

Laughing with, Laughing at

Humour and Revolution in the 2019 Venice Pavilions of Chile and Egypt

Chrisoula Lionis and Alkisti Efthymiou

Abstract

The autumn of 2019 was characterised by an eruption of global protests, including Lebanon, Iraq, Ecuador, Chile, and Egypt. The velocity with which these protests emerged nurtured a sense that the Global South ‘was on the march’. At the same time as these events were rapidly unfolding, the world’s premier mass art exhibition, the Venice Biennale, was in its final weeks. Harnessing discourse analysis, participant observation, and collaborative auto-ethnography, the authors draw together a comparative study of the Chilean and Egyptian pavilions and assess the impact of ongoing and suspended revolutionary histories of both nations. Approaching art as a form of ‘practical aesthetics’ (Bennett 2012) and focusing on humour as an aesthetic quality enmeshed in complex political temporalities, this article analyses the relationship between humour, contemporary art, and revolution, demonstrating how the laughter facilitated by these two pavilions negotiates understandings of national pasts, and uprisings in the present.

Keywords: 18-O, biennials, Chilean protests, Egyptian revolution, humour studies, national pavilions, practical aesthetics, temporality

Introduction: Humour in the 58th Venice Biennale

Humour is one of the most pervasive elements of contemporary public culture. It is central to our everyday lives, our relationships, the form and content of our media (Pickering and Lockyer 2005: 3), and it is now an unavoidable aspect of how we understand culture and indeed politics. Although humourology carries a broad range of theories often hastily sketched and in conflict with one another, in recent years we can see a turn toward a growing scholarly appreciation of the aesthetic role and function of humour (Holm 2017).¹ Rather than focus on its taxonomies (parody, pastiche, etc.), this new approach understands humour as an aesthetic quality that mediates the way we see, hear, and feel the world, determining how we



interact within it. This understanding of humour as an aesthetic quality means that it can 'be understood not as a site of dominance or resistance whose function is determined in advance, but as a cultural terrain whose aesthetic contours determine its multiple possible political trajectories' (Holm 2017: 13). In this article we aim to contribute to this understanding of humour as an aesthetic quality enmeshed in complex political temporalities. More specifically, we focus our attention on the relationships between humour, temporality, contemporary art, and revolutionary moments.

We demonstrate how laughter, at and with art, affects contemporary interpretations of nationhood ingrained in political histories of revolution. To explore this dimension of humour we focus on the politics of national representation in the 2019 Venice Biennale. Our emphasis is on the two case studies of the Chilean and Egyptian pavilions in Venice, drawing together a comparative analysis of how both pavilions negotiate and reconfigure audience encounters with revolutionary and post-revolutionary aesthetics, serving to challenge understandings of national pasts, and uprisings in the present.

The scrambling of temporalities is central to interpreting how both national pavilions represent the respective revolutionary histories of Chile and Egypt. Within this context, we are interested in the fusion of the past with the present, and of distance with proximity, and in what this fusion does to the spectator, namely inciting their laughter. As with all contributions to this special issue, we demonstrate how sensory and affective traces of revolutions endure. Our attention is directed toward how national self-representations are consequences of revolutionary (Chile) and post-revolutionary (Egypt) moments. In the case of Chile, we focus on the recent 2019/2021 social revolt (starting on October 18 and thus referred to as 18-O). In the case of Egypt, we maintain focus on the legacy of the Arab Spring and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.

We take an interdisciplinary approach to analysis of humour, the sensory responses of viewing art in situ, and the sensory response of laughter. Our method harnesses discourse analysis, participant observation, collaborative auto-ethnography (Chang et al. 2016), and experience-based visual analysis to draw together a comparative study of our two cases. To trace a new framework for understanding humour as an aesthetic form that mediates revolutionary afterlives, we build upon the key ideas of Todd McGowan (2017) regarding humour and its relationship to the twin notions of 'distance and proximity', Nicholas Holm (2017) on humour as a 'political aesthetic', and Jill Bennett's work (2012) on affect and 'practical aesthetics'.

By building a new understanding of the political role of humour as an aesthetic form, we hope to broaden the scope of contemporary aesthetic theory. Although the subject of our analysis here is visual art (in what is arguably the world's most recognised biennial exhibition), it is important to make clear that our discussion of aesthetics is not object-oriented or 'ocular-centric'. Here we follow Jill Bennett (2012), who works at the intersection of aesthetics and visual anthropology, to urge an understanding of art as a lived experience. Like Bennett, we analyse art as a form of 'practical aesthetics', a subject of investigation that is not geared around an

object but rather considers art and aesthetics as unfolding events that both engender relations and facilitate affect that moves across and between bodies and through diverse geographies.

Beyond advancing the understanding of practical aesthetics, our discussion (along with all contributions to this volume) bolsters an analytical framework centred on the multi-sensory experience of revolutions. Focusing on the interplay between distance and proximity, expressed temporally and through laughter, our contribution demonstrates how this analytic applies to contemporary art and international exhibition practice. In so doing, we aim to provide a new understanding of how revolutionary resonances are enacted, experienced, and understood through both art and humour and their significant role in mediating the relationship between revolution and national pasts, presents, and futures.

Here and there: The temporal relationship between humour, distance, and proximity

Humour is intimately braided to the relationship between distance and proximity. The operation of humour relies on the interstice or, perhaps more accurately, the overlap between these two poles. To demonstrate this point, film and cultural theorist Todd McGowan (2017: 127) reminds us of personalities described as ‘lacking a sense of humour’. These people, he explains, occupy one of two positions—either they see everyone as pathetic (worthy of pity) or they experience no connection to others at all. Put differently, these people are either too connected or not connected enough.

