. This meant that they were supposed to be viewed from above, through a dividing glass. However, there was one exception to this type of gaze: the works of Francis Aljys, the only non-Iraqi artist in the pavilion, were not displayed in an actual vitrine. His works were exhibited outside the vitrine, on the walls. The visitors were invited to look at these works differently, from below, without any barriers.

The language of the accompanying texts was relatively didactic. In other words, the texts were meant to instruct and provide a considerable amount of information about the museum artefacts and artworks, as well as the history of Iraq. Once again, it seemed that the curators intended to tell the visitors their story and not necessarily invite them to take part in a dialogue. There was no ‘we’ mentioned in the text. However, there were no wall texts, so it could be argued that the audience were offered the opportunity for a free dialogue, since visitors could have decided not to take the brochure or the press release with them. Similarly, the labels did not contain any additional information, allowing the visitors to make up their own mind about the artworks on display.

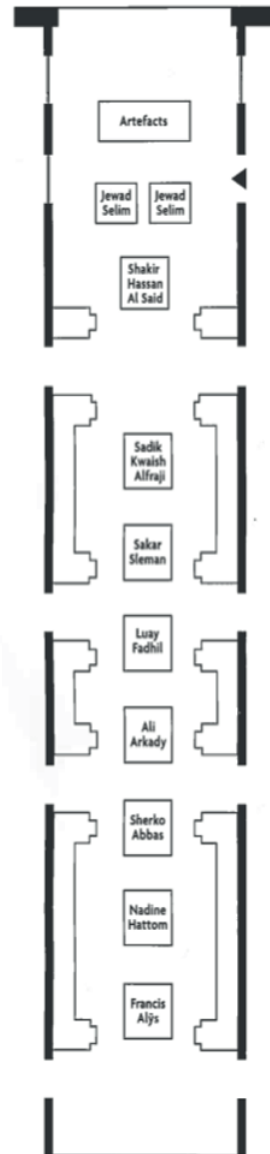


Figure 7. Exhibition plan from the exhibition brochure. A little black arrow at the top of the plan marks the entrance and exit to the pavilion. Courtesy of the Ruya Foundation.

Figurative language and values

According to the education researcher Eva Insulander, the analysis of figurative language and values in any exhibition reveals 'the assumptions that an exhibition makes' and helps to identify meanings of political ideology (Insulander 2019). Taking inspiration in this approach, I embark on the analysis of figurative language and values in the *Archaic* in order to better understand the image of Iraq communicated by the exhibition.

Figurative language, such as metaphors and analogies, was frequently used in the pavilion, both in the artworks and in other ways (for instance the organization of space and images). First and foremost, the term 'archaic' is used as an analogy of Iraq – both ancient and outdated. The textual material (exhibition brochure, catalogue, and press release) was full of terms such as 'outdated', 'ancient', 'out of use', and 'primordial'. Displaying the artworks and artefacts in vitrines, as in an exhibition of rarities and antiquities, could be read as a metaphor of the fragile socio-political situation in contemporary Iraq, where artists are disconnected from each other either due to ethno-religious conflicts and hostilities, or simply because they left the country and reside outside of Iraq. Tellingly, the works of Francis Alÿs, the only non-Iraqi artist on display, were not exhibited (and thus disconnected) in a vitrine dedicated to the artist but hung 'freely' on the walls of the pavilion.

The challenge entailed in looking at displayed artworks through the glass of the vitrines could also be interpreted as carrying certain metaphors. Light reflections off the vitrine glass made it at times challenging to view the artwork. It was also inconvenient for a visitor to bend over a vitrine to watch the video work for a long time. These inconveniences can be perceived as a metaphor of the difficulties for the international audience, as well as the Iraqi audience, to view works of Iraqi artists.



