

Biennale opens without a Golden Lion

Posted on May 9, 2026 by Benigna Mallebrein

VENICE — The Venice Biennale of Visual Arts has opened without awarding a Golden Lion, after its international jury resigned amid political tensions over Russia's participation and clashes between the Biennale Foundation and the European Commission. Visitors will now shape the event's symbolic verdict before it closes on 22 November.

Security was visible throughout the opening, especially outside the Russian pavilion, and near the US and Israeli pavilions. Pre-openings were marked by peaceful protests from artists and activists drawing attention to the war in Gaza, and some visitors encountered closed pavilions along the way.

With 99 countries presenting across the Giardini, the Arsenale, and *palazzi* (historic palaces) throughout the city, the Biennale once again offers a dense journey through national positions, visual languages, and political atmospheres. The theme, "In Minor Keys," developed by Curator Koyo Kouoh and the curatorial team, brings together artists whose work explores history, memory, identity, and form.

Three pavilions, three contrasting visions

The Spanish Pavilion is one of the most striking. Oriol Vilanova, born in 1980 in Manresa, Catalonia, has used 50,000 postcards to cover the space. "I bought them at the Sunday flea market, and I also create smaller-scale artworks," he says. "I've been collecting for 20 years and it's become a ritual." He prefers the market to the museum. "We are in the Spanish pavilion but surrounded by the whole world," Curator Charles Guerra says. He has known the artist for two decades.

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Guttural singers, Russian pavilion *(Credits: Italy Now)*

The Russian Pavilion, by contrast, attempts to redefine the country's cultural presence through the work of 50 international musicians, poets, and philosophers. The installation moves from the guttural singing of a trio dressed in black *Kutten* (hooded robes) to a techno DJ surrounded by an enormous mass of flowers, insisting that culture can outlast politics.

Italy's minor key in clay and memory

The Italian Pavilion, featuring Chiara Camoni's *Con te con tutto* (With you with everything), finds its minor key in clay and in the traditions of the so-called minor arts, especially Etruscan art. Visitors are welcomed by life-sized clay figures gathered like a forest. In the next room, languages, figures, and chronologies enter into dialogue around an installation resembling a terracotta artist's studio activated as a live performance. "I want to celebrate the beauty of reuse and social interaction," Camoni says.

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