

CUSTOS

PROJECT PROPOSAL
BULGARIAN PAVILION
61ST VENICE BIENNALE, 2026

Simeon Stoilov
artist

Peter Tsanev
curator

Within the framework of the competition for the Bulgarian Pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale, the artist Simeon Stoilov proposes his most large-scale and ambitious installation to date—a site-specific work created specifically in response to the spiritual and architectural aura of Don Orione Artigianelli.

CUSTOS – “The Guardian” brings together a minimalist formal language and a profound symbolic structure. The concept enters into direct dialogue with the theme In Minor Keys and with the curatorial text by Koyo Kouoh, which speaks of a “visual and meditative procession connecting the senses and carrying them through portals and intermediate spaces.” Stoilov’s project responds to this call by creating an artistic object that is simultaneously an external form and an inner path.

Rooted in the aesthetics of the Renaissance hermetic tradition, CUSTOS resonates with figures such as *custos horti**, *genius loci***, *spiritus hortuli****, and *custos liminis*****—not merely guards, but embodiments of the boundary itself between worlds. In this context, “The Guardian” functions as a temporal architect: a figure that sustains the stability of the threshold between the visible and the invisible, between the profane and the sacred, between what rises and what descends.

In the proposed project, this metaphysical boundary is embodied by a massive inflatable form with a tar-black, glossy surface that alters the perception of the surrounding space. It is at once wall and corridor, a line of movement as well as of restraint. Situated among the delicate fifteenth-century stone arches, the monumental volume generates a tension between weight and lightness, between antiquity and technological contemporaneity.

The viewer is compelled to move around the structure in a ritual of passage—slowly and attentively. Upon reaching the inner courtyard, the “journey” culminates in the open circle of

grass and the well. At the most concealed point of the garden, the glossy, multifaceted form of the well rises like a diamond, reflecting with mirror-like clarity fragments of green grass and blue sky. In Renaissance poetry, the image of the “diamond in the well” is often used to evoke the eternity of feeling. At the conclusion of the installation, the visitor stands before the well, which symbolizes the path toward knowledge, and before the image of the diamond as a metaphor for truth itself.