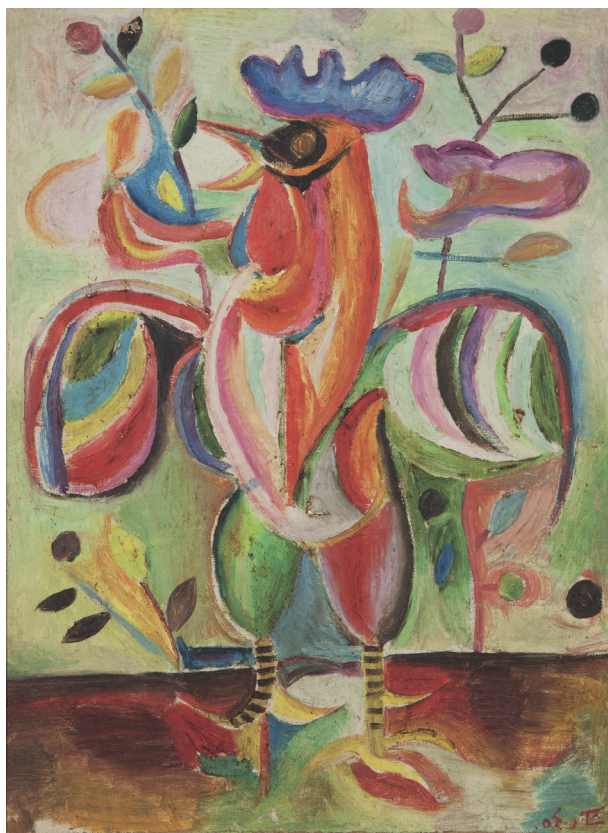
Figure 8. Luya Fadhil, *Scribe*, 2017, still. Courtesy of the Ruya Foundation

Some of the artworks also conveyed the notion of 'archaic'. Luya Fadhil's film *Scribe* (Fig. 8) is centred on an outdated Iraqi tradition of using scribes to draw up official documents for people. The main focus of the film was on a man who used one such scribe daily to write letters to his recently deceased wife. The narrative of the film fitted perfectly the narrative of the exhibition and the idea of Iraq as 'archaic'. On the one hand, it showed an ancient tradition and reminded the audience that Iraq was the birthplace of writing. On the other hand, the tradition seems so outdated in the age of modern digital technologies that it should have become obsolete.

Artefacts, artworks and objects on display in the vitrines also played a role as visual metaphors, either of the overall theme of 'archaic' or one of the seven themes highlighted by the curators. Interestingly, the vitrine of Francis Alÿs, who in his artwork explored a theme of conflict, contained a map of Greater Syria as divided by the Sykes-Picot agreement. The Sykes-Picot agreement, drawn up between the British and the French colonial powers in 1916 to divide their spheres of influence in the region after the end of the First World War, is considered by many people to be the catalyst of ethno-religious conflicts in the region.

A careful reading of the exhibition reveals that two values, unity and diversity, were conveyed both explicitly and implicitly in the exhibition across different modes and via the artworks. Unity, in terms of *connections* on the cultural, historical, geographical, and human level, was communicated via different modes throughout the exhibition. The press release and the brochure explicitly stated the curatorial vision of showing the connection between Mesopotamian aesthetics and modern and contemporary works of art, thus connecting Iraq on the cultural and historical levels.

To maintain the semblance of connection between diverse ethno-religious communities, the curators seemingly underplayed anything that might have reflected the divisions between them. The choice of works by Shakir Hassan Al Said could be interpreted in line with such argument. Shakir Hassan Al Said and Jewad Selim founded the Baghdad Art Group. Initially, members of this group sought to create a vernacular language for Iraqi art. They considered Mesopotamian artefacts to be their main source of inspiration. However, later Al Said's fascination with Sufism led him to create a different style, reflecting his interest in Arabic letters. Al Said's later works, such as those presented in the pavilion (Fig. 3), are very different from his earlier pieces, for example *The Articulate Cockerel* (Fig. 9), which resembles Selim's style of painting and shows the clear influence of Mesopotamian aesthetics.



Interestingly, Al Said's earlier work was not featured or mentioned at the exhibition. The curators seem to have chosen Al Said's later work that hints at the influence of Islam on modern (and as a result, contemporary) aesthetic language, without overemphasizing the Islamic culture. There was no distinct vitrine at the exhibition that would contain artefacts from the golden age of Islam – the Abbasid caliphate with its capital in Baghdad (c. eighth to thirteenth centuries). However, the exhibited works by Al Said pointed subtly to this period in Iraqi history. These curatorial choices may have been made in an attempt to avoid alienating artists from non-Muslim, non-Arab communities, thereby underlining unity in historical and cultural connections without giving one of the cultures or historical periods a dominant position.

Figure 9. Shakir Hassan Al Said, *The Articulate Cockerel*, 1954. Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation.

