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## **Linguistic Technologies in Branding: Artistic Variations at the Biennale Arte in Venice 2024<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *The research aims to establish the role of language in the branding of national, transnational and regional identities in the works of art selected for the Venice Biennale 2024. The analysis shows that the notion of language as a unifying concept of national identity is greatly shaken. The use of text in works of art shows the clash and destruction of traditional values and identities. In most national pavilions and individual participants, the theme is the return to or push away from traditional identities. The texts in the works of art are monolingual, discussing the problems of colonialization, women's and transgender identity, and multilingual, thematizing the increasing feeling of alienation in a globalized world based on gender, religious, etc. differences. The use of intentional language variants or speech imitations suggests the person's inability to talk about the suffering and violence, as well as to connect with others.*

**Keywords:** branding; language; text; Biennale Arte in Venice; identity.

Branding is an identity-building process by which countries gain visibility and position themselves on the world map by drawing on their history, culture, economy, society, geography and people (Theodoropoulou, Tovar, 2022). S. Anholt (2017) was the first to use the term ‘national brand’ in the late 1990s, later comparing the world to a “giant supermarket” due to globalization, in which countries compete through different elements of branding - people, places, culture and language, history, food, fashion, famous people, global brands, etc. Y. Fan defines seven levels of the concept of national brand, among which he places the so-called ‘soft’ power - intellectual and intangible achievements, i.e. the so-called by other researchers cultural brand (Fan, 2010, p. 99–100). The national brand is related to the cultural industries of the countries, and therefore it is precisely “cultural brands that play a leading role in national branding today”, being “actively used to demonstrate the cultural values of the country and their dissemination” (Tulchinskii, 2013, p. 9–10). O. Biletska (2021) uses the results

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of the rating of national branding according to the criterion “culture and heritage” (here comes the factor of influence in art) and indicates that Italy tops the list for 2020 as the country with the strongest cultural brand. "The National Brand Index, O. Biletska continues, shows that the world's leading countries pay special attention to the 'culture' component as a tool for their national branding these days. Culture is considered a driving force in building a positive international image and national brand" (Biletska, 2021). Arguably, participation in the Biennale Arte in Venice is a way to brand both the nation and the artists (see further Swartz, 1997; Nisbett, 2003; Ferraro, 2006; Thornton, 2009; Birnbaum and Volz, 2009; Titova, 2021).

### **Branding and types of identity**

Looking for the place of national identity among other types of identity, I use D. Petkova's integrative model of social and cultural identities (Petkova, 2013, p. 16-26). According to the model, social and cultural identities are subcategories of individual and collective identity. So national identity is a collective identity. As a collective identity, national self-consciousness is of the type of traditional affiliations built on the basis of common genetic, racial, class origin, common historical memory, common language and cultural heritage, common religion. This type of collective identity is of the first type. The second type is transnational and regional identities.

Based on this typology, I examine the artifacts in the Biennale Arte in Venice pavilions according to the role of language in making sense of national and transnational identities.

A factor influencing the choice of a national branding strategy is the self-concept, defined as the collective members' mental image of their own group (Petkova, 2013, p. 144). Self-concept equals self-narrative, which “includes thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about a community's past, present, and future, and is typically replicated in the media, education, and legislative systems” (Ashmore et al., 2004, p. 96-97, cited in Petkova, 2013, p. 144). This discourse approach outlines the role of language in the formation of collective image and identity. That is why the research emphasizes the use of language in the works in the presentation of collective values, beliefs, stories, customs, etc., since a number of studies have proven the importance of the opposition ‘we’ – ‘them’ in the construction of a collective identity. In this sense, the placement of the themes of ethnocentrism, racism and xenophobia is quite expected, since the theme of the Venice Biennale 2024 is also

“Foreigners everywhere”. Setting the topic of stereotypes about the other and about oneself also influences the choice of branding strategies.

### **Research methodology**

**Aims and objectives of the research.** The research aims to establish the role of language in the branding of national, transnational and regional identities in the artworks selected for the Venice Biennale 2024.

**The tasks** are as follows:

- to find works that use language as a strategy for identification with the nation or with transnational and regional features;
- to typologize and interpret the use and functions of the text in the works.