We build upon McGowan’s framework here as it focuses on the function of humour amongst audiences and spectators, as opposed to its role within various interpersonal relationships (e.g., within family, friendship, or work relations). Our emphasis in this article is on the role and operation of humour within contemporary art contexts—and not focused on interpersonal relationships or dynamics that have long dominated humourological approaches. We argue that the entanglement of distance and proximity is crucial to the operation, recognition, and response to the humour generated by the Chilean and Egyptian pavilions of the 58th Venice Biennale. More particularly, the experience of distance, or rather the conflation and recession of a multitude of distances, becomes embroiled in the encounter with revolutionary histories traced in both pavilions and our capacity to become ‘laughing spectators’ (McGowan 2017: 130).

There were several key forms of distance/proximity characterising the ‘laughing spectators’ encounter with the Chilean and Egyptian pavilions in Venice. In the most immediate sense, distance/proximity was sensed geographically. As the most prestigious art exhibition globally, visiting the Venice Biennale is often considered essential travel for members of the international art circuit. Frequently travelling from afar, these well-heeled exhibition audiences often visit Venice for each Biennale edition, developing a long-standing relationship and familiarity with the city, and with each other. Despite this familiarity with Venice, the geographical

distance between Italy and the nation states of Chile and Egypt encourages a sense that the social, economic, and political content explored and represented by these pavilions is something happening over 'there', rather than within the proximate 'here' of Europe, or indeed the Global North.

The very structure of the Biennale highlights this 'here' and 'there': the core component is an international exhibition organised by a rotating curator and showing works under a specific theme or statement. The second component consists of the exhibition of national pavilions, each with their own curator and projects. This makes Venice the only remaining biennial to take the form of national representations. Lasting for six months (from May 11 to November 24), the 2019 Biennale was attended by more than six hundred thousand visitors (La Biennale 2019a). As Hans Haacke's *World Poll* series of works suggests, and particularly the one conducted during the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, most exhibition visitors are well educated and of relatively high income.² Broadly positioned within this demographic ourselves, we have been regularly attending such large-scale international exhibitions, while our reactions to art are informed by our research histories and ongoing professional engagement with cultural workers and institutions. Under this light, our experience of the Biennale is connected to our personal and professional investment in art and its contexts. At the same time, it is filtered by a critical distance derived from our understanding of the art market's structures and inherent power relations.

Like us, visitors take interest in specific national pavilions according to cultural background, regional allegiances, or recent geopolitical changes. The cultural distance of the globe-trotting art crowd (or even the locally based visitors) from the specificities of the geographies represented in Biennale pavilions is in part predetermined. This can be attributed to the spatial distribution of the Venice Biennale, one that is, as Emily Putnam notes (2013: 114), a 'heterotopia for the staging of nations'. The Biennale has been characterised as 'the Olympics of the art world' (Crow 2017), in reference to its central organising principle: a festival of national representations appealing to an international public, where countries are in competition to win a prize (the Golden Lion), earning points on the level of soft power and cultural diplomacy (Nye 2004; Tripp 2013; Zaugg and Nishimura 2015). Herein there is a prescribed interplay between local and global art production, between the vision of artists or curators working upon individual pavilions and the image that their commissioning nation-state wants to portray.

Egypt is the only Arab country in the Giardini³ area of the Venice Biennale and has owned a pavilion since 1934. Therefore, for more than eighty years, the national representation of Egypt in Venice has been state-sponsored,⁴ and very often state-censored, as governments aim to showcase their hold on power and confirm their own version of history (Tripp 2013: 185–186). The year 2011, during the thick of the Arab Spring, marked one of the very few cases where the Egyptian pavilion integrated cracks into the state narrative by presenting the work of late artist Ahmed Basyony, who died during the 'Day of Rage' on January 28. What seemed like an opportunity to critically address the country's historical present,

however, turned into a battleground between ‘the dominant national cultural representation and the contemporary ‘internationalized’ art scene’ (Harutyunyan 2011). Subsequent pavilions not only toned down their rhetoric (Kholeif 2013) but also appropriated revolutionary demands in order to legitimise the post-Mubarak regime (Forbes 2015). Criticisms of the state’s intervention in the selection process and the exhibition content have been raised by the international press and the country’s independent art scene (Elsirgany 2015; Johnson 2019a). As we will see further on, 2019 was no exception.

Chile entered the Venice Biennale for the first time in 2009, with a pavilion in the Arsenale presenting conceptual sculptor Iván Navarro’s spectacular neon light installations. In subsequent years, the projects selected were evidently socio-politically charged: feminist art historian Nelly Richard curated the 2015 pavilion, visual artist Alfredo Jaar challenged the politics of the Giardini with his work in 2013, and Bernardo Oyarzún’s 2017 installation commented on the repression of the Chilean indigenous populations and his Mapuche heritage. The country’s national representation is financially supported and managed by the National Council of Culture and the Arts and, upon occasion, additionally financed by the galleries representing the exhibiting artists—as was the case in 2009 and 2011 (Castro Jorquera 2011).⁵ Since 2015 the pavilion has been selected through a public competition and since 2017 through an international competition. The Ministry of Culture publishes an Open Call to submit proposals, which are then judged by a publicly announced, internationally acclaimed selection committee.

Over the course of its long history (first edition 1895), the Venice Biennale has undergone considerable structural change. Since the late 1960s, there has been a debate regarding the extent to which national pavilions should reflect and adhere to the curatorial theme of the Biennale’s international exhibition (Martini 2020). Ralph Rugoff, the curator of the 2019 (and 58th) edition, announced the title ‘May You Live in Interesting Times’, a phrase purportedly taken from a traditional Chinese curse referring to periods of uncertainty, crisis, and turmoil—like the ones we are living in.