Unity through connections on the geographical level were expressed via the choice of artists representing Iraq at the national pavilion. The artists came from different parts of Iraq as well as from the diaspora (as indicated in the labels). The artists' geographical origins could have been seen as an indicator of their ethno-religious backgrounds. Just like the artists, the archaeological artefacts displayed in the pavilion came from many different areas of Iraq (see Fig. 1). The exhibition created an impression of artists from diverse backgrounds who shared common roots and history. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the ensuing civil war, and the rise of ISIS, the country has been regarded as consisting of three different entities: the Kurdistan Region, the Islamic State, and the Shia-dominated Baghdad-Basra axis (Stansfield 2016). The display of works by artists from different parts of the country and the diaspora, as well as from diverse ethno-religious backgrounds, could be read as an attempt to overcome this territorial fragmentation and reinstall connections on the geographical level.

Another level of connections highlighted at the exhibition could be referred to as human connections. It was conveyed in the decision of the curators to examine the notion of 'archaic' as a signifier for universal themes which are a given in any civilization. The themes chosen by the curators spoke to the notion of universal humanity and were important to people regardless of where and when they lived. The themes connected Iraqis to each other in human unity. The choice of the displayed objects and artworks supports this assumption. The museum artefacts on display were not linked to or did not evoke particular Mesopotamian historical events, royalties or deities, but everyday life common to all people: children's toys, clay jars, or seals.

The second value conveyed in the pavilion was one of diversity, understood in a positive sense. First, the exhibition emphasized the diversity of the Iraqi population. As mentioned above, the artists featured in *Archaic* come from different ethno-religious communities – Sunni Arabs, Shi'a Arabs, Kurds and Mandaeans. No distinction was made between the artists in terms of the way their works were displayed. Their background was described in the written material and implicit in their place of origin. Two of the artists did not even reside in Iraq. The availability of the press releases in both Arabic and Kurdish also sent a signal about the language diversity in contemporary Iraq.

Second, the value of diversity spoke through the broad range of media employed in the artworks (land art, video installations, traditional paintings, to name a few) and the themes proposed by the curators. Some of the artworks, for example Sakar Sleman's *Land Art* (2014; Fig. 10), expressed this value too. Through the abstract symbol that Sleman created in the Kurdish mountains, she explored diversity on the personal level – her multiple identities as a woman, as a Kurd, and as an artist (Colombo and Chalabi 2017).



Figure 10. Sakar Sleman. *Installation view, 2017*. Courtesy of the artist and Ruya Foundation.

Textual metafunction

Textual metafunction is about how coherent the exhibition-as-text is to the visitor-reader. Before analysing its coherence, we have to first determine the narrative (text) the exhibition put forward. The ideational analysis as well as the closer micro-level investigation of the exhibition's figurative language helped us to understand the image of Iraq communicated by the exhibition. Iraq is presented to the international audience as a country with rich cultural heritage – ancient, modern, and contemporary, and a heterogenous population with a great number of diverse ethno-religious communities, such as, for example, the Mandaean represented by the artist Nadine Hattom. The curators call Iraq 'archaic'. One of the curators, Tamara Chalabi, explicitly mentioned in an interview that the pavilion is

an apt description of Iraq, which the world associates with the very beginnings of civilisation, Sumerian and Assyrian culture where writing developed, the wheel was invented, agriculture, the Old Testament... but at the same time Iraq today is an "archaic" country in its geography and politics, and society functions on primordial lines where people are broken down by sect, religion and ethnicity.³

Hence, the curators did not shy away from pointing out the negative side of contemporary Iraqi society and politics. However, there was also a positive line in the narrative of the pavilion. By conveying in the space of the pavilion, in a positive way, the values of unity and diversity, the curators projected the image of positive historical, cultural, geographical and human connections, which could bind the diverse parts of Iraq into a more harmonious and tranquil unity, offering thus hope for overcoming the negative aspects of the 'archaic' by drawing on its positive heritage.