### **Analysis results**

The Venice Biennale offers artists different ways of participating. The most prestigious level is through an invitation by the Biennale committee to individuals to participate and compete with other artists in the Palazzo (palace) within the Giardini. Otherwise, artists can be chosen to represent their nation either in a permanent pavilion in the Giardini (national pavilions appeared as early as 1907 and reflected the power play between nations over a century), in the Arsenale, or in temporary locations located around the city center. Side events can also be put on independently by individual artists or bands. It is a huge and complexly organized exhibition with the participation of hundreds of artists. And quite a few of them use text in their works. Texts of a different alphabet, in a specially selected font or handwriting, with a different degree of importance in the work.

This year the focus is on the colonial causes and gender dimensions of marginalization, the ecological fusion with nature, the freedom of the unusual, the wondrous and the utopian, the creation of places of religious empathy and/or escape.

A number of national pavilions and the artists selected by the curators have chosen to tell about the national collective identity through the historical events and cultural heritage of their own country. A recurring theme of the Biennale Arte in Venice 2024 is the reflection on the colonial past and marginalized communities due to ethnic or other conflicts. But some nations self-identify through the artists approved to represent them as historically colonized, i.e. enslaved and discriminated

against, sometimes subjected to massacres, forced relocation to foreign lands or outright extermination, i.e. genocide. Other national pavilions reimagine the past of their peoples as the past of colonizers, that is, of dominant peoples who must acknowledge historical guilt, but do so through a complex reflection of ambivalent events and multidirectional interpretations.

## 1. Functions of monolingual texts in artistic communication

### 1.1. National identities in a colonial environment and in migrant waves

In some cases, the choice of language is the way to show the dominance of the modern lingua franca: English. An internationally recognized language of nations with universally recognized economic, political and cultural prestige. In English there are, for example, the narratives of Andrii Dostliev, Lia Dostlieva. *Comfort Work* (2023-2024) at the National Pavilion of Ukraine, as well as Pablo Delano. The Museum of the Old Colony, 2024. And if we focus even just on these two pavilions, we see two completely different branding strategies using the English language. English as a seemingly neutral international language and English to emphasize who tells the story of marginalized and oppressed communities.

Andrii Dostliev, Lia Dostlieva through ten actors from Europe and Great Britain portray “suitable” types of Ukrainian refugees who are preferred by various European communities. Current refugees who have participated in research on stereotypes about Ukrainians are invited to help the actors improve their performances (see Photos 1 – 4).



**Photos 1 – 4.** National Pavilion of Ukraine. Andrii Dostliev, Lia Dostlieva. *Comfort Work* (2023-2024).

Pablo Delano's conceptual installation traces the endurance of colonial structures based on the experience of Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island that was a US colony for 500 years. In a purpose-built museum, the story of US dominance is told through the presence of the English language in bottle labels, in the titles of books and textbooks, in the captions of photographs, in geographical maps of the region. Mass American culture has permeated everywhere, with the Puerto Rican Barbie doll a kind of symbol of the trade in national identity that has been stripped down to facade exoticism (Photos 5 – 8).



Photos 5 – 8. Pablo Delano. The Museum of the Old Colony, 2024.

The opposite strategy is also chosen in the Pavilion of the Americas, where contemporary texts written in English are stylized in the color tradition of Native American art (see Photos 9 - 23). The colors that swallow the inscriptions of the colonizer's language and make them hard to read show the strength of the traditions of the indigenous people and challenge the idea of the foreigner - who the foreigner really is.





**Photos 9 - 23.** If not now then when; Give my something extra; The right of the people peaceably to assemble; Treat Me Right; The Obligation Of Honor Of A Powerful Nation; We Will Be Known Forever By The Tracks We Leave; The Returned Male Student Far Too Frequently Goes Back to The Reservation And Falls Into The Old Custom Of Letting His Hair Grow Long; I'm A Natural Man; Liberty When It Begins To Take Root Is A Plant Of Rapid Growth; The Great Spirit Is In All Things; Action Now Action Is Eloquence; Whereas It Is Essential To Just Government We Recognize The Equality Of All People Before The Law, 2024.