The 2019 pavilions of Egypt and Chile were marked by an emphasis on temporality that keenly reflected the curator’s title. The historical events and periods represented in the art within the exhibitions might be temporally distant from the actual time of viewing but, in the eyes of visitors, bear an inevitable proximity to recent political events. In the case of the Chilean pavilion, the *Altered Views* exhibition by artist Voluspa Jarpa was designed to offer a ‘proposal for decolonisation through a review of European history’ (La Biennale 2019b). Such a proposal, considering the political climate in Chile during the years leading to the Biennale and to the 18-O uprising, seems to go hand in hand with a revolutionary denunciation of present injustices rooted in the colonial project. Instances such as the assassination of Mapuche activist Camilo Catrillanca by the police in November 2018, resulting in a series of multitudinous protests against the Chilean State’s brutal repression of indigenous populations, and the feminist strike and march on 8 March 2019, attracting five hundred thousand women in the heart of Santiago demanding an

end to gender-based violence, are events known to (if not directly experienced by) Jarpa, pointing towards the complicity of institutions in perpetuating colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. In dialogue with this context and employing the conventions of ethnographic museums and displays, Jarpa's exhibition was separated into three parts: the 'Hegemonic Museum', the 'Subaltern Portraits Gallery', and the 'Emancipatory Opera'. Focusing on various historical events and personalities across European colonial history, the pavilion offered a reevaluation of European forms of historical commemoration, taking audiences on a 'transtemporal' journey (La Biennale 2019b).

In contrast to the specific personalities and historical events represented in Jarpa's work, the Egyptian pavilion brought together seemingly generic tropes of Egypt's ancient and recent pasts—combining, for example, sculptures of large sphinxes with television monitors depicting non-specific scenes of war. The exhibition *khnum across times witness* consisted of works by artists Islam Abdullah, Ahmed Chiha, and Ahmed Abdel Karim and focused upon the figure of Khnum (one of Egypt's most early known deities) imagining how the deity might have borne witness to historical changes from ancient times until the present. This brief description of works demonstrates that despite the considerable difference between both pavilions in content and artistic practice, both are marked by an attempt to scramble the temporal categories of 'past', 'present', and 'future'.

The global political landscape at the time in which we chose to visit the Venice Biennale and conduct this theoretical and ethnographic inquiry inflected our view of the Egyptian and Chilean pavilions, and no doubt likely did the same for many other visitors. Our research visit to Venice in late October 2019 was at the tail end of the exhibition that concluded the following month. More importantly, however, in the few weeks prior it appeared as if the world was 'on the march'—with large-scale protests erupting across diverse metropolitan centres ranging from Hong Kong to Quito, Beirut, La-Paz, Baghdad, and, significantly, Santiago and Cairo (Amnesty International 2019). Internationally, these protests were remarkable for the sheer number of protestors on the streets but also for the brutality with which states responded to their citizens' unrest. In Egypt, by early October, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi moved to quash protests against corruption and economic grievances with the largest wave of arrests seen in the nation for decades (Yee and Rashwan 2019). In Chile, in what has now become referred to as the 18-O uprising, millions across the social spectrum poured onto the streets to protest corruption, economic precarity, and structural disadvantage (Gutiérrez 2020).

A familiarity with these political and social events presented us with a common ethical problem in encountering these works; this was the question as to whether it is 'too soon' to appropriately laugh with another's misfortune. What this common ethical dilemma points to is that the relationship between temporality and humour is not a straightforward one. Indeed, the capacity for humorous content to generate mirth (that is happiness or joy) is also intimately linked to the temporal orientation of trauma. This is most clear in instances where humour has crossed a temporal line, one frequently described as 'too soon', where humorous irreverence toward

a traumatic event is understood as tasteless and unfunny, effectively demarcating an ethical division hinged on the experience of time (Phillips 2019: 14–15). Our analysis of the Egyptian and Chilean pavilions is underscored by an understanding that the ethics of audience laughter is shaped by this temporal distance.

Our comparative analysis of the Egyptian and Chilean pavilion case studies is underscored by a threefold approach: we are interested in how both reflect divergent revolutionary histories, how they take distinctly different aesthetic approaches, and how the humour they generate differs considerably in its impetus and in its effect. Our study of aesthetics moves beyond a descriptive approach and toward ‘practical aesthetics’, considering art as a ‘means of apprehending the world via sense-based and affective processes—processes that touch bodies intimately and directly but that also underpin the emotions, sentiments and passions of public life’ (Bennett 2012: 3). Our use of the framework of practical aesthetics sees art, and in particular the pavilions of Chile and Egypt, as sites where revolutions endure and are mediated. Spaces where, as editor of this special issue, Myriam Lamrani (2021: 6) notes, ‘revolutions move back and forth between peoples’ bodies and the body politic’.

Laughing at, laughing with: A first-hand account of the pavilions

As comparative studies, the pavilions demonstrate divergent mediations of entangled political histories and contemporary political climates. While both nations have been, and are, currently experiencing political upheaval, the implication of each pavilion’s visitors in these revolutionary moments is of particular interest to us here. Significantly, these pavilions were of a very select few to facilitate humour and laughter from Biennale audiences. Yet, the humour they generated differed considerably—in large part a result of the legacy of these suspended (Egypt) or ongoing (Chile) revolutions and the contemporary political climate in each nation.

It is useful here to begin our analysis of the two pavilions by tracing the artistic practice of the selected artists and by providing an account of the works displayed within both. The Chilean pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale was curated by Agustín Pérez Rubio and presented the work of Voluspa Jarpa under the title *Altered Views*.⁶ The artist’s works often touch upon issues of gender, historical memory, and colonialism by way of unearthing and reorganising archives. The Egyptian pavilion was curated by Ahmed Chiha and exhibited works by himself, Islam Abdullah, and Ahmed Abdel Karim, under the title *khnum across times witness*. All three artists are based in Cairo and are relatively unknown outside of Egypt, as their short biographies presented in Venice confirm (Egypt Pavilion 2019). The lack of international profile for these artists provides some insight into the fact that the commission for the Egyptian pavilion is more concerned with how to best accommodate the state’s requirement to project a particular sanctioned vision of Egypt for audiences.