Figure 11. Nadine Hattom, *Until the River Winds Ninety Degrees West*, 2017, installation detail. Courtesy of the Ruya Foundation

The contemporary artworks commissioned by the Ruya Foundation and featured in the pavilion all seemed to speak to this narrative. That is, however, with one exception. There was a tension between the work of Nadine Hattom and the overall message of the exhibition. In her work *Until the River Winds Ninety Degrees West* (Fig. 11), Hattom explored the traditions

and heritage of her family and the Mandaean community as a whole. Mandaeans are an ethno-religious group from South Iraq to which Hattom's family belongs. Working with her family's personal photographs, Hattom digitally erased people from the images, so that only the Iraqi landscape remained. She juxtaposed these images with images of the Australian landscape. Hattom then transformed the erased figures into text in captions under each photograph. During the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Mandaeans were severely persecuted by the Iraqi government and many of them chose to leave the country. Hattom's family was no exception and emigrated to Australia. Bearing this in mind, her works can be read as if the artist erased her community not only from the photographs but also from Iraq itself, since there was no place for them in the country they were forced to leave. Thus, the work speaks of *disconnection*, which seemingly contradicts the value of unity conveyed by the exhibition. However, despite this potential reading, the fact that Hattom's work was featured in the Iraqi national pavilion inscribed the artist and her entire community into the temporal and artistic history of Iraq. Therefore, the curators *reconnected* the community with Iraq by featuring the work in the national pavilion, re-absorbing this particular part of Iraqi diversity, the Mandaeans, back into the projected national unity.

Bringing together into a coherent narrative seemingly unrelated objects created centuries apart for different purposes can be challenging. However, by adding a framework, the curators managed to weave the objects into a comprehensive and consistent text for the exhibition. The organization of the space in the form of a closed exhibition with a clear beginning and a clear end, as well as its chronological layout, added to the sense of consistency. The vitrines played the role of chapters. Each vitrine containing works by contemporary artists represented a theme. Each theme was easily comprehensible, its clarity stemming either from the artwork itself or from the objects that were displayed in each vitrine alongside the artwork.

However, some of the curatorial choices made in *Archaic* may not have been readily obvious to the international audience, which could have impeded coherent reading of the exhibition. The decision to show the documentary about Selim's *Monument of Freedom*, which contained no contextual information for visitors about the importance of the 1958 Revolution, as well as provide the accompanying written material in both Arabic and Kurdish (in the context of the strong push for Kurdish independence at the time) and the map of Greater Syria divided by the Sykes-Picot agreement (as a metaphor of war), meant that the exhibition was difficult to comprehend unless one was familiar with the history of Iraq, which is discussed in more detail below.

Discussion: The importance of contextual knowledge to the meaning-making analysis

The Venice Biennale is known among the art public as a celebration of the 'contemporary moment' in art, and the countries taking part generally seek to present to the public their most innovative state-of-the-art achievements in visual art. Therefore, the decision to show to international audiences *Mesopotamian artefacts* and works by Iraqi *modernists* alongside contemporary artworks is a peculiar way of presenting a national pavilion at the festival. Despite such a radical way to approach the exhibition, the *Archaic* was very well received by art critics.⁴ They found the exhibition a timely reminder to the international community about Mesopotamian treasures, which at that moment were under threat of destruction by ISIS.⁵ The art critics mostly picked up on the curatorial idea only partially, seeing Iraq as a country with a glorious past but a dark present, enshrined in the term 'archaic'.⁶ This reading, however, only reproduced common stereotypes about Iraq. Some of the reviewers detected the idea of connections in the exhibition narrative, an idea which I argue was mainly implicit, but only on the cultural⁷ and human levels.⁸ However, the connections on the historical and geographical level implied in the pavilion by the choice of artists and artefacts was not commented on in the reviews. In one of the interviews, Tamara Chalabi said that the main reason for Iraq's backwardness was the ethno-religious divisions and asserted that the exhibition carried a message of hope.⁹ To understand this message, however, one needs to be familiar with the historical, social, and political context of Iraq and the circumstances in which the exhibition took place.

The state of Iraq as we know it today appeared on the world map as a consequence of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War. By the end of the war, British troops had conquered and united three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire: Baghdad, Basra and Mosul (Tripp 2000; Dodge 2003). Diverse ethno-religious communities inhabited these provinces (e.g., Yazidis, Assyrians and Iraqi Jews), but each province had one dominant ethnic or religious group at its core: Baghdad province was predominantly Sunni Arab, Basra was mostly Shi'a Arab, and Mosul province had a Sunni Kurdish majority (Abdi 2008). Each group had aspirations for its own state (encouraged by the British in return for support against the Ottomans).