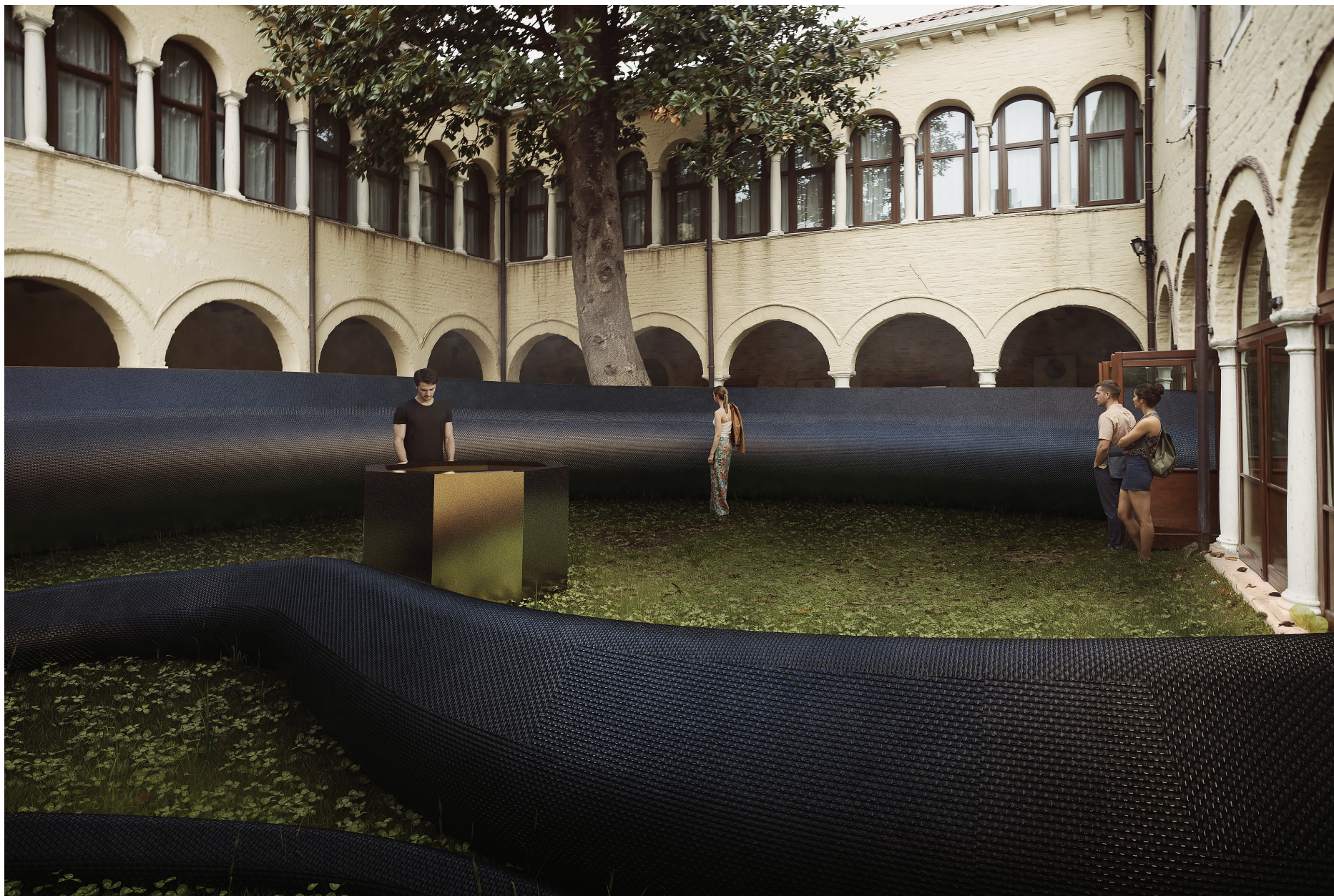
In this way, “The Guardian” generates a tension between the material and the symbolic, between the weight of form and the ephemerality of light. The installation directs the gaze inward—but through the external world.

** Custos horti is a Latin expression meaning “guardian of the garden.”*

*** Genius loci is a Latin term meaning “the spirit of the place.” Originating in Roman mythology, it refers to the belief that every place possesses its own protective spirit, shaping its unique atmosphere, character, and essence.*

**** Spiritus hortuli is associated with the medieval poem Hortulus by Abbot Walahfrid Strabo (9th century), in which he describes his small monastic garden and the spirit of care that transforms it into a place of contemplation and healing for the soul.*

***** Custos liminis translates from Latin as “guardian of the threshold” and carries strong symbolic meaning, used to describe a figure—real or mystical—that guards the passage between two worlds.*



Overall view of the artwork CUSTOS in the inner courtyard of the pavilion within the Don Orione Artigianelli complex.



The object unfolded within the interior space of the pavilion.



Perception of scale and the presence of the installation within the architectural context.

Technical Description of the Artwork

The artwork CUSTOS is a large-scale, site-specific spatial installation developed for the architectural complex Don Orione Artigianelli, Venice. The installation is conceived as a single, continuous spatial object that unfolds seamlessly through the interior spaces and the inner courtyard of the complex, forming a coherent and sequential spatial experience.

The object follows the existing architecture and utilizes the present arched openings as natural points of passage. The installation does not require structural intervention or permanent alterations to the building and is designed to adapt to the varying heights, widths, and proportions of the spaces. The form is positioned at floor level and on the grass surface, clearly defining a route of movement for visitors without obstructing visual axes, functional access, or evacuation routes.