Listed amongst the ‘worst’ (Ruiz 2019) of the art displayed at the 2019 Biennale, the Egyptian pavilion received very little by way of substantial critical engagement. When the pavilion was discussed, it was described as kitsch or ‘chintzy in a Vegas



Figure 1: Islam Abdullah, Ahmed Chiha, Ahmed Abdel Karim, Installation View, *khnum across times witness* (2019) at the Egyptian pavilion. Photo: Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic.

way’ (Johnson 2019b), with some critics going so far as to describe it as the ‘reject film set from Liz Taylor’s *Cleopatra*’ (Ruiz 2019). In the official Venice Biennale website (La Biennale 2019c), the pavilion is described as a temple for the deity Khnum—the guard of secrets and the teller of history who has been taught the ‘secrets of every field of knowledge, medicine, engineering, mummification, and astronomy’. This description encourages audiences to enter the temple and tomb-like space and search for ‘the essence of past times’, and to ‘meet people who lived and co-existed peacefully’. This official account of the work stands apart from those of other national pavilions. It appears to be not only poorly translated but also notable for being reminiscent of the description of an escape-room form of entertainment (drawing from stereotypical tropes surrounding ancient Egypt) and Orientalist imaginings of Egypt in European exhibitions of the late 1800s (Mitchell 1989: 217–219), rather than a statement of a contemporary art exhibition.

The misfire of the pavilion regarding exhibition, presentation, and curatorial framing conventions evident in the press release was also apparent in the exhibition itself. Upon entering the Egyptian pavilion, audiences found themselves in a foyer-like space containing information about the installation on display and the exhibiting artists. This entranceway was suggestive of governmental spaces geared toward cultural diplomacy, something evoked, for example, by the staging of a large Egyptian flag, alongside a table with two small twin Italian and Egyptian flags. The design tone of the foyer changed drastically once audiences entered the adjacent



Figure 2: Islam Abdullah, Ahmed Chiha, Ahmed Abdel Karim, Installation View, *khnun across times witness* (2019) at the Egyptian pavilion. Photo and courtesy: Contemporary And (C&).

two-room installation. Filled with gold sphinxes with rotating television monitors as heads (each displaying generic scenes of bombings), the first room felt immediately as though a stage set, fit with evocative lighting, fibreglass casting, and a palette of yellows, golds, and warm purples.

This first chamber was followed by a narrow entryway that led audiences to a second room where they found themselves confronted with a large gold sphinx—this time with a satellite for a head (Figure 1). With a loud soundtrack consisting of a narration of the story of Khnum in Italian and dramatic music reminiscent of the climactic scenes of animated films, this second chamber was centred around the sphinx which presumably represented the ancient Egyptian deity. Surrounded by illuminated obelisks, painted hieroglyphs, and a wall-mounted video depicting the pavilion's artists in a confined space from which they cannot escape, this final room of the installation left audiences feeling confused about the intended meaning of the work. At our time of viewing, audiences appeared to show a disregard for the works in the installation—not adhering to typical behaviours or conventions in 'high art' settings. This was evidenced, for example, by seeing several audience members touching the work, laughing at the sphinxes, and engaging with men who appeared to be repairing several broken monitors in the installation (Figure 2).

In each of our visits to the pavilion we monitored audience behaviours and engagement with work. The starkest observation was that, unlike most other pavilions, that of Egypt was largely empty. Moreover, audiences did not appear to linger in the exhibition. In part this is because the video loop, the soundtrack, and the two large-scale installations could be swiftly viewed by audiences, as they were notable for their lack of detail and accompanying text. On the other hand, this quick walk through the exhibition might also be explained by an element of surprise or confusion—and a consequent eagerness to try to make sense of it all. Indeed, upon leaving our second visit to the pavilion, a fellow audience member was heard asking, ‘was that for real?’ In a Biennale edition framed by the curatorial concept of living in ‘interesting times’, the pavilion appeared almost entirely ‘out’ of time, both in terms of subject matter and artistic practice. On the surface of things, there was a perceived lack of contemporaneity, as the artistic execution did not resemble the dominant forms, practices, or tropes of contemporary art. More importantly, however, there was also a distinct disengagement with contemporary ‘interesting times’ (specific social, political, or economic concerns of the present), particularly in regard to Egypt or the broader Middle East North Africa region.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the Chilean pavilion was consistently filled with audience members, who lingered within the exhibition space.⁷ The first section that the visitors encountered upon entering the Chilean pavilion was the Hegemonic Museum, made to resemble a traditional European ethnographic museum but one that, rather than focusing on colonised populations, focuses on the coloniser(s). The exhibits, combining historical evidence with artistic (and at times interactive) installations, referred to six cases from the seventeenth century onwards: the cannibalism following the death of Dutch brothers De Witt during the 1672 Disaster Year (*Rampjaar*); the repression of women’s demands for labour rights and equality in 1848 Vienna; the European ‘human zoos’ and the popularisation of scientific racism; the hysterification of female experience at the Salpetriere psychiatric hospital; the Dirty War and the US involvement in Guatemala through the United Fruit Company; and the US-backed efforts to wipe out the Italian Left in post-war Europe. As mentioned in the curatorial statement, all these events aim to ‘expose the counterpoints to the notions of civilization with which the European discourse, subsequently exported to the United States and other countries—including the colonies through some of their hegemonic elites—upheld the centralization of its expansionist power’ (*Altered Views* 2019). In other words, the exhibition reveals the western roots of the concepts used to define the colonies, attributing them to the behaviour of the ‘white, heterosexual, patriarchal, and hegemonic male’ (Pérez Rubio 2019). As if viscerally responding to exactly this point, during the first three weeks of the 18-O protests in Chile, several national monuments and sculptures depicting figures of the European colonisation and Chilean military had been altered or damaged (Urrejola 2019).