Subsequent Iraqi rulers had to navigate these ethno-religious divides and would secure power by allying with one particular group of the population, which in the end only created more aversion among the other communities. For example, Saddam Hussein's regime relied on the Sunni Arab minority, which caused great discontent among other Iraqi ethno-religious communities, particularly the Shias.

Interestingly, the history of Iraq does contain one attempt to manage the diversity of the Iraqi population through inclusion and equal accommodation of all ethno-religious communities, instead of forcing unity through the security apparatus that would rely on one of these communities. This brief episode occurred under the rule of general Abd Al-Karim Qasim, who assumed power after a military coup in 1958 that overthrew the monarchy. Qasim's new constitution proclaimed equality for all Iraqi citizens regardless of race, ethnicity, language or religion and made space for social diversity within a new Iraqi national identity. However, Qasim was overthrown in February 1963, which marked the ascendancy of the Baath party and its reliance on the Sunni Arab minority for maintaining power.

After the US-led Coalition brought an end to the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, it was confronted with the complexities of Iraqi politics and society and sectarian hatred and distrust, which were instrumentalized and fanned by forces both inside and outside Iraq. Despite the efforts of the Coalition to base Iraqi nationalism on the foundation of civic nationalism and individual rights, the flames of multiple ethnic nationalisms soon engulfed the country and resulted in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing and multiple conflicts, including the Iraqi Civil War of 2014-2017.

Consequently, at the time of the *Archaic*, it was argued that one cannot possibly talk about Iraq as a single country, but the Baghdad-Basra region, the Kurdistan region, and the Islamic State, each with its own governments (Stansfield 2017). Symptomatically, Iraqi Kurds voted for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan in an officially unrecognized referendum in September 2017.

In this context, the message of hope articulated by the curators but overlooked by the reviewers of the *Archaic*, which took place at the time of the Kurdish referendum, becomes more comprehensible. The emphasis on the connections between the positive aspects of the 'archaic' and the present, which bind Iraqi diversity into an inclusive unity, was palpable on all three levels of analysis. The Mesopotamian artefacts were chosen to link back to a common people unified in their everyday humanity and not to ancient kings wielding power through coercion. The modern artworks linked the ancient past with the present, but also alluded to the period of Iraqi history when diverse communities united in the Revolution against the monarchy and the country's heterogeneity was celebrated rather than fought. The choice of displaying the video documentary on Jewad Selim's work on the *Monument of Freedom* implicitly sent this message, as the purpose of the monument was to celebrate the 1958 July Revolution, the end of monarchy, and the beginning of a new era.

The choice of the contemporary artists also continued the theme of connections that make the foundation for unity in diversity. It is argued that artists whose works are exhibited in national pavilions have a dual role: they represent both the state and social groups (Garney 2019). If we accept this notion, we can conclude that the contemporary artists featured in the *Archaic* exhibition also acted as representatives of their communities. Sufficient information about the artists' background was provided both in the labels (their place of origin generally indicated their ethnic and/or religious background), and in the press release. The artists were given voices through their artworks exhibited in the national pavilion and, consequently, diverse Iraqi communities were given voice through the figure of the artist 'representing' them.

Further elaborating on this idea, one can conclude that the institutional structure (national pavilions) of the Venice Biennale imposes a political role on artists and artworks. In other words, the political imagery is enacted through artistic representation. In the *Archaic* pavilion the artists were fitted into the curatorial agenda to artistically create the image of a unified yet heterogeneous country, even if some of the artworks actually contested this primary narrative. In another context, these artworks could have been interpreted quite differently. For example, there is an interesting tension between the work of Nadine Hattom and the curatorial idea of displaying her work in the national pavilion of Iraq. Hattom could be regarded as a representative of the Mandaean community and while in her artwork she pointed out the erasure of the Mandaean community from Iraq, the curators paradoxically used her background to reconnect her community back to Iraq through the inclusion of her artwork within the narrative of unity in diversity.

Moreover, the organization of space and chronological layout of the pavilion can be understood as an attempt to curate an art historiography of Iraq. Artists with different ethno-religious backgrounds are inscribed in this logical, historical development of artistic practices in the country. Alluding to the Mesopotamian past as well as the modern history of Iraq, the curators not only highlighted the history shared by diverse ethno-religious communities and their common roots, but also attempted to comment on the future of the country. In this sense, if the past is shared, the collective future can be imagined.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the developing area of studies on the cultural politics of national pavilions at the Venice Biennale. It proposes and makes use of the semiotic method of multimodal analysis to examine curatorial strategies in meaning construction. By analysing the reception of the national pavilion of Iraq in the art critical reviews, the paper suggests that the meaning communicated by the curators was partially overlooked. Given that the system of national pavilions at the Venice Biennale is as much about artistic as it is about political representation, the paper makes a case for the importance of the historical, social, and political context in fully understanding the meaning communicated by national pavilions' exhibitions.