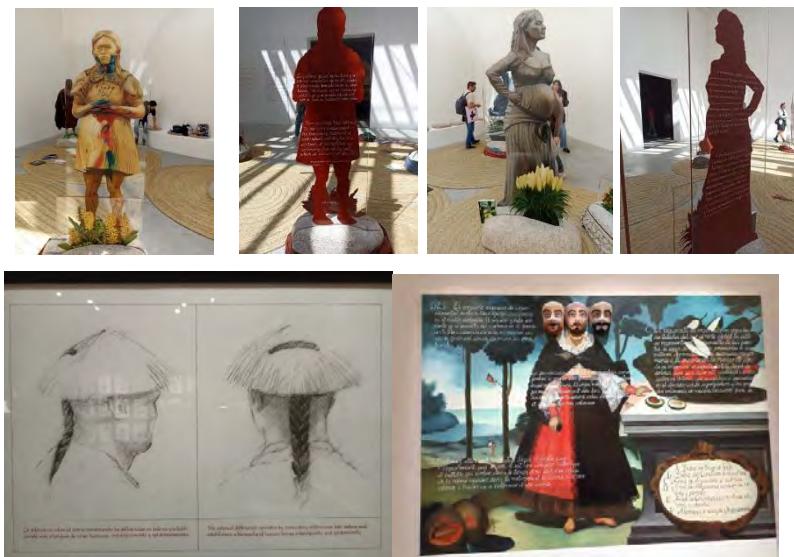
In the pavilions of Spain and Bolivia, almost every work used a narrative in Spanish - in one case it was the language of the colonizers, in the other - of the colonized. The inscriptions are directly on the images or on their backs (Photos 24, 25-30), the imitation of handwriting emphasizing the human effort to talk about the difficult subjects of colonization.

The Spanish pavilion is among the large-scale ones, so several different projects are taking place there. One presents a series of pictorial canvases of the idealized pastoral equatorial nature of the colonized lands, as it appears in historical paintings from the centuries of Latin American colonization, but on them are exposed handwritten texts representing how, according to Walter Benjamin, behind each natural or man-made beauty stands for exploitation.



**Photo 24.** Pavilion of Spain

The other installation in the Spanish Pavilion tells the story of Native Americans through a series of cardboard cut-out silhouettes set behind iconic and culturally recognizable types of flowers.



Photos 25-30. Pavilion of Spain.

## 1.2. Female identity as a transnational phenomenon and the Hispanic tradition

Spanish texts have also been used to highlight female identity, accompanying traditional handmade artefacts made from natural materials – feathers, cotton, silk, etc. The emphasis on the position of women in Bolivia and Chile, for example, aims to rebrand the countries as abandoning conservative values for the sake of defending the freedom and rights of women and joining the ideas protecting human rights (see Photos 31 – 33).



Photos 31 – 33. Pavilion of Bolivia. Alexandra Bravo. Undocumented Women Yearn for Their Native Environment and Suffer from 'Mal de País', 2024; Alexandra Bravo.

Many European Women Work or Study Thanks to Undocumented Immigrants, 2024; Alexandra Bravo. No One in the World Is Illegal, 2024.

On canvases made like traditional patchwork in Chile, words are written that connect traditional with universal values – “a hopeful sigh of change” (curator Rodrigo Moura in Biennale Arte 2024, p. 81), thus combining national and transnational identity, creating a common universe of human values - solidarity, love, peace, freedom (Photos 34 – 35).



**Photos 34 – 35.** Arpilleristas (Unidentified Chilean artists). Arpillera, 1980s.

### 1.3. Other international or small languages and their alphabets as traditional branding of national identity

Texts in small languages and different from commonly used alphabets fit into the traditional way of branding – through nationally specific, recognizable and rare cultural facts.

Works that use the possibilities of the alphabet to show that changes in language and collective narrative are inextricably linked to changes in society are curious. Such is the work of Katya Buchatska. Best Wishes (2022-2024) (see Pictures 36 – 38), who, “while working with artists with neurological diseases during the war, noticed how family language changes - standard linguistic forms and clichés do not work when ordinary life is destroyed. Asking what a bombed person should wish for, she turns to the artists with neurological diseases, whose wishes capture the new reality sometimes abstractly, repetitively, poetically or absurdly” (curators Viktoria Bavykina, Max Gorbatskyi, see Biennale Arte 2024, p. 447). The use of the Cyrillic alphabet is not accidental. It is related to the perception of language and the alphabet as a strong bond of nationality in a country whose independence is threatened.



