



Ralph Rugoff

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In a speech given in the late 1930s, British MP Sir Austen Chamberlain invoked an ancient Chinese curse that he had learned of from a British diplomat who had served in Asia, and which took the curious form of saying, 'May you live in interesting times'. "There is no doubt that the curse has fallen on us" Chamberlain observed. "We move from one crisis to another. We suffer one disturbance and shock after another".

This summary sounds uncannily familiar today as the news cycle spins from crisis to crisis. Yet at a moment when the digital dissemination of fake news and 'alternative facts' is corroding political discourse and the trust on which it depends, it is worth pausing whenever possible to reassess our terms of reference. In this case it turns out that there never was any such 'ancient Chinese curse' despite the fact that Western politicians have made reference to it in speeches for over a hundred years. It is an ersatz cultural relic, another Occidental 'Orientalism' and yet for all its fictional status it has had real rhetorical effects in significant public exchanges. At once suspect and rich in meaning, this kind of uncertain artefact suggests potential lines of exploration that are worth pursuing at present, especially when the "interesting times" it evokes seem to be with us once again.

Hence the 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia will be titled after a counterfeit curse.

'May You Live in Interesting Times' will no doubt include artworks that reflect upon precarious aspects of existence today, including different threats to key traditions, institutions and relationships of the 'post-war order'. But let us acknowledge at

But in an indirect fashion, perhaps art can be a kind of guide for how to live and think in 'interesting times.' The 58th International Art Exhibition will not have a theme per se, but will highlight a general approach to making art and a view of art's social function as embracing both pleasure and critical thinking. The Exhibition will focus on the work of artists who challenge existing habits of thought and open

up our readings of objects and images, gestures and situations. Art of this kind grows out of a practice of entertaining multiple perspectives: of holding in mind seemingly contradictory and incompatible notions, and juggling diverse ways of making sense of the world. Artists who think in this manner offer alternatives to the meaning of so-called facts by suggesting other ways of connecting and contextualising them. Animated by boundless curiosity and puncturing wit, their work encourages us to look askance at all unquestioned categories, concepts and subjectivities. It invites us to consider multiple alternatives and unfamiliar vantage points, and to discern the ways in which 'order' has become the simultaneous presence of diverse orders.

'May You Live in Interesting Times' will take seriously art's potential as a method for looking into things that we do not already know – things that may be off-limits, under-the-radar, or otherwise inaccessible for various reasons. It will highlight art-



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the outset that art does not exercise its forces in the domain of politics. Art cannot stem the rise of nationalist movements and authoritarian governments in different parts of the world, for instance, nor can it alleviate the tragic fate of displaced peoples across the globe (whose numbers now represent almost one percent of the world's entire population).



ph. Andrea Avezzu/La Biennale di Venezia



works that explore the interconnect-
edness of diverse phenomena, and
that convey an affinity with the idea,
asserted by both Leonardo da Vinci
and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, that every-
thing connects with everything else.

'May You Live in Interesting Times'
springs from a belief that interesting
art creates forms whose particular
character and delineation raise ques-
tions about the ways in which we mark
cultural boundaries and borders. In-
telligent artistic activity involves cre-
ating forms that call attention to what
forms conceal, and the functions that
they fulfil. The Exhibition will highlight
art that exists in between categories,
and which questions the rationales
behind our categorical thinking.

'May You Live in Interesting Times'
will aim to welcome its public to an
expansive experience of the deep
involvement, absorption and creative
learning that art makes possible. This
will entail engaging visitors in a se-
ries of encounters that are essentially
playful, taking into account that it is
when we play that we are most fully
'human'. This will mean tweaking as-
pects of the exhibition format where
possible to make sure they are sym-
pathetically aligned with the charac-
ter of the art being presented.

Finally, 'May You Live in Interesting
Times' will be formulated in the belief
that human happiness depends on
substantive conversations, because
as social animals we are driven to
both create and find meaning, and to
connect with others. In this light, the
Exhibition will aim to underscore the
idea that the meaning of artworks are
not embedded principally in objects
but in conversations, first between
artist and artwork, and then between
artwork and audience, and later be-
tween different publics.

Ultimately, Biennale Arte 2019 as-
pires to the ideal that what is most
important about an exhibition is not
what it puts on display, but how audi-
ences can use their experience of the
exhibition afterwards, to confront ev-
eryday realities from expanded view-
points and with new energies. An
exhibition should open people's eyes
to previously unconsidered ways of
being in the world and thus change
their view of that world.

Ralph Rugoff



The Board of La Biennale di
Venezia, at the suggestion of
the President Paolo Baratta,
approved the appointment of
Ralph Rugoff as Director of
the Visual Arts Department,
with specific responsibility for
curating the 58th International
Art Exhibition.

Ralph Rugoff has been the
Director of the Hayward Gallery
of London since 2006. Opened
in 1968, the Hayward Gallery
is considered one of the most
leading public art galleries
in the United Kingdom; it is
part of the Southbank Centre,
Europe's largest arts centre that
receives major funding by the
Arts Council of England. Rugoff
was the Artistic Director of the
XIII Biennale de Lyon in 2015
titled 'La vie moderne'. Between
1985 and 2002 he wrote art and
cultural criticism for numerous
periodicals, publishing widely
in art magazines as well as
newspapers, including Artforum,
Artpresse, FlashArt, Frieze,
Parkett, Grand Street, The
Financial Times, The Los Angeles
Times, The Los Angeles Weekly
and published a collection of
essays, 'Circus Americanus
(1995)', in which he explored
cultural phenomena of the
American West. During the same
period he began working as an
independent curator, organizing
exhibitions such as 'Just Pathetic
(1990)' and 'Scene of the Crime
(1997)'. A former Director (2000-

2006) of CCA Wattis Institute, at
California College of the Arts in
San Francisco, he has curated
numerous group shows at the
Hayward Gallery over the past
11 years, including 'The Painting
of Modern Life (2007)', 'Psycho
Buildings (2008)', an exhibition
that included interactive and
immersive installations by artists
such as Mike Nelson, Gelitin and
Do-ho Suh; and 'The Infinite Mix
(2016)'; he also has curated
important retrospectives and
solo exhibitions by Ed Ruschka,
Jeremy Deller, Carsten Holler,
Tracey Emin and George Condo.

President Baratta stated that "he
appointment of Ralph Rugoff
confirms the Biennale's primary
goal, to qualify the Exhibition as
a place of encounter between
the visitors, the art and the art-
ists. An Exhibition engaging the
viewers directly with the artworks
in such a way that memory, the
unexpected, the possible provo-
cation, the new and the different
can stimulate their visions, their
minds and their emotions, and
offer them the opportunity for a
direct experience."

The Board also approved the
dates of the 58th International
Art Exhibition to be held from
May 11th to November 24th,
2019; Press Preview May 8th,
9th, and 10th; opening to the
public on Saturday, May 11th.

www.biennialfoundation.org