

We'll Burn Your Pavilions



Can NATASCHA SÜDER HAPPELMANN
succeed in doing away with
national 'representation' altogether?
by Ben Mauk

Natascha Süder Happelmann (right) and her spokeswoman Helene Duldung (left),
in front of the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin, 2018. Photograph: Jasper Kettner

IN 1896, BETWEEN THE BATTLE OF ADWA and the Anglo-Zanzibar War, the first modern Olympic Games were held over two weeks in Athens. The opening ceremony attracted more than 70,000 people and was said to be the largest peacetime assembly since antiquity. Athens '96 became a blueprint for today's quadrennial sports spectacles, even down to their controversies – the stadium suffered delays and went wildly over budget, hoteliers shamelessly hiked their room rates – albeit with one conspicuous absence: there were no national teams.

This was by design. At their inception, the Olympics were envisaged as an antidote rather than a catalyst for blind jingoism. The games' mastermind, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, claimed that, during an athletic event, 'applause is vouchsafed solely in proportion to the worth of the feat accomplished and regardless of any national preference [...] all exclusively national sentiments must then be suspended and, so to speak "sent on temporary holiday".'¹

Because ideas about history are always formed by the present, it is sometimes claimed that men from 14 different nations competed in the inaugural games. There are reasons to doubt this *a posteriori* accounting. It includes one athlete from Australia, which would not achieve national independence until 1901, and another – a Swiss national who worked as a gymnastics teacher in Sofia – who is claimed by both Bulgaria and Switzerland. Other athletes are listed separately as Austrian or Hungarian depending on which half of the Dual Monarchy has since laid claim to them, and those called 'Greek' may have travelled to the games from Cyprus, Egypt or modern-day İzmir. It took ten years for the official introduction of the element we now think of as emblematic of the Olympics, if not the *raison d'être* of all international competition.

With almost perfect synchrony, the first Venice Biennale (then the International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice) was inaugurated one year before Coubertin's Olympics, in April 1895. Both were children of the World's Fairs and Universal Expositions, then in decline across Europe; both eventually became circuses of private sponsorship and the global leisure class; and both have oscillated uneasily over the decades between nationalistic fervour and the futuristic spirit of cosmopolitanism on which they were nominally founded. Like the Olympic national teams, the Biennale's defining objects – the national pavilions – were added later, as an afterthought.

We forget how new the idea of the nation is. In the sense of nation-state, it was novel even at the start of the 20th century. An older, less totalizing sense then prevailed: that of *naissance*, a birth place or locus of belonging, separate from any political body. This notion has only recently been supplanted by one of political and territorial congruence – the uninterrupted expanse of people, land, military and administration that is called France, say, or Denmark. You won't find this sense of nation in any of the writings of the French or American revolutions. Historian Eric Hobsbawm locates its first appearance no earlier than the 1884 edition of the *Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy*, where 'nation' is defined for the first time both as 'a State or political body which recognizes a supreme centre of common government' as well as that state's territory. A synthesis between the ruling state and its subjects was beginning to form. A few years later, the modern Olympics and Biennale were conceived.

Venice's first pavilion opened in 1907 when Belgium financed and built its own extension of the main exhibition hall in the Giardini. The country was expanding internationally, and was just about to come into control of another foreign area more than 70 times the size of Belgium itself: a million square miles of Africa understood to be the private empire of King Leopold II, who extracted a fortune

in rubber and ivory even before Belgium annexed the Congo Free State in 1908, forming the Belgian Congo at the climax of a holocaust of torture, rape, slavery and murder.

Colonial atrocities are not exactly thin on the ground among the early European members of the Giardini della Biennale but, more than a century later, the Belgian pavilion has morphed into a space as blank and benign as social democracy itself. It is Germany that gets the heat. The Bavarian pavilion followed Belgium's in 1909 and was renamed for Germany in 1912, although the original design, featuring a Grecian frieze and a pediment spilling over with Olympic nudes, was scrapped in 1938 in favour of a more imposing vision by Ernst Haiger, the architect commissioned by Adolf Hitler to face-lift Munich with monumental Nazi neoclassicism. Haiger's hulking edifice has barely changed in the intervening decades (although the busts of Hitler and Benito Mussolini, added in 1940, are now gone).