**Pictures 36 – 38.** National Pavilion of Ukraine. Katya Buchatska. Best Wishes (2022-2024).

Stylized inscriptions and images of letters in a traditional cultural context emphasize the transfer of meanings from the past to the present. In a number of works, the possibilities are sought through the form of letters and the ethno-religious graphic tradition to modernize the idea of the culture of an ethnic group, as was done in Lebanon. A Dance with her Myth (Photos 39 – 42) and Omar Mismar. Ahmad and Akram Protecting Hercules (Photo 43).

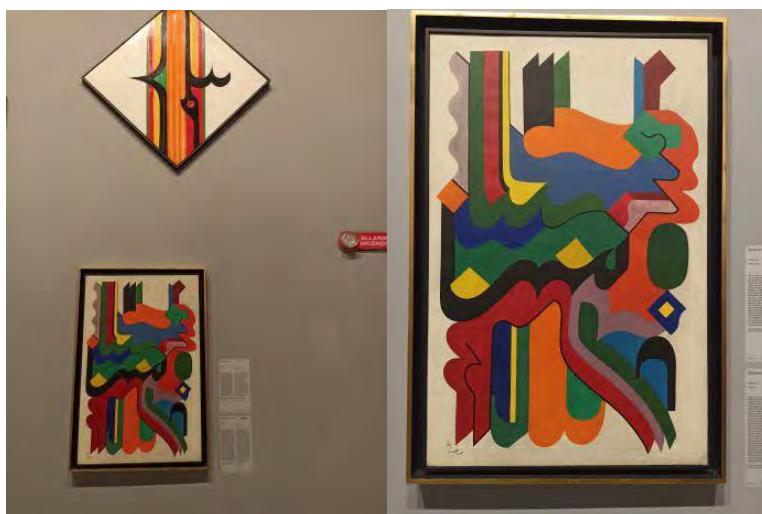


**Photos 39 – 42.** Lebanon. A Dance with her Myth, 2024.



**Photo 43.** Omar Mismar. Ahmad and Akram Protecting Hercules, 2019-2020.

The push away from traditional national symbols, such as language and the alphabet, is rather through form. The interweaving of letters and text into abstract forms was used by Rafa al-Nasiri, an Iraqi artist who in the 1970s used the Arabic script in his works. He imitated Arabic calligraphic forms in decorative decoration and used the Arabic alphabet as an artistic expression of the heritage of Arab-Islamic civilization. “The artist gives importance to only to the shapes of the Arabic letters, rather to their literal meaning. These shapes corresponded with this experimentation in abstraction, which served to reconnect Iraqi and Arab communities to their common artistic heritage” (curator Arthur Debsi Photos in Biennale Arte 2024, p. 73) (Photos 44 – 45).



**Photos 44 – 45.** Rafa al-Nasiri. Untitled, 1971.

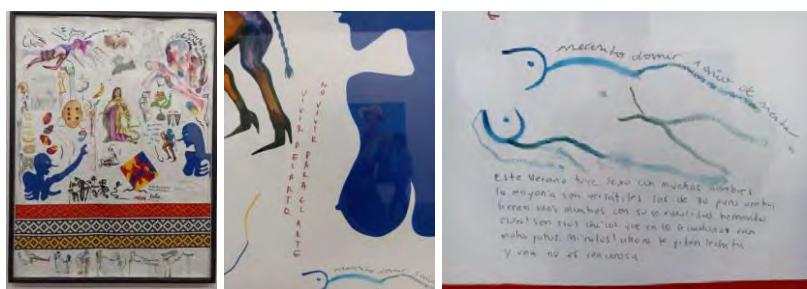
#### 1.4. Transgender (mis)identifications and the rebranding of countries

The Spanish language was also used in a number of works asserting new sexual identities and showing the conflict between traditional and modern identity criteria. And this is part of the rebranding of Spanish-speaking nations as societies recognizing the right of the individual to identify with new groups on different grounds.