The most striking and attention-drawing element of the Hegemonic Museum was a circular room with walls made of glass at the centre of the exhibition. From the outside, the walls looked like opaque mirrors on which the audience could



Figure 3: Voluspa Jarpa, *The Hegemonic Museum*, Installation View, with the mirror room on the right. Series *Altered Views* (2019) at the Chilean pavilion. Photo: Felipe Lavín.

see their reflection. From the inside, however, the walls were of transparent glass through which you could observe (without being observed) how other people behave outside the room (Figure 3). Once inside, the visitor could read six short texts written on the glass panels, each related to one of the cases engaged with before, and each one facing directly the section of the exhibition that refers to the respective case. These texts challenged the Western hegemonic perspective by presenting deliberately forgotten or covered-up facts: how Guatemala became the first ‘banana republic’, the contribution of the CIA and NATO to the dismantling of the Red Brigades in Italy, and so on. This information becomes available only once you enter the glass room and are given the chance to ‘shift perspectives’—from being observed to being the observer of the visitors’ behaviour. When inside the room, we started putting together pieces of the hegemonic project, while at the same we watched audience members look at themselves in the mirror, fixing their makeup, taking selfies, and interacting with other installations.

From a position of relative power, related to the act of watching without being seen and to knowing something about the exhibition that the others do not know yet, we (and other visitors around us inside the room) felt free to laugh conspiratorially at the frivolousness of the audience outside. ‘This is an exhibition, not a photo booth!’ was a comment we overheard. The stakes turned upside down, however, when we left the glass room and became the ones being observed, realising the



Figure 4: Voluspa Jarpa, *The Subaltern Portraits Gallery*, Installation View. Series *Altered Views* (2019) at the Chilean pavilion. Photo: Felipe Lavín.

deeper provocation that Jarpa's Hegemonic Museum wanted to make. We were not exempt from being the target of the laughter facilitated through the work. The exhibition was specifically designed to be presented at the Venice Biennale and to its predominantly European, well-off, white audience. Indeed, the artist aimed, as she explains in an interview, to expose 'the cultural hegemonies that govern the ways in which artistic works are sanctioned and intellectual discourses are generated by different stories and cultures' (Jarpa 2019). Put differently, Jarpa's work 'punched up', taking aim at audiences from the Global North. Whilst the work avoided drawing any didactic correlation between the colonial histories on display and the contemporary political context, there was a tacit suggestion that the target of humour was white European audiences who benefit in material and cultural terms from the colonial histories on display. Laughter in response to Jarpa's work might then be understood as a recognition of the legacy of a colonial past and its consequences in the present. In this sense, visitors like us became part of the work's decolonial critique and are implicated in the production of hegemonic discourse.

The second section of *Altered Views*, the Subaltern Portraits Gallery, worked along similar lines. The Gallery was a dark room with portraits hung almost as if they were levitating (Figure 4). Each portrait depicted characters from the previously mentioned cases and was dramatically illuminated by a spotlight. The portraits consist of twenty-two 'large-scale oil paintings of archival images, assuming the standardization of bodies and representations, in the same proud way in which insults and racist, sexist terms have been used to catalogue, ridicule

and subjugate individuals' (Altered Views 2019). As if to test Audre Lordé's (2018) assertion that the 'master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', the work presents the same images used to classify bodies for their gender, race, and class but now converted (through the traditional hegemonic aesthetic form of oil-painting) to timeless portraits of heroism and defiance. Is this inversion enough, however, to 'transcend subalternity', as the exhibition text suggests? As we were reading it, our laughter emerged as an expression of disbelief and doubt towards what we thought of as the statement's naivety. But, upon closer inspection, was our laughter expressing perhaps our ingrained discomfort in viewing something outside our prescribed horizon of expectation (i.e., we are not used to seeing portraits of subaltern subjects presented in this way)?

Whereas the Hegemonic Museum was clear in its use of museological conventions to turn the colonial gaze back upon itself, the Subaltern Portraits Gallery was much more ambiguous, producing in us suspicion towards the tone and sincerity in which objects were curated within the space. The curatorship subtly called to mind problematic museological histories: the display, with giant portraits hung at an angle in a dark room with chiaroscuro lighting, looked more like an exhibit of 'outsider art' or, worse still, the infamous Nazi 'degenerate art' exhibition. Whereas the Hegemonic Museum seemed to openly punch up, the same could not be said of the Subaltern Gallery. Reading the exhibition text, we wondered whether it was earnest or ironic. We could not recognise whether statements like 'These individuals accept their subaltern reality while staring back at us with an epic look of resistance' were promoting a heroification of the subaltern or contributing to the dismantling of the category altogether. Given the ambiguity of text, curatorial framing, and subject matter, what then was the motivation and consequence of our laughter? It was our awareness of historical, anthropological, and aesthetic conventions that allowed us to register this exhibition as an act of subversive mimicry. In turn we recognised the target of humour as being not the populations on display within the portraits but rather the structural forms of colonial violence that underscore the representations of indigenous and colonised people in western ethnographic discourse and museological practices.

Affective proximities: Laughter as a response to revolutionary and post-revolutionary presents

The laughter of audiences in both pavilions was in effect reliant on what humourologists describe as incongruity theory. Most often associated with the work of Immanuel Kant (see Morreall 1989), incongruity theory argues that humour is generated as a result of a denial of our expectations—when we expect one person, thing, or outcome and are presented with another. Providing this incongruity does not present us with any threat, it is argued that this dimension of surprise is essential to laughter (Gervais and Wilson 2005). In the Chilean pavilion, this incongruity was evident in the mirror installation, for example. In the Egyptian pavilion this incongruity was more immediate—and was based on audiences' expectations to

see the conventions of 'high art' rather than kitsch aesthetics. The consequences of this humorous content, and the responses of laughter by audiences witnessed in both pavilions, were markedly different. To return here to the theory of humour presented by Todd McGowan at the outset of this text, it would appear that the Chilean pavilion was able to form 'laughing spectators' through its ability to balance excess and lack, alongside proximity and distance. The Egyptian pavilion, however, created a very different outcome, where those who began as 'laughing spectators' were in effect transformed into 'compassionate spectators' who did not feel comfortable laughing at artists or at a political situation to which they looked upon with pity and compassion.