In the interior areas, the installation develops linearly, following the rhythm of the architectural elements, while in the inner courtyard it describes a circular or semi-open trajectory around the central well. In this way, a clear spatial organization is achieved, linking the interior and exterior spaces into a single continuous sequence.

The central well is integrated as a key spatial element within the composition. The existing well is enhanced with a volumetric detail made of reflective material with a mirror-like surface. This addition is mounted in a fully reversible manner, without structural intervention or alteration of the original structure. The reflective surface captures and mirrors fragments of the surrounding environment—architecture, grass, and sky—visually emphasizing the well's central position within the space.

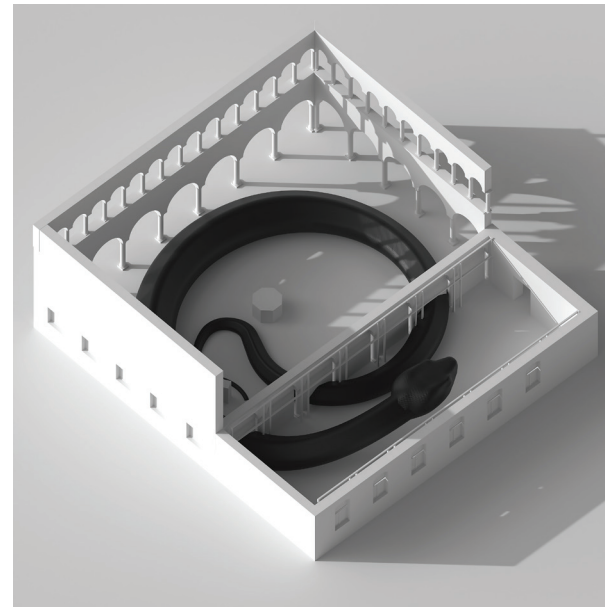
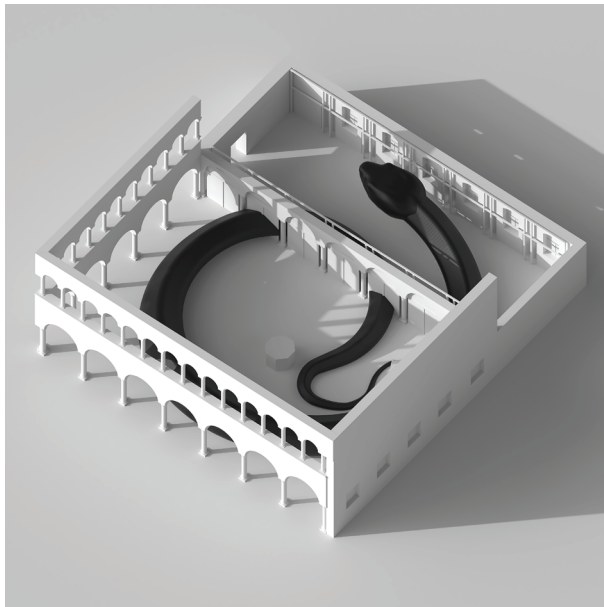
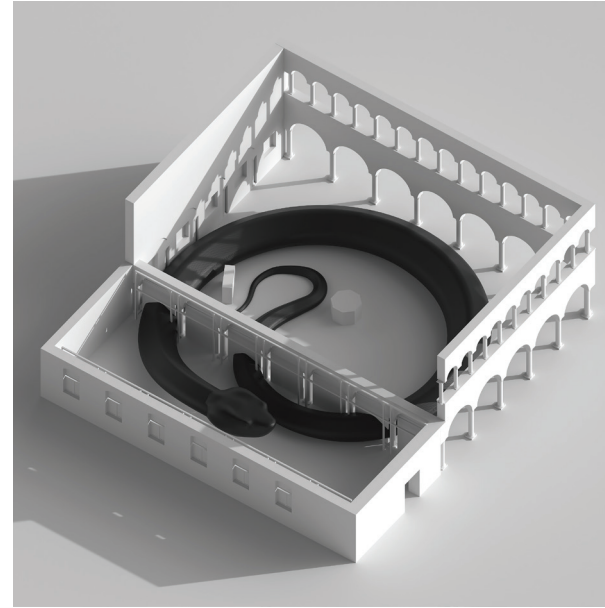
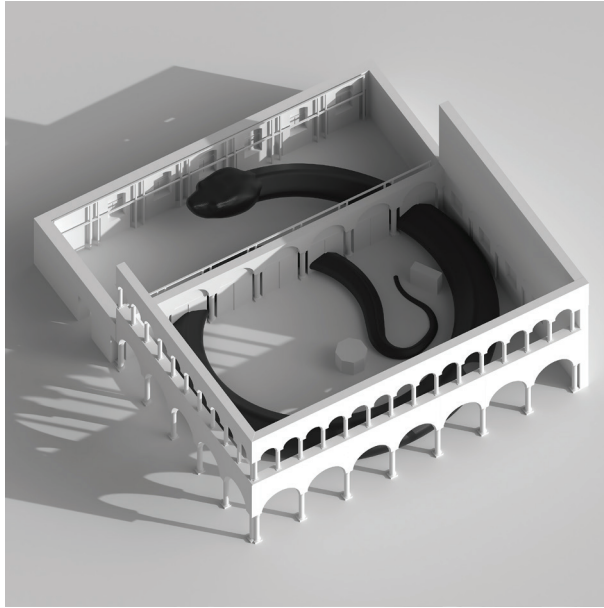
The installation is realized as an inflatable volumetric structure made of high-strength vinyl with a textile base and a dark, glossy surface. The material is resistant to mechanical stress, UV exposure, and atmospheric conditions, making it suitable for both interior and exterior application. The form is maintained by a constant airflow provided by electric fans concealed