The story of people of different religious and sexual identities is told entirely in Spanish in the series *Virgenes Cholas* of La Chola Poblete (Photos 46, 47–49, 50–53, 54–55, 56–57). The series raises questions about religious and sexual identities that are transnational. Their collision gives rise to the dramatic experiences of modern man, who struggles with the violence of the collective over the individual who has rejected traditional identities. It is not by chance that slogans and keywords such as **VIOLENCIA** can be found among the numerous textual fragments in these works.



Photos 46. La Chola Poblete. Purple María, from the series *Virgenes Cholas*, 2023.



Photos 47-49. La Chola Poblete. Pachamama, from the series *Virgenes Cholas*, 2023.



**Photos 50-53.** La Chola Poblete. Virgen de la Misericordia, from the series Virgenes Cholas, 2023.



**Photos 54-55.** La Chola Poblete. La Virgen Mulata, from the series Virgenes Cholas, 2022.



**Photos 56-57.** La Chola Poblete. Inmaculado corazón de Travo, from the series Virgenes Cholas, 2022.

Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo's works "address the pitfalls of identification and misidentification in the rejection of binary thinking" (curator Elena Ketelsen). The neon colors correspond to the Pride flag (see Photo 58).



**Photo 58.** Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivio). Electric Dress (Atsuko Tanaka), 2023.

## 2. Functions of multilingual texts in artistic communication

The combination of different languages is used in quite a few works in order to outline the globalization processes, to emphasize the common humanity and the unification of the world, but also to show the complex reality of the other, who in the supposedly globalized and open world always remains foreign.

A literalization of linguistic branding is the work most directly related to the theme of the Venice Biennale 2024 – “Foreigners Everywhere” by Claire Fontaine. In it, in the languages of the nationalities participating in the Biennale, neon inscriptions on the theme “Foreigners everywhere” were made, in order to distinguish each nation through the language and alphabet, but also to emphasize the common European root of the word “foreigners” in the various language families (see Photos 59 – 62).



**Photos 59 – 62.** Claire Fontaine. *Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024.

## 2.1. Recontextualization of multilingual texts

### **2.1.1. Regional identities (migrants and diasporas) in multilingual texts**

Foreign language texts are placed in new and different contexts to produce new meaning. Recontextualization is realized not only through the transfer of inscriptions and letters, but also through the citation of entire texts in a different cultural environment.

Lauren Halsey presents an installation of monumental columns inspired by daily life in Los Angeles (Photos 63 – 65). Some of the columns have words written along with the images. The forms from the columns of the goddess Hathor have been recontextualized “by carving the capitals with likenesses and stories of people from her neighbourhood, honouring their contributions” (curator Juan Silverio in Biennale Arte 2024, p. 170). The temporal remix of ancient and contemporary “is a political gesture to uphold the Black and African American diaspora and its history with the same reverence as other architectural landmarks across the West” (curator Juan Silverio in Biennale Arte 2024, p. 170).



**Photos 63 - 65.** Lauren Halsey. Courtesy the artist.

The installation by Nil Yalter (Golden Lion winner 2024) “combines two iconic works of the author – “Exile is a Hard Job” (1977–2024), inspired by the words of the Turkish poet Nâzim Hikmet, which are written in red and are located on the images of immigrants and exiles. The work deals with two identity images – of the migrant and of the woman. Videos and fly-posters show the lives and sufferings of specific migrants, presenting the ideas of integration, uncertainty and stigmatization that evoke nostalgia for what is left behind (see Photos 66 – 69). “Topak Ev” (1973) refers to the artist's experience in the Bektik nomadic community that lives in round tents in Central Anatolia and migrated around the 10th century. It questions gender roles and social

norms, exploring the role of women during migration' (curator Amanda Carneiro, see also Biennale Atre 2024, p. 348) (see Photos 70–71). The languages that are used in writing the words of the poet and the stories in the round tent are the main European languages, which are a kind of translation of the stories told by the migrants.



