

A Flag, a Song, a Palace: Exploring the Scenography of Europe's First Foray into Transnationalism

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In my artistic practice, I delve into archives that reveal historical case studies of how culture has been used and abused by ideological and political interests. I am particularly interested in moments that forefronted national and supranational identity crises – where art and culture were called in to help in creating a visible (aesthetic) cut with the past and build a scenography for a new socio-political future, that often presented utopian visions but sometimes resulted in dystopian failures.

My focus lies in identifying patterns and cycles of instrumentalisation of art and culture for national and political purposes, especially in attempts at transnationalism and multilateral solidarity. I engage in these archives by referencing, rephrasing, dissecting and further expanding them into new constellations comprising immersive installations that incorporate film, performance, sculpture, and historical ready-mades. My aim is to create platforms for discussion where institutions, artists, archives, and audiences come together to critically examine the enduring patriarchal patterns of nation building and explore ways to introduce a more critical voice into their processes of reproduction.

Recent socio-political crises in Europe, coupled with the rise of far-right ideologies and populism on both ends of the political spectrum, have significantly influenced cultural production across the continent. Many artworks and cultural productions have taken on the role of political identity interlocutors, with museums often aligning their programmes with heightened national political directives.

This backdrop motivated my research into the first case of culture encountering a multilateral political power that harnessed culture as a carrier of soft power to reshape global governance: this was the first attempt at transnationalism on European soil with the League of Nations and its architectural plan for the Palace of Nations in Geneva.

Throughout history, political power has required a physical embodiment through architecture that can perform as a site for political action and a tool for the expression of political thought. The architecture needed to function as a choreographic machine, and with the advent of photography and film, also as a cinematographic apparatus. It also needed to serve as a unique and recognisable scenographic backdrop, complete with interior design and artworks, to help assert the authority of the governing body. Ultimately, architecture had to be able to protect, represent, and frame the authority of its client.

The case study of the League of Nations' selection process for the design of the Palace of Nations exemplifies the complex and perturbing relationship between political power and art. Faced with limited space for their meetings at the Hotel National, the League initiated a call for the design of a new building, in 1927, one that would align with their innovative vision for governance. The initial directive sought 'a future orientated structure that could represent the parliament of the world.'¹ The jury emphasised that 'it was the idea of the League of Nations which had to inspire the construction of the building, and that it was from an understanding of the world based on brotherhood that the architectural realization had to be emanated.'²

While protocol architecture traditionally served to frame and represent its patron, this instance could be viewed as a ground-breaking departure, where the very essence of governance underwent reinvention, necessitating an entirely distinct approach. As a transnational entity, the League exhibited great concern over favouring any single nation, compelling a redesign of its architectural model for governance. This marked the emergence of a unique demand: the creation of a 'neutral' hub where representatives from diverse countries could engage on equal footing, upholding the global equilibrium across politics, economics, and society. This innovative concept posed a formidable challenge, prompting a reimagining of architectural design through the lens of multilateral, transnational perspectives.

The central concept envisioned by the jury aimed to craft a call that would convey a building's potential to embody a space for gathering, dialogue, deliberation, and transparency, while inspiring a strong commitment to the League's ideals and principles. Regrettably, in the end, they chose a symbolically and historically burdened term 'palace' to sum up their concept.³ What had appeared promising in its initial conception, holding the promise of eradicating clandestine dealings in dim corridors of power, swiftly devolved into a conventional and patriarchal embodiment of authority.

The competition garnered significant interest, attracting a total of 377 submissions.⁴ Following an initial open call to select a single architect, the committee opted for a different approach by enlisting several architects from diverse national backgrounds to collaborate. This strategic choice aimed to prevent the building from being imbued with a specific national style, especially considering the League's heightened sensitivity to questions of national representation in the aftermath of World War One. The committee found that a design-by-committee approach offered the most viable solution, leading to the selection of five architects for the project. These five determined individuals embarked on the task of crafting a collaborative new design. This decision inadvertently caused a considerable delay in the project's progress. The result was a visibly awkward culmination – an oversized palatial structure situated on a seemingly inadequate expanse of lawn.

