

PRESS RELEASE

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La Biennale di Venezia

61. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali

The Fortress

Pavilion of the Netherlands

61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

Artist Dries Verhoeven and curator Rieke Vos present *The Fortress*, a performance and architectural installation that transforms the Dutch Pavilion into a dark, fortress-like enclosure. Through this transformation, the work confronts the contradictions embedded within the structure of La Biennale di Venezia while exploring Western society's reflex for self-preservation amid growing geopolitical uncertainty. The project marks a historic first: it is the first time the Netherlands is represented at the Biennale Arte with a performance, and the first time the Dutch Pavilion itself becomes an integral part of the artwork.

THE PAVILION CLOSES IN ON ITSELF

Designed by Gerrit Rietveld and built in the optimistic post-war years of the 1950s, the Dutch Pavilion can be seen as the epitome of openness, progress, and faith in the future. During the Biennale Arte 2026, however, this modernist monument transforms into the antithesis of itself. In a 25-minute rite of passage, the sunlit structure gradually turns its back on the outside world. What was once light, transparent and accessible, becomes dark, defensive and inward-looking.

In the publication accompanying the exhibition, Vos describes the Rietveld Pavilion as an architectural icon, but also a vulnerable one: moisture from the Venetian lagoon constantly seeps into its porous walls. Verhoeven underscores this fragility through sturdy buttresses installed on three sides that appear to shore up the façade. Six times a day, on the hour, steel shutters between the buttresses rattle slowly shut. Gradually, the view of the outside world disappears, and a barrier forms between the 'we' inside and the 'they' outside.

INSIDE THE FORTRESS

Inside the pavilion, the encroaching darkness manifests through a visceral vocal performance. Moving among the audience, the performers employ 'grunting', a technique from death metal that uses the lowest registers of the voice. It is as if the darkness of their surroundings is creeping into their bodies. As visibility fades, irrational impulses gain the upper hand.

In Verhoeven's work, the audience is never merely a spectator. By committing to the full 25-minute cycle and to the house rules stated on an iron plaque – limited capacity, no lighting, no phones – visitors must disconnect and surrender to a shared collective experience. Like a moth to a flame, a performer follows the final trace of daylight as it moves across the pavilion walls. Total darkness then descends. For several moments, the audience remains suspended in a black void, until two side doors open and the light of the outside world returns.

According to the artist and curator, *The Fortress* reflects a broader shift in contemporary society: at a time marked by growing nationalism, geopolitical conflict, climate crises, and social inequality, the ideals that shaped post-war liberal democracies are under increasing strain. The pavilion becomes a metaphor for a Western world caught between its enlightened self-image and a bleak vision of the future.

As Verhoeven notes: *“Together with a group of thirteen international performers, we are presenting a work about the search for stability in a world out of balance. Through the raw sounds the performers produce, they give expression to the social state of disarray that I currently observe – and the tenacity with which we, even in art, sometimes cling to values of yesterday.”*

THE BIENNALE PARADOX : OPEN DOORS, CLOSED BORDERS

The Fortress engages directly with the contradictions embedded within La Biennale di Venezia itself, as perceived by the artist and curator. Vos says: *“The national pavilions at La Biennale di Venezia represent a world order from the past. In the Giardini, former world powers – mostly Western – still occupy the most prominent positions. Countries that, in reality, are closing their borders, declaring war or committing genocide stand side by side, brotherly, with open doors. The art world attempts to uphold the idea of enlightened ideals and a hopeful common future.”*

She adds: *“The world is on fire – you know it – but in the idyllic Giardini, it can sometimes feel as though you are not part of that bleak reality.”*

Commissioner Eelco van der Lingen concludes: *“We cannot return to the optimism and hope of Rietveld’s post-war modernism, but we can use our pavilion to present work that responds to the present moment. By engaging with both the event and its location, Dries Verhoeven invites us to reflect on the tensions embedded within them – an approach that feels particularly urgent and necessary today.”*

Notes to editors

Title: *The Fortress*

Commissioner: Eelco van der Lingen on behalf of the Mondriaan Fund

Curator: Rieke Vos

Exhibitor: Dries Verhoeven

Performers (alternating): Jennie Bergsli, Melyn Chow, Maarten Heijns, Jana Jacuka, Dengling Levine, Diane Mahín, Maya Mertens, Marlen Pflüger, Marie Popall, Lisen Pousette, Olivia Rivière, Misty Superdeluxe, Harald Stojan

Location: Gerrit Rietveld Pavilion, Giardini di Venezia

Dates: May 9 to November 22, 2026 (preview days 6–8 May)

Performances (approx. 25 mins): **Wednesday – Sunday at 12:00, 13:00, 14:00, 15:00, 16:00, 17:00.** On Tuesdays, the pavilion presents itself as a closed sculpture.

A publication accompanying *The Fortress* is available online via Jap Sam Books, featuring texts Eelco van der Lingen, Rieke Vos, Bas Heijne, Eric Otieno Sumba, Maurits de Bruijn, and Dries Verhoeven.

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