Photos 66-71. Nil Yalter, Exile is a Hard Job (1977-2024) и Topak Ev (1973)

### 2.1.2. Feminine identity in conflict with traditional identities

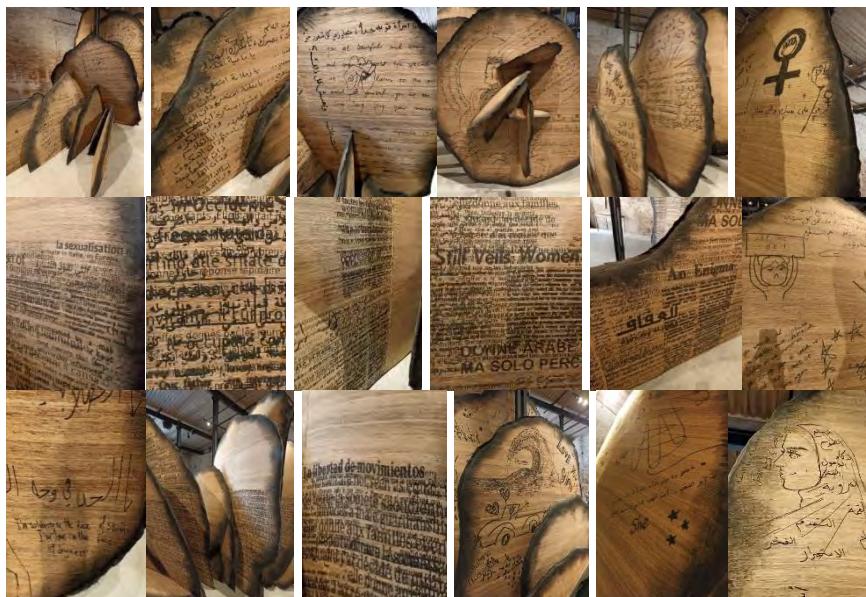
The collective female identity is thematized in a number of works and is almost always related to the individual and social conflict that is provoked by the collision of the modern woman with the religious tradition.



Photos 72 - 73. Güneş Terkol. A song to the world-2, 2024.

Güneş Terkol's paintings feature images of women telling (on the banners) their individual stories, which become a collective narrative. This amplifies women's voices and creates a deep sense of community. Along with this, the question of the transformation of joint collective storytelling, in which women interpret their stories, contemporary reality and lifestyle is raised (an interpretation of curator Arzu Yaytaş, see more in Biennale Arte 2024, p. 321) (see Photos 72 – 73).

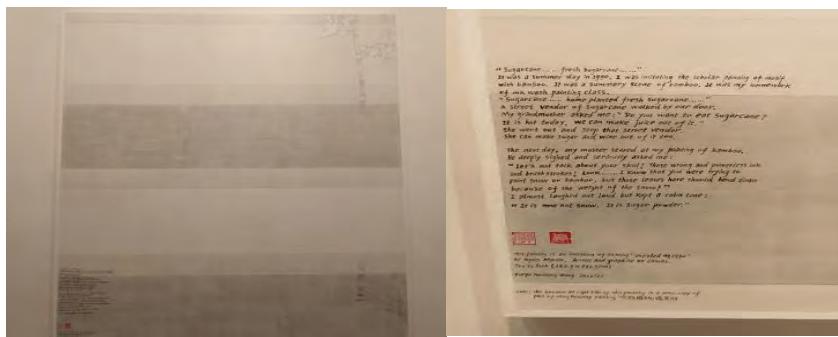
Similar in concept is "Shifting Sands: A Battle Song" by Manal AlDowayan in Pavilion of Saudi Arabia, but impressive is the decision to use the unique sand shapes of the desert rose to write texts in different languages from local and international media about Saudi women. These words and archives are a cacophony of prejudices that have distorted women's self-image and limited women's voices, tying them in the "straitjacket" of the outsider. The voices of Saudi women are expressed in combining the sounds and geology of the desert with the voice of women - a collective expression of their opposition to the meaninglessness of life (an interpretation of curators Jessica Cerasi, Maya El Khalil, see more in Biennale Arte 2024, p. 433). The installation not only shows the energy of Saudi women in a period of profound cultural transformation, but also forms a definitive outline of a transnational and transreligious female identity (Photos 74 – 91).



Photos 74 – 91. Manal AlDowayan. Shifting Sands: A Battle Song, 2024.