Participating nations own their pavilions outright, almost as though they were embassies and, over the years, visitors to the Biennale have enjoyed no shortage of droll ironies produced by these national synecdoches. Yugoslavia's has survived the breakup of the country whose name still adorns it and Russia's has persisted through tsarist, Soviet and now autocratic rule. Efforts to establish an official Palestinian pavilion in 2003 were quashed when planners discovered a rule requiring that pavilions' owners be recognized by the government in Rome. Contrast this episode with the time, in 1948, when Peggy Guggenheim first displayed her private collection in Venice, using Greece's empty building, and marvelled at seeing her own name in the catalogue in the same size and font as any nation, as though Peggy Guggenheim were a 'new European country.'²

Germany's Nazi pavilion remains the most notorious site of such national ironies, and is usually at the centre of debates over the value of the Biennale's national divisions. In 1993, the first Biennale to follow Germany's reunification, Hans Haacke demolished the floor and hung a giant photograph of Hitler's 1934 visit to the gardens for the installation *Germania*. Yet, his attempt to deconstruct Germany's fraught national identity nevertheless won the Golden Lion – a prize given to the 'best nation for the most interesting pavilion'. Most recently, in 2017, Anne Imhof won the Golden Lion for Germany once again with *Faust*, a five-hour theatrical performance that revelled in abrasive and occasionally fascist signifiers: barking guard dogs, leather, handcuffs and half-naked actors following inaudible orders with zombie-like compliance. No matter how dramatic or destructive, such interventions still leave the pavilion standing and are therefore easy to assimilate into Biennale lore, evidence of the fair's ability to critique its own structure – and to have fun while doing it. The performance of *Faust* I saw was compelling and strange, but the space itself felt like a nightclub. It was packed, and you could barely see the performers through the forest of hands holding up iPhones to record the spectacle. In the thick of the crowd, I struggled to think of *Faust* as more than another brilliant diversion in the city-sized art party that surrounded us.

Herein lies the Venice paradox. When artists use their participation to interrogate issues of national culture and belonging, it has the effect of legitimizing both the pavilions and the carnival atmosphere of the Biennale as the proper fora for such inquiries. This has been the fate of both *Germania* and *Faust*, as well as 'Personne et les autres', curator Katerina Gregos's 2015 attempt to address Belgium's colonial past. It can be hard to imagine a new dimension to these critiques, especially with regard to Germany, where they have become a virtual requirement of the space.



Augusto Sezanne, Poster for the 7th Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, Venice, 1907, 50 × 70 cm. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fondo Manifesti

Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale. Courtesy and photograph: Lottermann & Fuentes



As Henry James wrote of Venice itself in *Italian Hours* (1909), ‘There is nothing left to discover or describe, and originality of attitude is utterly impossible.’

This is the challenge faced by Natascha Sadr Haghghian, the artist who, inhabiting the more Teutonic-sounding persona Natascha Süder Happelmann, will represent Germany at the 2019 Biennale. Little is known about Sadr Haghghian, and what is known is unreliable. According to her English-language Wikipedia page, ‘Natascha Sadr Haghghian (born Budapest, 1987, or Sachsenheim, 1968, or Australia, 1979, or Munich, 1979, or Tehran, 1967, or London, 1966, or Iran, 1953) is an artist who lives and works in Berlin, Germany, or Kassel, Germany, or Gutersloh, Germany, or Santa Monica, California, USA, or the Cotswolds, Great Britain.’ An artist of misprision and concealment, Sadr Haghghian has obscured her own biography through decades of legerdemain and the occasional wry interview. She may have worked as a telephone operator at a transport agency in the late 1980s. She may live in Kreuzberg, Berlin. The *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon* (a long-standing international database of artists) authoritatively lists Sadr Haghghian’s birthplace as Tehran and her birth year as 1967, but it feels unsporting to pin down the biographical details of an artist so intent on disencumbering herself of all markers of personal identity.

Süder Happelmann, the enigmatic persona she has created specifically for the pavilion, is a Frankensteinish construction based on a ‘collection of name variations’ generated by auto-corrections and public mispronunciations. The explanation was given at an October 2018 press conference with the artist’s spokesperson, Helene Duldung, who is herself a character played by the German actress and performer Susanne Sachsse. (*Duldung*, which means ‘tolerance’ in German, frames the project within a context of migration, assimilation and asylum.) Duldung read from the prepared announcement while sitting next to an enigmatic figure – purported to be the artist – whose head was encased inside a papier-mâché rock.

More than a decade ago, Sadr Haghghian designed bioswop.net, an online clearinghouse for artist CVs and résumés that intended to ‘release the artist’s CV from its representative role’. Critical confusion over her biography stems from this project, which shares with the rest of her research-based *oeuvre* the desire to release people and objects from the weight of representation, inoculating observers against what Duldung calls the ‘fetish power of appearance’. It’s hard to think of a better fit for a pavilion that – much like the international art world itself – feels exhausted by critical interventions that ultimately serve to burnish the statuses of their creators, not to mention gallerists, curators, critics and the biennial circuit itself. The problem is larger than any one event. All artists with international ambitions are now translated in real time before a global audience; non-Western and non-white artists, in particular, are pressured to leverage their biographies into works that follow a familiar narrative of minority heritage, struggle and trauma. That is what makes Sadr Haghghian/Süder Happelmann’s critique – which goes so far as to co-opt the celebratory form of the curatorial press conference – so sharp. Her naming-by-autocorrect seems innocuous, but it is a jab at Germany’s belief in its own tolerance (a belief undercut by the casual racism and unexamined stereotypes that remain as prevalent as air across the country’s liberal cultural institutions). Her refusal to participate other than anonymously in the build-up to her pavilion’s opening has created a stuttering aporia in the discourse of art blogs and magazines. Part Diogenes, part MF Doom, Süder Happelmann is a perfect candidate for Biennale disruption, a masked purveyor of slippery pranks that irrigate the usually dry field of institutional critique. Even her lack of a stable CV makes it difficult to assimilate her into the art world’s self-congratulatory critical machinery, which prizes token diversity and performances of tolerance while suppressing any work that fails to respect the unwritten rules of minority play.

