

Art

Inside the Vatican's Uncanny Venice Biennale Pavilion

Con i miei occhi (*With my eyes*), staged in a women's prison, preaches visibility but operates on secrecy.



Julie Baumgardner April 29, 2024



The outside of the Vatican Pavilion at the Venice Biennale featuring a mural by Maurizio Cattelan (photo Julie Baumgardner/Hyperallergic)

VENICE — There was a minute when the art press might have been able to meet the Pope. It was a short minute, a New York one, even — definitely not a Venetian one. The encounter was slated to take place at the Pavilion of the Holy See at the Venice Biennale on April 21; instead, Pope Francis **became the first pontiff to visit the contemporary art event** on Sunday, landing by helicopter in a private event with no outsiders allowed.

The Papacy is an organization that operates on secrecy. God, after all, isn't exactly a visible figure. Faith requires a leap, a trust in the invisible. And yet visibility is at the heart of the Holy See Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, whose exhibition title, *Con i miei occhi* (*With my eyes*), is borrowed from Book of Job 42:5: "Mine eyes have seen thee." But this isn't exactly a pavilion about "being seen" in the sense of the English colloquialism denoting empathy and embrace, despite the Church's attempts.

No, in fact, the literal infrastructure of the pavilion is hidden. In a prison. The Giudecca Women's Detention Home is a 13th-century monastery converted into a prison for unwed mothers, sex workers, and mentally ill people in