within the volume of the installation and integrated so as not to disrupt the visual integrity of the artwork. All technical components are inaccessible for direct contact by visitors.

To achieve a controlled lighting environment, the existing glazing of the pavilion is temporarily darkened using specialized dimming film intended for exhibition spaces. This solution allows for the reduction of direct daylight and the creation of an even twilight condition throughout the entire installation space, regardless of external lighting conditions.

The installation and deinstallation of the artwork are fully reversible and do not require drilling, gluing, or other permanent interventions to architectural surfaces. The installation is designed for temporary exhibition; after dismantling, the space can be restored to its original condition without traces of intervention.

All materials used, electrical components, and technical solutions comply with safety requirements for public exhibition and are fully compatible with the operation of the artwork in an environment with public access.



Axonometric views illustrating the spatial development of the installation within the interior and the inner courtyard of the pavilion.

Project Implementation Schedule

Start of implementation: after the official announcement of the selection results

Deadline for exhibition readiness: 5 May 2026

Weeks 1–3

Conceptual development and structuring of the project; synchronization of the individual spatial and functional elements; on-site visit and detailed analysis of the architectural, spatial, and technical parameters of the exhibition environment, including identification of constraints, installation requirements, and exhibition conditions.

Weeks 4–6

Design development and visualization of the project; preparation of the technical description and development of three-dimensional execution files compatible with production, installation, and logistics processes; finalization of all design decisions required to commence fabrication.

Weeks 5–8 (parallel)

Refinement of the preliminary budget in accordance with the finalized project documentation; planning and coordination of logistics activities and transport solutions; contracting of fabricators and suppliers; and operational communication with the host exhibition venue.

Weeks 9–14

Production and fabrication of the project elements in accordance with the approved project documentation; implementation of quality control procedures, technical checks, and testing; packaging and preparation of components for safe transportation.

Weeks 15–16

Organization and execution of transport to the exhibition venue; on-site installation and spatial positioning of the elements; execution of necessary technical adjustments, stability checks, and coordination with the architectural context and the requirements of the host institution.