Jasmina Cibic is a London-based artist who works in film, performance, and installation. Her work explores the intertwinements of state power, culture, and gender constructs. She examines the mechanisms of soft power – the instrumentalisation of culture by political forces – during moments of historical social and ideological crises. Through archival research, Cibic seeks out artworks, architecture, and music in which political interests and the rhetoric of national power are expressed. She translates her research into films and immersive theatrical compositions that include photographs, performances, and installations. Cibic represented Slovenia at the 55th Venice Biennale with her project 'For Our Economy and Culture.' Her recent exhibitions include solo shows at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg; The Highline New York; macLyon; Museum Sztuki Łódź; Museum of Contemporary Art Ljubljana; CCA Glasgow; Phi Foundation Montreal; BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art Gateshead; Ludwig Museum Budapest; Kunstmuseum Krefeld; along with group exhibitions at MAXXI Rome; Steirischer Herbst '19; MOMA NY; Marta Herford; and Guangdong Museum of Art China. Cibic's films have been screened at the Barbican London; Whitechapel Gallery; CCA Montreal; Pula Film Festival; HKW Berlin; the Louvre; Les Rencontres Internationales Paris; Aesthetica; Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival; BFI London Film Festival; Dokfest Kassel; and Copenhagen International Documentary Festival. Cibic was the winner of the MAC International Ulster Bank and Charlottenborg Fonden awards (2016), the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image Award (2020) and the Film London Jarman Award (2021).

→ Jasmina Cibic, *The Gift* (2021), video still. Image: courtesy of the artist.



The outcome literally set in stone the failings of the League and its theoretical aspirations for transparency. The Palace was a neoclassical and conservative architecture, affirming the continuation of a style representing the legacy of empires of the Great Powers rather than liberating itself from it, as would be the proper way to illustrate the ideal of self-determination.

By the time the Palace was ready to be inaugurated, the main purpose of the League – to prevent the next armed conflict in Europe – failed and World War Two was right at the front door. In 1927, the following comment appeared in the Berlin journal *Bauwelt*, 'A League of Nations building that ties itself to the ghosts of history is likely to become a haunt of ghosts.'⁵

We should mention the only modernist proposal was by Le Corbusier, whose plan was the only one that truly created an architecture that could serve a new typology of social organisation that the League presented. But the jury followed the lowest mass standards in the judgment of designs and found a way to eliminate him from the competition due to his use of mechanical drawing instead of hand-drawn plans that were stated in the regulations of the competition.⁶

The foundation stone for the building was laid in 1929, and the first meeting was held in 1937 – almost exactly eight years later. As the architecture was finally agreed upon, the interiors presented another challenge. The almost bankrupt League decided to constitute the entirety of the Palace from gifts – by asking each of the member states to contribute something for the lacking interior: from wall panelling to frescoes, sculptures, and doors. This great money-saving operation for the organisation gave birth to an interior design structure that paints a clear picture of 1930s European colonialism and political curation.



←↑ Jasmina Cibic,
The Gift (2021), video still.
Images: courtesy of the artist.

Perhaps the best illustration of the problem of transnational representation within the Wilsonian world is the gift of Belgium which still, today, hangs within the foyer of the Council Room: these are two tapestries gifted, in 1935, with the title 'People of the World' where there is a clear distinction between the fully clothed 'developed' nations and the nude 'exotic' ones. As gifts cannot be returned, the United Nations still maintains this work in situ – placed in its original position right outside the Conference of Disarmament room. This is one of the most notable illustrations of why the discussion of inherited relations between culture and political power and cultural diplomacy must be debated and problematised with questions raised about how to return an unsuitable gift. Twitter posts with #multilateralism continue to accompany this image when posted from an official UN account as late as 2019.

The number of gifted artworks kept growing over time as the League of Nations evolved into the United Nations, and new members continued to offer new gifts in all shapes and sizes: from dances performed at special days of celebration to paintings and sculptures.

In addition to the official gift exchange that underscores the pursuit of a new multicultural and transnational mode of governance, the Palace has also been the recipient of two other sets of gifts, intriguingly surpassing the meticulously orchestrated political and diplomatic offerings within the realm of official gifting by member states. Both of these sets of gifts illuminate the presumed element of theatricality indispensable to any form of governance. Specifically, these gifts pertain to the creation of a flag design and a composition for a representative anthem. These gifts emerge from the endeavours of individuals, including amateur and semi-professional composers and artists, who sought to pay homage to the coalition aimed at preventing further national conflicts – a mission that, as history attests, ultimately failed miserably.

What stands out as particularly perplexing is the fact that among the musical compositions gifted to the Palace since its inauguration, spanning even the war years when it was closed, and continuing through the tenure of the United Nations, the predominant forms were anthems and marches – the very musical genres that are deeply intertwined with the concept of the nation-state, encompassing both its establishment (self-determination) and its eventual dissolution (war).

The other notable contribution came in the form of a gifted competition for the flag of the League of Nations. As with the Palace's architecture, the issue of national distinctiveness within the visual interpretation of the new form of transnational governing arose also with the potential flag. Due to concerns that a singular emblem might evoke nationalist sentiments in the context of this significant transnational endeavour, the project remained unrealised, and the League never adopted an official flag. The submitted proposals offer a diverse array of visualisations, showcasing the potential representation of a novel form of transnational authority through graphic design.