Until recently seen as somewhat dusty, institutional critique seems to be staging a comeback, with artists such

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as Maria Eichhorn, Andrea Fraser and Cameron Rowland producing works that question structures of ownership, corporate boards, funding and acquisition within the art world. Sadr Haghghian's *wunderkammern* of sound, video and ready-made objects are similarly informed by leftist political critique, although her targets are manifold. Her 2013 work *pssst Leopard 2A7+* concerns itself with Germany's arms merchants and their authoritarian client states. A platform made of Legos that takes up as much floor space as the German tank after which it is named, *pssst Leopard 2A7+* is pocked with headphone jacks through which visitors can listen to recordings about state-sanctioned violence. The Lego grid resembles both a camouflage pattern and cultivated farmland as seen from an airplane – or drone. *Onco-mickey-catch* (2016) combines taxidermy, genetic engineering and social media with a large mammalian sculpture that allows visitors to communicate with each other through ear-like computer screens. A third work, *De Paso* (2011), uses low-cost airlines as an Oulippean constraint, creating a discomforting sound installation from little more than hand luggage and a water bottle: the banal staples of every creative professional who has ever flown EasyJet.

At the time of writing, Süder Happelmann has released two videos that will feature in her pavilion at Venice. Both follow the anonymized, rock-headed artist as she walks through liminal landscapes. The first traces her route through several towns in Bavaria where new asylum centres have gone up – the notorious *Ankerzentrum*, which critics describe as deportation centres. The second traces her as she wanders among tomato farms in Puglia, the region that produces half of Italy's tomatoes and whose farms and processing plants are known to exploit migrant workers, forced to live in squalid ghettos and work for violent 'gangmasters' for as little as €2 an hour. None of these facts features in the videos, which are conspicuously eventless and soundtracked to ambient music and electronic beats, although the second includes an oblique clue: an audio recording from a 2012 workers' protest in Rome. If these images and sounds are to feed into a critique of migration and European tolerance at the pavilion, it won't just be Süder Happelmann who makes it. In February, the artist announced (again through proxies) that she would be supported in Venice by six composers and musicians whose genres range from IDM to Maloya and chamber piano. There would also be graphic designers, sculptors, editors and, of course, spokeswoman Duldung, who has already noted Sadr Haghghian's preference for collaboration over solitude: 'Generally, no one does anything alone.'

Art evolved in collective anonymity, among the cave scrawlers, bone etchers, workshop detailers and cathedral grunts. The rise of the artistic genius (a word that once referred to the divine spirit of a family or place, rather than individual talent) is not so much older than the



Natascha Süder Happelmann in Foggia, Italy, 2018. Photograph: Jasper Kettner

nation-state. Sadr Haghghian has built a practice out of rejecting both concepts, not just investigating but consciously unlearning the modes of social identification on which the art world runs.

If the rest of us are ever able to collectively unlearn with her, it is unlikely we will find ourselves in great need of international art – at least not the kind that thrives at the 200 or so biennials now in operation around the world, hoarding funding and attention at the expense of local, indigenous and carbon-neutral alternatives. 'We'll burn your pavilions,' protesters chanted in 1968, claiming that Venice had become a 'Biennale of the bosses'. Artists turned their pictures toward the wall in solidarity. Süder Happelmann turns her own face to the wall, encasing herself in stone.

Like the vestigial myths on which they are founded, nations are not easily discarded. We are even told we live in an era of 'rising nationalism', and while I'm not sure this is exactly true, it's undoubtedly the subtext of the 58th Venice Biennale's bad-joke title, 'May You Live in Interesting Times'. The phrase was made famous in a 1966 speech by US senator Robert F. Kennedy, who said it was a 'Chinese curse', a spurious claim that has nevertheless become permanent factoid. So long as nations form the contours of our world, there will be orientalist tropes, not to mention hypocritical weapons deals, desperate migrants, Olympic teams and national pavilions. We can only gesture toward the alternative, glimpsing in moments of collaboration and anonymous creation that other imperfect object of ancient Greece, imperfectly revived: democracy ●

1 Quoted in Jules Boykoff, *Power Games: A Political History of the Olympics*, 2016, Verso, London, p. 40

2 Quoted in Peggy Guggenheim: *A Celebration*, 1998, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, p. 76

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