Week 17

Final adjustments and fine-tuning, technical stabilization, and preparation of documentation of the completed project, with the artwork fully installed and exhibition-ready no later than 5 May 2026, prior to the preview days of the 61st Venice Biennale.

This schedule is structured on a weekly basis, calculated from the date of the official announcement of the selection results. All activities are planned to ensure the completion and exhibition of the project no later than 5 May 2026, in full compliance with the regulations of the 61st Venice Biennale.

Indicative Budget for Project Implementation

v	Op	n	a r				BotvI	BotvI
1	Human Resources	Artist – fee	month	10	836		8 360	
2	Human Resources	Curator – fee	month	10	836		8 360	
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3	Administrative Support	Accounting services	working day	30	120		3 600	
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4	Documentation – Video	Exhibition filming	minute	20	40		800	
5	Documentation – Video	Official opening filming	minute	20	40		800	
6	Documentation – Video	Closing event filming	minute	15	40		600	
7	Documentation – Video	Video editing	service	1	1 200		1 200	
8	Documentation – Photography	Exhibition photography	image	200	3		600	
9	Documentation – Photography	Opening event photography	image	250	3		750	
10	Documentation – Photography	Closing event photography	image	200	3		600	
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11	Artistic Production	Artwork 1 – materials and fabrication	set	1	23 974		23 974	
12	Artistic Production	Artwork 2– materials and fabrication	set	1	6 388		6 388	
13	Artistic Production	Gallery blackout film	delivery	1	1 680		1 680	
14	Artistic Production	Production technical 3D model	service	1	2 680		2 680	
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15	Text Processing	Editorial services	working day	20	165		3 300	
16	Text Processing	Translation services	working day	30	165		4 950	
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		TOTAL PROJECT BUDGET (incl. VAT)					68 642	

Sample Plan for Project Promotion and Implementation Activities

The project promotion plan is developed to ensure professional, consistent, and sustainable public visibility of the Bulgarian national participation in La Biennale di Venezia. Its primary objective is to position the project within the international artistic and institutional context of the event, while ensuring clarity, accessibility, and long-term traceability of its realization.

I. Objectives

The main objectives of the promotion plan are focused on establishing the project as a significant national contribution within the framework of the international exhibition. These include ensuring recognition of the project among an international professional audience, presenting the Bulgarian participation within the official program of the Biennale, and creating a long-term visual and textual archive of the realization that extends beyond the temporal limits of the event itself.

II. Target Audiences

The plan is oriented toward several clearly defined yet interconnected audiences. First and foremost, it addresses the international professional audience—curators, artists, critics, museum professionals, and representatives of cultural institutions. In parallel, it engages the broader international public of the Biennale, as well as the professional and general audiences in Bulgaria, for whom the national participation carries representative and cultural significance.

III. Communication Channels and Formats

To implement the promotional activities, established communication channels and formats characteristic of the Venice Biennale and international artistic exchange will be employed. These include the official communication channels of the Biennale and the national participation, specialized international and Bulgarian art and cultural media, as well as digital platforms and online archival spaces. The use of traditional informational materials—press releases, invitations, brochures, and introductory information panels—is also envisaged,

providing contextual orientation on site.

IV. Promotion Phases

IV.1. Before the Opening

During the preparatory phase, the national participation will be announced through professional communication channels. Press materials and visual packages will be prepared and disseminated, and institutional and professional networks will be informed in order to position the project in advance within the international Biennale calendar.

IV.2. During the Biennale

Throughout the exhibition period, active on-site communication will be carried out through documentation of the exhibition and presentation process, media coverage, and professional meetings. This phase makes full use of the Biennale's communication capacity and international visibility as a platform for professional exchange.

IV.3. After the Biennale

The concluding phase includes the archiving and subsequent dissemination of visual and textual documentation. Publications and presentations will be produced to ensure the long-term visibility of the project and of the Bulgarian national participation beyond the immediate temporal scope of the Biennale.