

CURATOR'S INTRODUCTION

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The first chapter of the *Spielraum* project, titled *The Nation Loves It*, was presented at Ludwig Museum Budapest in January 2015 as an immersive environment comprising film, performance, sculpture and installation. Karl Kraus' term *Spielraum* not only lent its name to the exhibition, but also became the lens through which Cibic examines the programmatic application of linguistic and architectural decoration in strategies of nation-building, as exemplified in the redesign of the city of Belgrade for the occasion of the first conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961.¹ The conference set the stage for the Yugoslavian government to both redefine and redesign the city of Belgrade for the purpose of presenting a new political formation to the attending foreign delegates, while simultaneously rebranding the city to its citizens.

Spielraum's first chapter, *The Nation Loves It*, dissected and reassembled the idea of the patriotic spectacle, exploring the instrumentalisation of visual language and rhetoric in the construction of the State as spectacle, and investigating the ways in which art and architecture serve as soft power strategies of every political order. Through contextualising patterns characteristic of systems of power, *The Nation Loves It* reveals glaring contradictions that are inseparably connected with the transformations of national and cultural identities in the past as well as the present. *The Nation Loves It* was articulated in three main interdependent sections at the Ludwig Museum, built into one another, interfering with each other, echoing and mirroring each other's constitutive elements.

The first section addressed the construction of a new visual language that was to endorse a new political formation (the Non-Aligned Movement) via the study of the basic building blocks of its physical foundations. These building blocks took the form of two-dimensional shapes sourced from the architectural plans and designs for the city of Belgrade, developed for the occasion of the First Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement: the documents included sketches and proposals for the city's new pavilions, monuments and decorative elements, as well as interior design solutions for the monumental former Palace of the Federation in Belgrade. With the incorporation of these almost ornamental forms, they became the visual leitmotif spanning the entire exhibition, feeding into its rich scenography, entering the projected film in the form of props and costume patterns, and finally interacting with the exhibited two-dimensional art objects and sculptural forms.

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The Non-Aligned Movement was founded by Jawaharlal Nehru (the first Prime Minister of India), Sukarno (the first President of Indonesia), Gamal Abdel Nasser (the second President of Egypt), Kwame Nkrumah (the first President of Ghana) and its chief leader, Josip Broz Tito (Marshal of Yugoslavia), who were also among the attendants at the first conference. While colonial regimes crumbled in the 1960s, the Non-Aligned Movement came to life planned and designed as an alternative 'third way' to the competing US and Soviet-led alliance structures of the Cold War, and a creation of several national leaders. In their own right, they advocated respect for the rights of peoples and nations to self-determination, struggle against imperialism, and an end to colonialism and neocolonialism. The birth of this power bloc called for a new ideological apparatus that had to be accompanied by distinguishable visual language in architecture and public space. The most notable examples were the inventions of a new style in art and architecture, and the increasingly inflamed rhetoric reflected in political speech and discourse, celebrated and accepted by the population and respected by the rest of the world. In order to achieve this, the new language had to be universal in its formal simplicity and made globally understandable by the use of internationally accessible concepts and values.

The building blocks first appeared as dark triangular forms painted on the walls in the entry room of the exhibition; then, growing out from their own shadows, they transformed into spatial objects of independent physical existence. This allowed them to be manipulated, moved from one place to another and combined as basic elements into larger and more complex structures. Their final application was their inscription as collages into landscape photographs sourced from the archives held at the Museum of Yugoslav History; the images were captured by Marshal Tito's official photographers during his travels and meetings with foreign dignitaries. From this archive, Cibic selected only the images depicting 'picturesque' and 'sublime' landscapes, images in which the state photographers / artists turned away from the political spectacle and, rather than focusing on the event itself, captured the environment: the scenery, rather than the scene, of the various protocol events that shaped the geopolitics of the post-Second World War world.

A narrow, dark corridor connected the first and second sections of the exhibition. Here, another of the appropriated shapes appeared in sculptural form. Its isolation elevated it to the status of a new icon, an icon that is to some extent decorative, yet articulates the experimental and ambitious programme established by the new visual vocabulary. The theatricality of the corridor space was further enhanced by the solemnity of a sole spotlight that singled out the icon, adding to the sense of gravity already generated by the physically oppressing, controlling and directing one-way passage. This transitory space functioned as an intimidatingly lit gateway to the second part of the exhibition, deliberately confronting the viewer with the visceral mise-en-scène of power and its *Raum*.

The second section of the exhibition focused on language and political rhetoric. It featured a 15-minute video in which an actress performs short concentrated actions, delivering snippets loaded with political significance. When she first appears on stage, she is seen moving geometric forms that run throughout the exhibition in an almighty manner, and as if they were pawns on a chessboard. Next we see her rehearsing a text in which she weighs her every word, measuring its impact and choosing the most adequate combination for the best rhetorical result. The different parts of this verbal mosaic represent extracts from political speeches from different times, spaces and political regimes,

uttered by a diverse range of politicians engaged in large-scale public and official state architectural developments, including Mussolini, Thatcher, Mitterrand, Truman, Tito and Khrushchev. Each of them conveyed the notion of a new state, nation or policy through different aesthetic and stylistic strategies. Beyond simply drawing on stock rhetoric of the most frequent terminology employed in such official, inaugural announcements, the rehearsed speech highlights various aspects in nation-building strategies, revealing how architecture is approached and used in the expression, representation, affirmation and diffusion of national identity. The strong figure of the woman represented in the video, unidentifiable yet universal, stands in as a recasting of Mother Nation, allowing us a glimpse of a new power taking shape behind the scenes: she is both the architect producing and the product of nation-building.

The third and final section of *The Nation Loves It* synthesised the visual language and the rhetorical systems of the previous two segments. It addressed both the interior and the exterior backdrops of power as well as its scenographic spectacle, and took the form of two large-scale artworks. The first was a velvet curtain, drawing its pattern from the tapestry adorning the monumental spaces of the former Palace of the Federation in Belgrade; the second a wallpaper mural depicting a fictional composite landscape, assembled from various photographic documents of Marshal Tito's political meetings, showcasing territories ranging from Africa, Europe and America to Asia. Woven into this fictional landscape were randomly scattered scrolls bearing political messages—symbolically demonstrating the tautological politicisation of spaces that each new birth of visual and rhetoric discourse requires. Also displayed in this section were iron rings adorned with sentences of nation-building rhetoric, reminiscent of the entrance gates to public architecture.² In these rings of different sizes, the rhetoric of leaders and its populist adaptation are once more brought together in the shaping of a new national discourse.

Within this third space, a series of original performances took place. Three dancers reactivated the artworks as backdrops and the sculptures as props, whilst two actresses performed a dialogue titled "Instructions", where a series of political quotes about how to build a new political structure was acted out as a looped durational performance.

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Slogans on the iron rings read: "Do not tamper with high standards", "Solve tasks in the spirit of our needs" and "Draw back the curtain of the future".