### 2.1.3. Citation as a way of pushing away from traditional identities and rebranding

The citation, which was not missing in the previous examples, of artists in a foreign national cultural context is a typical postmodern technique that tries to affirm the national by rejecting what belongs to outdated ideas. Evelyn Taocheng Wang expresses her long-standing interest in the Canadian-born American painter Agnes Martin. In the works, Wang literally follows the inscriptions of selected works by Martin – Sugar Powder Bamboo and Imitation of Agnes Martin; Colored Cotton Candles and Imitation of Agnes Martin; Do Not Agree with Agnes Martin All the Time (see Photos 92 – 93, 94 – 95, 96 – 97). It is related to the Chinese literati tradition, but also distanced it “from its Confucian-patriarchal basis, while the insertion of figurative elements within the modernist grid tease Minimalism’s universalist pretences” (curator Adeena May, see Biennale Arte in Venice 2024, p. 318).



**Photos 92 – 93.** Evelyn Taocheng Wang. Sugar Powder Bamboo and Imitation of Agnes Martin, 2023.



**Photos 94 – 95.** Evelyn Taocheng Wang. Coloured Cotton Candles and Imitation of Agnes Martin, 2023.



**Photos 96 – 97.** Evelyn Taocheng Wang. Do Not Agree with Agnes Martin All the Time, 2023.

This strategy of recontextualization is used in the installation in the Belgium Pavilion, thematizing media narratives, as well as in the large canvas “Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness” (2024) by Frieda, Toranzo, Jaeger (Photos 98 – 104).



**Photos 98 – 104.** Frieda, Toranzo, Jaeger. Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness, 2024.

The texts on the back of the panel refer to the mural Flower Seller (1941) by Diego Rivera and Juan O'Gorman's in the UNAM library (1949-1952) and to Sappho (pp. 630-604 ALL).

### **3. Intentional language variants or speech imitations as transnational symbols of broken human existence**

Specially constructed languages are used in a number of works that show man's inability to narrate the anxiety and suffering of war or slavery. Such a strategy is adopted in the works of Pavilion of Poland, "Repeat after me" and *El Negro Yanga* (2011) by Aydeeé Rodriguez Lopez (Photo 105).



**Photo 105.** Aydeeé Rodriguez Lopez. *El Negro Yanga*, 2011.

#### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the works selected for the Biennale Arte in Venice 2024 shows that the notion of language as a unifying concept of national identity is greatly shaken. The use of the text with the works of art shows the clash and destruction of traditional values and identities. In most national pavilions and individual participants, the theme is the return to or push away from traditional identities. States are rebranding themselves as rethinking tradition in relation to contemporary identity issues and universal values.

Texts in works of art are monolingual and multilingual.

1. Monolingual texts are used in works that discuss dominance and assimilation in colonial environments and in migrant waves. English and Spanish are a kind of lingua franca for vast territories that have been colonized in the past. The problem of who is the foreigner – the indigenous population or the colonizers – is also posed through the choice of language within the works.

The works that place women's identity as a central problem in modern societies are also monolingual - Bolivian, Chilean, Arabic, etc. Often the use of the text aims to rebrand countries as abandoning conservative values that suppress women's freedom and choice.

The use of other large and small languages, as well as stylized variants of their alphabets, aims to destabilize the notion of language as a national symbol in times of war and in modern times in general.

Participants in the Biennale Arte in Venice 2024 strongly raise the issue of transgender (mis)identification as well, with Spanish-language works standing out in this regard. Perhaps this is an attempt to rebrand Spanish-speaking modern societies – they do not turn their backs on new identities that come into sharp conflict with traditional (religious, sexual, patriarchal, etc.) values.

2. Polylingual texts are used in quite a few works in order to outline the globalization processes, to emphasize the common humanity and the unification of the world, but also to show the complex reality of the other, who in the supposedly globalized and open world always remains foreign. This group of works includes a number of postmodern concepts in the use of the text in art – the recontextualization, the quotation, to raise again the questions of female identity, of the clash between tradition and modernity.

3. The idea of several works is realized through the use of intentional language variants or imitations of speech, through which the inability of man to tell about suffering and violence is shared, as well as to connect with others.

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<sup>1</sup> The research was realized thanks to the support of the SUMMIT (*Sofia University Marking Momentum for Innovation and Technological Transfer*) project, 3.3. International Mobility (BG-RRP-2.004-0008).