In large part this was the result of a divergent employment of stereotypes in the two pavilions that created not only varying audience responses but also arguably different political consequences. Aware of the stereotypes enforced upon Chile by the Global North, Jarpa's work actively challenged imaginings of place and understandings of colonial history by literally turning the mirror back on the audience, implicating them in a process of colonial imagining and power relations. Egypt, on the other hand, did not appear to aim to subvert these stereotypes at all. Instead, it employed an aesthetic reminiscent of escape rooms or casinos and engaged with motifs that dominate imaginings of the nation, namely a glorious ancient past (Meskell 2000; Abu-Lughod 1998) and an experience of being in the crossfires of tremendous geopolitical change and conflict. In the Egyptian pavilion, audience members were witnessed walking into the exhibition and initially laughing—perhaps mistakenly believing that what they were seeing was a surprisingly ironic, tacky, and even essentialist representation of Egyptian culture. Laughter quickly stopped. Perhaps this was in part due to confusion or, like in our case, due to the realisation that the pavilion was an embodiment of state power and ultimately signalled the failure of the Egyptian revolution. Our laughter here was transformed, going from audible to silent, as the pavilion became something that was painful to look at. Put differently, the laughter generated by the pavilion did not reflect the important and recognised role of humour as a tool of subversion in the face of oppression and state power in the Egyptian revolution, instead it reinforced the very opposite (Winegar 2021: 2). Within our auto-ethnography, the feeling was akin to the cringe-worthy sight of a performer failing on stage. The 'failure' here was not so much in the technical execution of works, despite their extremely kitsch aesthetic, rather it came as a result of missed opportunity and seeming confusion over the intention of the Venice Biennale. Painfully, because of state interference, the artists and curator of the pavilion appeared as if they were playing a game for which they did not know the rules.

What is made clear through these mixed and varied laughter responses is that humour is, as philosophy Simon Critchley reminds us, contingent on an acknowledgement of a shared 'secret code' (2002: 68), where, in order to engage in humour, we must hold a shared set of signs, symbols, and references. These secret codes are, in other words, shared knowledge. Although the laughter generated through these secret codes is telling, so too is the moment that laughter falls away, the instant that

makes apparent what Critchley describes as ‘the black sun at the centre of the comic universe’ (Critchley 2002: 50). Our understanding of the ‘secret code’ at play in the Chilean pavilion encouraged a continuation of laughter, whereas our response to the Egyptian pavilion was eclipsed by the ‘black sun’, encouraging a cessation of laughter. What these responses make clear is that recognition of our knowledge rises to the surface through laughter. In the case of the Chilean and Egyptian pavilions, this knowledge is bound to revolutionary pasts and presents.

We came into these pavilions knowing that both nations are living through revolutionary and post-revolutionary movements and that these movements are bound to long histories of anti-colonial struggle. At the time of visiting the Venice Biennale, these revolutions were in a markedly different state; one was suspended (Egypt), and the other was just beginning (Chile). Our knowledge of this, impacted directly upon our laughter: where we felt optimism (Chile) we continued laughing, where we felt despair (Egypt) we stopped laughing. More than this, the Chilean pavilion mocked European history and western cultural hegemony; it emboldened the spectator to laugh at systems and institutions of power. Conversely, to laugh at the Egyptian pavilion was akin to punching down towards a nation and its people whose revolution appears to be forcibly stalled.

Exhibitions are not events that occur outside the real world (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 4). On the contrary, as Jill Bennett argues, they ‘reveal trends but themselves function to create new sequences, new histories and genealogies, responding to the contemporary and materialising relationships between art and the outside world’ (2012: 18). What is clear through our analysis here is that affects and their physical expressions, and laughter in particular, amplify the ways in which exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale become ‘a visible means of realising sets of relations’ (Bennett 2012: 19) and that they are better understood as unfolding events, shaped and shaping social and political histories that may be geographically and temporally distant.

Conclusion

In mapping and analysing audience responses to these Egyptian and Chilean pavilions and the works housed within them, we contribute to a broadened understanding of aesthetics. Here we have followed Jill Bennett’s approach to demonstrate the operation of ‘practical aesthetics’, a view of aesthetics which far from being focused on objects (and therefore aligned naturally to art history and visual culture) is instead ‘process-based and concerned with perception and affect’. This understanding of aesthetics is not about the categorisation or definition of art but rather an analysis of the affective relations that ‘animate art and real events’ (Bennett 2012: 13).

Our drive to analyse these two pavilions was underscored by two essential questions. Why do we register these pavilions (and the works within them) as humorous? Is this recognition of humour, and indeed the laughter of audiences, connected to ‘failed’ and ongoing political struggles? Taking an interdisciplinary

approach to our analysis, we have here drawn on cultural theory and humourology, alongside a synthesised methodology involving discourse analysis, auto-ethnography, and visual analysis. Our analysis has been anchored in an understanding of our own positionality, our recognition of the contemporary political and social context, and the legacy of historical and ongoing revolutionary movements that affect our recognition of humour and its impact upon audiences. We here contend that humour remains overlooked as a form of practical aesthetics—that is, a form that ‘renders visible the networks that produce relations’ (Bennett 2012: 5).

