

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

The Holy See Pavilion: The Ear is the Eye of the Soul La Biennale di Venezia – 61st International Art Exhibition

Hans Ulrich Obrist & Ben Vickers

In Venice, the Giardino Mistico dei Carmelitani Scalzi preserves a rare quiet. Behind its walls, the city's breath slows. Light moves across herbs that have grown amidst prayer for centuries. Across the city rests the Complesso di Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, in which a process of restoration and repair, both literal and metaphorical, continues. Between these two sites, this living garden and former oratory, the Holy See Pavilion for Biennale Arte 2026 takes the form of a sonic prayer: *The Ear is the Eye of the Soul*, a call to the contemplative act of listening, inspired by the life and legacy of Saint Hildegard of Bingen.

Conceived by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ben Vickers in response to Koyo Kouoh's curatorial proposition for Biennale Arte 2026, the pavilion meets her invitation to slow down and attune to quieter registers as both practice and offering. Through the spirit, visions, and chants of Hildegard, expressions of devotion, grief, and consolation find ways to coexist without spectacle.

Hildegard (1098–1179), one of the most luminous figures in the mystical imagination, was an abbess, poet, healer and composer, a mind in whom theology, music, cosmology and medicine were not separate disciplines but one continuous way of perceiving creation. In our own moment, saturated with what Kouoh describes as the 'anxious cacophony of the present chaos', her work arrives with renewed impetus, as a call to attention, to inwardness, and to the possibility that art in connection with the sensory nature of being can participate in healing.

For Hildegard, sound is a way of knowing. Her vision moves from breath (*spiritus*) to chant, to understanding. Music becomes a bond between body and world, microcosm and macrocosm. In the Giardino Mistico, listening is the primary act, unfolding as an ensemble of new commissions by contemporary composers, musicians, poets, and artists who begin from Hildegard's chants, writings, and visionary images, and respond through voice, instrumentation, and at times, silence.

These commissions are realized in collaboration with the sound artists Soundwalk Collective (Stephan Crasneanski and Simone Merli), who serve in the artistic direction of the pavilion's sonic conception, shaping its spatial and auditory coherence. Working in close dialogue with the curatorial team, the Giardino Mistico installation unfolds as a single contemplative composition, in which individual contributions from invited artists move in and out of a sonic whole.

The sound work privileges interiority and restraint, conceived as an inward experience practiced in silence as much as in sound. Listening becomes a form of contemplative presence, inviting visitors into a state of focused ritual attention, quiet reflection and communal meditation.

Soundwalk Collective also contributes an original sound work, by creating a tailored audio instrument that listens to the garden in real time, translating subtle natural rhythms — including biophotonic data, electromagnetic activity and the micro-acoustics of wind, water, wood, insects, and soil — into an evolving composition. The garden itself thereby becoming a participant in composing the work. In this sense, the pavilion is tuned not toward amplification but toward receptivity: an audible practice of what Kouoh described as listening to the "persistent signals of earth and life," honoring the Giardino Mistico as a place of contemplation.

The garden has long been cared for by the Discalced Carmelite community, who are both hosts and collaborators on the project. The Order was founded by St Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), herself a mystic, reformer and Doctor of the Church. Cared for by the community here since the seventeenth century and restored to its original design, the garden reads as a walk through the soul: its seven plant beds mark the seven stages of contemplative prayer set out in Teresa's *Interior Castle* (1577). The community stewards the garden's spiritual memory, which, in the Venetian Carmelite tradition, includes the cultivation and distillation of lemon balm into *Acqua di Melissa*, a medicine of calm and restoration still produced by the nuns and monks today. This ongoing activity entwines with *Viriditas*, a concept integral to Hildegard's theology. Sometimes translated as fecundity, sometimes more literally as *greenness*, the elaborated concept encompasses a divine vital presence that makes healing possible. As the Carmelite monks write, the garden invites "human silence *within* the chorus of nature."

At the second site, the Complesso di Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, the pavilion shifts register into a contemporary scriptorium, a living archive. It builds on the Holy See's sustained commitment to this site and its restoration with the continuation of Tatiana Bilbao's and MAIO Architects' *Opera Aperta*; the pavilion of the Holy See at the Venice Biennale of Architecture 2025. Curated by Marina Otero Verzier and Giovanna Zabotti.

Triangulated between three anchor points, this second site hosts a living archive, Alexander Kluge's final work, and the twinned sonic liturgy of the Benedictine nuns of Eibingen Abbey (whose community stands on the site of the monastery Hildegard founded in 1165). The archive has been curated in close collaboration with Sister Maura Zátanyi OSB and the St. Hildegard Academy, whose teachings, research, and preservation of Hildegard's legacy have been fundamental for the artists and collaborators of the Pavilion. Her scholarship gives unique insight into the precision, the strangeness, and the tenderness of Hildegard's visions.

Within the archive, visitors encounter a curated multilingual library of Hildegardian texts, artist's books by Ilda David', and new monastery architecture by Tatiana Bilbao Estudio, MAIO Architects, and Dogma Architects. Assembled in the adjoining rooms stands the 12 Stations to Hildegard of Bingen, by Alexander Kluge, his final work, and from which the Pavilion takes its title, completed before his death on 25 March 2026, aged 94. This towering twelve-station film and image installation unfolds across three rooms within the industrial logic of the building's ongoing restoration.

Between the living garden and this former oratory, sonic prayers and archival memory come alive through the work of twenty-four contributors to the pavilion. *The Ear is the Eye of the Soul* transforms listening through the enduring resonance of Saint Hildegard of Bingen's visions.