

# Speech: Venice Biennale Opening

May 8, 2026

Representing one's nation at the *61st Venice Biennale* is an unfathomable burden and an honor of a lifetime. In my undocumented case, the burden and the honor spring from two sources. The burden comes from the crushing weight of exile. The honor originates from an inalienable right.

In my portfolio of worthless trophies, the last global competition where my presence and access were granted by one's national passport was held in Brussels. Two years ago, an Ethereum blockchain hackathon was where I wore an athlete's jacket colored *à la* Belgian flag. In the time gap since then, my mind convinced my hands to create a textile passport that holds space for the expired *two: one* in my possession and *another* kept by the foreigner's office.

The making of such an artistic proof of identity was enabled by Belgian art powerhouses and modeled after the United Nations refugee passport standards. On its fabric pages, the travel document fused evidence of attachment to two lands of similar size: Burundi and Belgium. Honestly, I wish my mind had asked my feet to step outside, every day, and to stop crafting likenesses of what's out of reach!

Since the start of my European life, my brain imagined that at the end of ten years of life within one kingdom's borders, my hands would be holding an electronic passport, imprinted by the king's digital seal. Such were the daydreams of a human hoping to belong to a database abiding by alien law.

Fleeting thoughts used to ping and pong against the cranial bones of my broad forehead. With no words uttered thereafter, tears could just amass and drop when a dream conductor signaled a dead-end destination. Tears often flowed, on a whim, when scrolling through digital photos of faraway kindred. My sister's wedding, my grandmother's burial, the birth of nephews, the eldest son's duties,... The list of what's gone goes on. The mental stop button had then to be pressed, *illico presto*.

Except at least once a year, when the switch button of my feelings got frozen at the sight of paper stacks printed by immigration agents. Otherwise, in the absence of a scary stream of interrogations, a translucent path would be easily carved by the torrent of tears swirling into the *Meuse* river. From one colorless liquid to another, cooperation is a birth obligation. Therefore, a European river would carry the torrents over a global network of water bodies, ship countless liters out of the port of *Antwerpen*, until reaching the shores of Lake *Tanganyika*.

The great African lake always takes it upon herself to tend to the soulful waves of whoever left the beaches of Bujumbura as a young adult, alone, and never came back. It's a routine for her to nurture a terrestrial ecosystem that tears apart and breaks family bonds. She never asks why. She never cries out loud. She shallowly expands her emotional depth to swallow all recyclable produce from watering eyes.

This year's month of May presented me with an Olympian challenge. A month before the *Biennale*, a face-to-face dialogue, between Mladen and me, took place in the kitchen of an artists-run space known as *Hectolitre* in the artistic heart of Brussels, *Les Marolles*. The topic of our midday conversation was the historic records of our nations of birth at the art world's Olympics. His nation's traces of attendance began in the early 21st century, sometime before an official Bosnian and Herzegovinian pavilion was pinned on an Italian map. The Burundian traces are as spotless as a blank page. We quickly shifted to a Belgian weather discussion, to keep our smartphones from showing ads about the nation where our feet stood, a nation with its palace in Venice since day one.

Our first sip of an *espresso* sparked the idea of extending, and accepting, a *carte blanche* invitation to his nation's art-enriched home in Venice. My eyes blinked at the pace of a heartbeat to withhold a stream of awe and ocular flows. I'll leave it to our communal kitchen to leak secrets about the quantity of water necessary to appease diasporic feelings. Out of our workspace's kitchen came a biochemical bond, a *trait d'union* that affirms solidarity as the keyword that unifies beings who are either landlocked or abroad.

What's next on our conversation table in foreign tongues? I believe it's quantum non-locality. Maybe it's good news from the Solidarity Burundi Pavilion sheltered within a guest room of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavilion. Who knows? Uncertainty has, for a long time, had a habit of pulling the lifelines of legal aliens, meshing them with those of technological aliens and stringing them to cosmic ones. We will just hug and drink more coffee. Burundi coffee, next time. After shots of *Rakija*.

Three identical frames of my artworks were contributed to Mladen Bundalo's exhibition as guest works. They are set against a white rectangular wall. I wish for my nation of birth's flag to travel, witness and embrace the guest room wall. The flag will likely pardon the whitewashed red and green colors, then instantly swap the three stars at its center with the trio of alien artworks made in a land of political refuge. No models of colonial language were used to write or voice this *vernissage* speech.

May God bless all aliens. My name is Chris-Armel Iradukunda. Based in Brussels. Born in Bujumbura. Blessed by Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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