In this article, we were specifically interested in how humour makes visible (and audible) the legacy of suspended and ongoing revolutionary moments (Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich 2020). To demonstrate this, our analysis began with a discussion of how the relationship between proximity and distance sits at the centre of audience and spectator laughter toward humorous subjects (Goldstein 2013). More specifically, we made clear the manifold manifestations of distance and proximity in the humour of the Egyptian and Chilean pavilions, namely those of geography, culture, and temporality. Our analysis of the two pavilions involved an interdisciplinary approach—bringing together ethnographic methods, including participant observation, alongside visual analysis of works in situ. Our focus here was not object-oriented, rather our emphasis rested upon the reactions of audience members and analysis of these exhibitions as ‘unfolding events’.

Focusing on how interpretations of nationhood steeped in political revolutions become caught in an affective circuit of humour, we aim here to open a new understanding of the significance and consequences of humour and practical aesthetics. Our work demonstrates that humour is not an inherently positive social force (Szokolczai 2013; Billig 2005), it is a complex aesthetic form with diverse political consequences. Our work makes clear how, as an aesthetic form, humour builds a relational bridge that negotiates complex revolutionary temporalities and can reveal the political structures and histories that belie contemporary art exhibitions. Our laughter, it would seem, signals an affective engagement that translates the experience of revolution to change insiders’ and outsiders’ perceptions of national conditions and the lived reality of revolutionary consequences.

Acknowledgements

This article has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No.799087. The research work was supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI) under the HFRI PhD Fellowship grant (Fellowship Number: 217).

Chrisoula Lionis is based between Athens and Manchester. Holding a PhD in visual culture (UNSW Australia, 2013), Lionis has published widely in the field of cultural politics and is the author of *Laughter in Occupied Palestine: Comedy and Identity in Art and Film* (I.B. Tauris, 2016). Lionis is co-director of experimental pedagogical platform Artists for Artists and is currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie research fellow at the University of Manchester, working on Horizon 2020 project *Laughing in an Emergency: Humour, Cultural Resilience and Contemporary Art*.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6307-3790. Email: chrisoula.lionis@manchester.ac.uk

Alkisti Efthymiou is a PhD candidate in the Department of Social Anthropology at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Athens, Greece). Closely engaging with works of feminist/queer film produced in the Southern Cone, her thesis focuses on the cultural politics of intimacy and the critical state of love under late capitalism. Her most recent publications include articles in the academic journals *feministiqá*, *Identities*, and *Journal for Greek Media and Culture*. Her research is funded by the Hellenic Foundation of Research and Innovation (HFRI) and the General Secretariat of Research and Technology (GSRT).
ORCID: 0000-0002-2277-1274. Email: alkiseft@gmail.com

Notes

1. In this article we do not focus on particular taxonomies of humour. Rather, we rely on the term 'humour' as a 'catch-all' term to describe content that elicits laughter. Further, our approach here is to under the term 'comedy' as pertaining primarily to genre, and the word 'laughter' as describing the physiological response and subsequent affect.
2. The results of the poll are not publicly available but become accessible to the participants of the poll upon finishing it, on the respective platform installed in each exhibition. The artist often selects certain results and compares them in a series of installations as part of the work. The facts presented in this article are based on the participation of one of the authors in the *World Poll* exhibited during the 56th Venice Biennale.
3. Going further into the Biennale's 'geopolitics', there is a distinction between countries that own pavilion buildings (and are responsible for their construction and upkeep) and countries that rent buildings throughout Venice. Pavilions owned by exhibiting countries are located at the Giardini, which is considered the most prestigious site and includes former colonial powers such as Belgium, France, Spain, and Great Britain. Considering that there is no more space left to construct new pavilions in the Giardini, the newly exhibiting nations are either hosted in the Arsenale or in off-spaces across Venice.
4. Artists often need to self-fund their Biennale shows, as the money that the Egyptian government is providing is 'loaned' to them and by no means sufficient. They are prohibited from raising funds with business partners and must gift the work back to Egypt's Ministry of Culture to repay the debt (Johnson 2019b).
5. The 2019 Chilean representation was further supported by private entities such as the Antenna Foundation and the AMA Foundation. It seems that, when it comes to funding, the government allows for added contributions by non-state institutions or private collectors in order to ensure the successful realisation of the show.

6. Voluspa Jarpa is a Chilean visual artist, internationally recognized through her participations at the Havana Biennale (1997), Istanbul Biennale (2011), Mercosur Biennale (2011), Sao Paulo Biennale (2014), and Shanghai Biennale (2018). Agustín Pérez Rubio is a Spanish curator with a strong focus on Latin American art, and is the former Artistic Director of MALBA in Buenos Aires (2014–2018) and curator of the 11th Berlin Biennial.
7. The three sections within the pavilion were dense, both in the volume of artworks on display and surrounding text. Whereas all works on display point to the role of humour, our focus here is on the first two exhibitions: The Hegemonic Museum and the Subaltern Portraits Gallery.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1998), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Altered Views (2019), 'Altered Views: Voluspa Jarpa curated by Agustín Pérez Rubio', Press Kit. https://www.cultura.gob.cl/bienalvenecia2019/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2019/04/2.-altered-views_voluspa-jarpa-curated-by-agustin-perez-rubio.pdf (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Amnesty International (2019), 'Protests around the world explained'. 25 October. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/protests-around-the-world-explained/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Bennett, J. (2012), *Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects and Art After 9/11* (London: I.B. Tauris).
- Billig, M. (2005), *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications).
- Castro Jorquera, C. (2011), 'La bienal de Venecia: Una Gran Vitrina', *Artishock: Revista de Arte Contemporáneo*. 19 May. <https://artishockrevista.com/2011/05/19/la-bienal-venecia-una-gran-vitrina/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Chang, H., F. Ngunjiri and K. A Hernandez (2016), *Collaborative autoethnography* (New York: Routledge).
- Critchley, S. (2002), *On Humour* (New York: Routledge).
- Crow, K. (2017), 'The Olympics of the art world', *The Wall Street Journal*. 6 May. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-olympics-of-the-art-world-1494068401> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Damir-Geilsdorf, S., and S. Milich (eds) (2020), *Creative Resistance: Political Humor in the Arab Uprisings* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag).
- Egypt Pavilion (2019). <http://isstudio.art/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Elsirgany, S. (2015), 'Egypt at the Venice Biennale: Fissures exposed within Egypt's art scene', *Ahram Online*. 23 May. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/25/130948/Arts--Culture/Visual-Art/Egypt-at-the-Venice-Biennale-Fissures-exposed-with.aspx> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Forbes, A. (2015), 'At the Egyptian pavilion, artists cry for peace', *Artsy*. 8 May. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-egyptian-pavilion-review-venice-biennale-2015> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Gervais, M. and D. Wilson (2005), 'The evolution and functions of laughter and humor: A synthetic approach', *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 80, no. 4: 395–430. <https://doi.org/10.1086/498281>.
- Goldstein, D. (2013), *Laughter Out of Place (Second edition)* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