Received: 21 March 2020

Finally accepted: 25 February 2022

Notes

- ¹ Iraq is not a permanent, or semi-permanent member state at the Biennale. As a temporary member state, the country has to apply for participation for each biennale. For the same reason, Iraq is not given a space to exhibit the pavilion in one of the two central Biennale locations but is given a space to exhibit by the Biennale's administration.
- ² All the contemporary artworks, with an exception of Sakar Sleman's Land Art (2014), were commissioned for the pavilion by the Ruya Foundation. Sleman's work presented at the exhibition is a replica of the artwork created by Sleman in the Kurdish mountains several years earlier.
- ³ Alain Elkann, 'Tamara Chalabi', Alain Elkann Interviews 2017. <https://www.alainelkanninterviews.com/tamara-chalabi/>, accessed 18 February 2020.
- ⁴ See Hannah Ellis-Petersen, 'Answering "Cultural Genocide": Iraq's Looted Treasures to be Displayed at the Venice Biennale', The Guardian 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/21/iraq-museum-to-display-40-ancient-artefacts-at-venice-biennale>, accessed 16 February 2022; Jonas Ekeberg, 'Privileged and Less Privileged Pavilions', Nordic Art Review 2017. <https://kunstkrikk.com/privileged-and-less-privileged-pavilions/>, accessed 16 February 2022; Kate Sutton, 'Politics by Other Means: Kate Sutton around the 57th Venice Biennale', Artforum 2017. <https://www.artforum.com/diary/kate-sutton-around-the-57th-venice-biennale-68460>, accessed 16 February 2022; Jackie Wullschlager, 'Venice Biennale Round-up: A Rainbow Thread of Optimism', Financial Times 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/2f810520-3584-11e7-bce4-9023f8c0fd2e>, accessed 16 February 2022

- ⁵ See Colin Randall, 'Ancient Artefacts Leave Iraq for the 57th Venice Biennale', *The National* 2017. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/ancient-artefacts-leave-iraq-for-the-57th-venice-biennale-1.88940>, accessed 16 February 2022; Ellis-Petersen, 'Answering "Cultural Genocide": Iraq's Looted Treasures to be Displayed at the Venice Biennale'.
- ⁶ See Randall, 'Ancient Artefacts Leave Iraq for the 57th Venice Biennale'; Dan Jakubowski, 'Regional Artists Largely Fit the Post-utopia Feel at this Year's Venice Biennale', *Mada Masr* 2017. <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/07/17/feature/culture/regional-artists-largely-fit-the-post-utopia-feel-at-this-years-venice-biennale/>, accessed 16 February 2022; Dan Einav, 'Statehood and Statelessness: National Pavilions in Venice', *Financial Times* 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/9557a068-2b6e-11e7-9ec8-168383da43b7>, accessed 16 February 2022.
- ⁷ See Ekeberg, 'Privileged and Less Privileged Pavilions'; Uma Nair, 'A Momentous Inheritance: Archaic, The National Pavilion of Iraq at the 57th International Art Exhibition of Venice', *Architectural Digest* 2017. <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/momentous-inheritance-archaic-national-pavilion-iraq-57th-international-art-exhibition-venice/>, accessed 16 February 2022.
- ⁸ See Ellis-Petersen, 'Answering "Cultural Genocide": Iraq's Looted Treasures to be Displayed at the Venice Biennale'; Wulschlager, 'Venice Biennale Round-up: A Rainbow Thread of Optimism'.
- ⁹ Elkann, 'Tamara Chalabi'.

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Anastasia Shanaah is a PhD fellow at the Department of Art History, Aesthetics & Culture and Museology at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her project investigates patterns of politicisation of exhibitions of contemporary art from and in the Middle East as well as national pavilions of the Middle Eastern countries at the Venice Biennale. The project also explores the implications of politicisation for the region's artistic practices and on perception of artworks by the Middle Eastern artists.