

M4C Collaborative Doctoral Award - From Empire to Commonwealth: Britain at the Venice Biennale, 1948 – present

Project Title				
From Empire to Commonwealth: Britain at the Venice Biennale, 1948 – present				
LEAD INSTITUTION				
Name of HEI institution	University of Warwick			
Lead regional city	Birmingham <input type="checkbox"/>	Coventry <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Leicester <input type="checkbox"/>	Nottingham <input type="checkbox"/>
PARTNER ORGANISATION				
Name of organisation	Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art			
Website URL	www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk			
THE RESEARCH PROJECT				
<p>This PhD project explores the recent history of the British Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale through the lenses of global and national art histories, and of exhibition history. Uniquely amongst global mega-exhibitions, the Venice Art Biennale, with its national pavilions, offers an insight not only into how nations represent themselves through art at specific historical moments, but also into how cultural productions respond to shifting global relationships and configurations. Following a hiatus during the second world war, the Biennale resumed in 1948 against the political backdrop of a drastically transformed Europe, and of rapid, ongoing decolonisation. Drawing out the complexities of Britain’s imperial legacies and their cultural manifestations, the project will explore the Pavilion as a site of national self-definition (and redefinition), and also as a space which, within Venice’s exhibition ecosystem, operates in dialogue with new artistic voices from Commonwealth nations. As Britain, post-Brexit, once again reconfigures its global position (and its relationship with the Commonwealth), the project will offer a timely reconsideration of the Pavilion’s articulations of Britishness in both its inward and outward-looking forms.</p> <p>The project will be supervised by Dr Rosie Dias, Professor Michael Hatt (History of Art, University of Warwick) and Dr Sarah Victoria Turner (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (PMC)). It is part of a wider collaboration between Warwick’s History of Art department and the PMC, the key outputs of which will be an open-access digital resource and an exhibition on Britain at the Venice Biennale (1895-present). A key resource for scholars of British art, the PMC has, in recent years, pioneered the use of digital technologies for the visualisation and publication of British art research. The student appointed to this project will benefit from training and experience at the PMC to develop skills in the use of such technologies, and will be fully involved in broader project activity on the visualisation and presentation of data and research on the Britain at the Venice Biennale.</p>				
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY				
<p>The student appointed to this project will split their time between the University of Warwick (Coventry) and the PMC (London), and will also undertake archival visits in Venice. The early stages of the project will involve examining works of art and archival records (Venice Biennale Archive, Tate Archive, National Archives) relating to Biennale exhibits and wider British Council visual arts activity. The student will analyse coverage of the British and Commonwealth pavilions in the UK and international press, and conduct interviews with artists and curators involved in key editions. In analysing the data, the student is likely to draw on a range of methodologies, supplementing visual</p>				

analysis with postcolonial theory, semiotics of display, and social history of art, while placing nationalist and global art history in critical dialogue with each other.

Key research questions to be addressed are:

- How has the British Council's administration of the Pavilion shaped the selection and presentation of exhibiting artists? Can the pavilion be understood within the context of the British Council's broader international activities, particularly within the Commonwealth?
- How have shifting conceptions of Britishness been articulated in the British pavilion? What have been the specific contributions of BAME artists?
- How have artistic and curatorial practices responded to decolonisation and colonial legacies, both in the British Pavilion and in the emerging spaces occupied by Commonwealth nations at the Biennale?
- How can we understand the relationship between the national pavilion and globalised art at the Venice Biennale? How, and to what effect, does the Biennale's unique ecosystem of national and central pavilions alongside satellite events facilitate artistic and cultural dialogues between Britain and other Commonwealth countries?

OUTPUTS

In addition to the thesis, the student will be encouraged to disseminate their research at workshops and conferences. With support from the University of Warwick and the PMC, they will also develop a series of professional outputs involving academics, artists, curators and other arts professionals, including:

- organising a workshop in Coventry on "Britain and the Biennial", to coincide with the 2023 Coventry Biennial. While the specific topics to be addressed in the workshop will be shaped by the student's interests, it is likely to cover, for example, biennials in Britain; how imperial legacies have shaped specific sites in the Global South in which biennales are held; the relationship between region, nation, and globe in the biennial landscape.
- Writing a position paper based on the workshop discussions for the project's digital output.
- Creating a professional network on researching exhibition histories, based at the PMC.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

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