These proposals encompass a wide spectrum of creative concepts, ranging from the introduction of previously unused colour palettes in flag design to highly spiritual and strongly ideological interpretations. This collection serves as an invaluable resource for shedding light on the complexities inherent in symbolically representing a collective identity that transcends individual nations.

The endeavours initiated by the League were subsequently taken up by the United Nations in a restructured capacity after 1946. The practice of design-by-committee persisted, reflecting a consistent approach in the utilisation of art and design within the political and diplomatic scenography. This approach includes a striking portrayal of the patriarchal aesthetics prevalent in the context of Cold War international design, often concealed beneath the façade of transnationalism.

A great example is the political and diplomatic styling of the Soviet gift to the United Nations from the 1960s which was required to illustrate a 'supranational sentiment.' By examining the visual representations of the proposals and delving into

the correspondence between UN officials and the USSR ambassador, we can discern the evolution of the gift's aesthetic trajectory. It transitioned from an initial proposal characterised by socialist realism – a sculpture portraying a cosmonaut – to its ultimate manifestation as a profoundly abstract rocket form, deemed fitting for its unveiling in 1971. This eventful inauguration featured a Russian cosmonaut alongside the Soviet Minister of Culture, with the spectacle reaching its zenith as they were joined by an American astronaut facilitated by the UN. The combined efforts of the artist and these key figures culminated in a meticulously choreographed display, emblematic of the art of stagecraft, designed to conclude the performance on a grand transnational stage.

In his essay 'The Gift,' Marcel Mauss eloquently demonstrates that the act of gifting within any social organisation operates under a strict rule system, whether written or unwritten.⁷ This includes recognising the potential burden associated with receiving a gift, as recipients are already cognisant of the psychological and social intricacies tied to the act of gifting, such as reciprocity and the (im)possibility of rejecting a gift.⁸ However, for the context of our enquiry into soft power exercised within these exchanges, the interesting query is what occurs when such a gift undergoes wear and tear, and its original recipient disappears? How does the ideology of gifting translate into new sets of socio-political relations with parties inheriting the cultural capital of the initial transaction? The Palace of Nations serves as a compelling case study for exploring the intricate relationships governing the role of art and culture within the construction of agency (and self-determination), as it vividly illustrates the extensive network of attempts at multilateralism through the application of soft power as ideological set-building.

As the original 1930s interior of the League of Nations crumbles, an essential renovation is underway. This rejuvenation introduces a seemingly nonideological redesign, backed by funding from Qatar and UAE. This transformation carries a symbolic weight, serving as a scenographic takeover that vividly portrays the emerging global power dynamics superseding the antiquated European colonial aesthetic of the 1930s.

This not only includes the dated and used meeting halls but also my favourite room in the whole Palace: the exquisite electricity substation which was still in its original furnishing when I shot my film *The Gift* there in 2019–21. Metaphorically, this space served as the beating heart of the League of Nations – a room responsible for supplying the vital energy that propelled the entire organisational machinery. In this space, I filmed an encounter between a diplomat and a violinist – who, in a *pas-de-deux*, encapsulate the instrumentalisation of culture and its reciprocal resistance within the delicate balance of soft power dynamics – a nuanced interplay that so often fails.

But let us not forget that soft power – as well as statecraft – are great examples of illusionist tactics. And the best way to measure the power of an illusion is through the forensic lens of its failure. Dead ideologies and states tell us more about their conjuring mechanisms and tricks than their live counterparts.



← Jasmina Cibic, *The Pleasure of Expense Archive* (2019). Images: courtesy of the artist and the United Nations Library, Geneva.

- 1 Minutes of the second session of the works of the Jury (January 1926), 31–33, League of Nations Archives 32/49424/28594 in Ilda Delizia, Fabio Mangone, *Architettura e Politica. Ginevra e la Società delle Nazioni, 1925–1929* (Roma: Officina Edizioni, 1992), 26.
- 2 Minutes of the second session of the works of the Jury (January 1926).
- 3 'Programme et Règlement du Concours d'Architecture pour l'édification d'un Palais de la Société des Nation à Genève,' April 17, 1926.
- 4 For the detailed analyses of the competition see Ciro Luigi Anzivino, Ezio Godoli, *Ginevra 1927: Il concorso per il palazzo della società delle nazioni e il caso Le Corbusier* (Firenze, modulo editrice, 1979).
- 5 Sigfried Giedion, 'The League of Nations Competition, 1927: Contemporary Architecture Comes to the Front,' *Space, Time, and Architecture* (1938), 445.
- 6 For the detailed analyses of the Courbusier case see Ciro Luigi Anzivino, Ezio Godoli, *Ginevra 1927*, 81–101.
- 7 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, (Routledge, 2002).
- 8 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 53.