- Gutiérrez, R. (2020), 'Ven seremos / Come, we will be', *feministiqá* 3. <http://feministiqá.net/ven-seremos/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Harutyunyan, A. (2011), 'Politics at the Pavilion in Venice', *Egypt Independent*. 14 June. <https://www.egyptindependent.com/politics-pavilion-venice/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Holm, N. (2017), *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Jarpa, V. (2019), 'The Venice Questionnaire: Voluspa Jarpa', *Art Review*. 3 May. <https://artreview.com/2019-venice-questionnaire-voluspa-jarpa-chile/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Johnson, P. (2019a), 'The controversy: The Egyptian Pavilion and the Venice Biennale', *Nasher Sculpture Centre*. <https://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/read-watch/articles/article/id/170> (accessed 10 June 2020).
- Johnson, P. (2019b), 'Egyptian artists claim government interference in country's controversial Venice Pavilion', *The Observer*. 4 June. <https://observer.com/2019/06/egyptian-artists-government-interference-venice-biennale-pavilion/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Kholeif, O. (2013), 'On the set of the 55th Venice Biennale: The encyclopedic palace', *Ibraaz: Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East*. 28 August. <https://www.ibraaz.org/reviews/42> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- La Biennale (2019a), 'The Biennale Arte 2019 came to a close, confirming the expected 600,000 visitors'. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2019-came-close-confirming-expected-600000-visitors> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- La Biennale. (2019b), 'Chile, altered views'. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/national-participations/chile> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- La Biennale. (2019c), 'Egypt, knum across times witness'. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/national-participations/egypt> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Lamrani, M. (2021), Introduction, *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 39, no. 2: this issue.
- Lorde, A. ([1984] 2018), *The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin).
- Martini, V. (2020), 'The evolution of an exhibition model: Venice Biennale as an entity in time'. *OnCurating* 46. <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-46-reader/the-evolution-of-an-exhibition-model-venice-biennale-as-an-entity-in-time.html#.X3DGLi2w3jA> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- McGowan, T. (2017), *Only a Joke Can Save Us: A Theory of Comedy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- Meskel, L. (2000), 'The practice and politics of archaeology in Egypt', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 925, no. 1: 146–169. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2000.tb05588.x>.
- Mitchell, T. (1989), 'The World as Exhibition', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 2: 217–236. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/178807> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Morreall, J. (1989), 'The rejection of humor in Western thought', *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 3: 243–265. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399447>.
- Nye, J. (2004), *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs).
- Pérez Rubio, A. (2019). Curatorial Statement. https://www.cultura.gob.cl/bienalvenecia2019/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2019/04/2.-altered-views_voluspa-jarpa-curated-by-agustin-perez-rubio.pdf (accessed 5 October 2020).

- Phillips, K. R. (2019), 'The profanity of memory: Temporality and the rhetoric of "Too Soon"', *Memory Connection* 3, no. 1: 13–29. <http://memoryconnection.org/article/the-profanity-of-memory-temporality-and-the-rhetoric-of-too-soon/> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Pickering, M. and S. Lockyer (2005), 'Introduction: The ethics and aesthetics of humour and comedy', in S. Lockyer and M. Pickering (eds), *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 1–24.
- Preziosi, D. and C. Farago (eds) (2004), *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (New York: Routledge).
- Putnam, E. (2013), 'Venice Biennale: Staging nations.' PhD diss., Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/229331644.pdf> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Ruiz, C. (2019), 'Review: We've chosen the best of the art in Venice, now here's the worst', *The Art Newspaper*. 10 May. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/review/what-to-miss-at-the-venice-biennale-2019> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Szakolczai, A. (2013), *Comedy and the Public Sphere: The Rebirth of Theatre as Comedy and the Genealogy of the Modern Public Arena* (New York: Routledge).
- Tripp, C. (2013), 'Art of the uprisings in the Middle East', *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 19, no. 2: 185–199. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590829> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Urrejola, J. (2019), 'Chile: destrucción de monumentos como protesta contra la historia oficial', *Deutsche Welle*. 11 November. <https://www.dw.com/es/chile-destrucción-de-monumentos-como-protesta-contra-la-historia-oficial/a-51202577> (accessed 15 April 2021).
- Winegar, J. (2021), 'The power of nonsense: Humor in Egypt's counter/revolution', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 1: 44–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1885857>.
- Yee, V. and N. Rashwan (2019), 'Egypt's harsh crackdown quashes protest movement', *The New York Times*. 4 October. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/egypt-protest-sisi-arrests.html> (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Zaugg, I. A. and E. Nishimura (2015), 'Angola and Kenya Pavilions in the 2013 Venice Biennale: African contemporary art and cultural diplomacy in the "Olympics of Art"', *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 45, no. 2: 134–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2015.1039740>.