Scarcely an exhibition context is as charged and overlaid with meaning as the national contributions to a biennial. National representation and cultural attributions—the dangers of every national pavilion—are not infrequently associated with conflicts. That is particularly true of the German Pavilion in Venice.

After the founding of the Biennale di Venezia as a sales exhibition in 1895, the first German contributions took place in the international and German galleries of the main exhibition building in the Giardini. Starting in 1909, the Bavarian Pavilion, renamed the German Pavilion in 1912, represented the country at the show. In 1938, that building was altered to conform to the fascist architectural aesthetic. The Nazi imperial eagle over the entrance portal was removed after the war. In 1984, the wings were furnished with the inscriptions “Bundesrepublik Deutschland” and “Repubblica Federale di Germania” to distinguish Western Germany’s contributions from those of the German Democratic Republic, which had been participating since 1982. Nevertheless, the architecture of the German pavilion still exemplifies the formal language of fascism to this day.

Thus it comes as no surprise that the artists invited to exhibit here in the past have often defied this architecture and the spirit it emanates. Hans Haacke, for example, broke up the plates of the pavilion’s travertine floor in such a way as to recall Caspar David Friedrich’s Sea of Ice. Anne Imhof introduced transparent walls and a glass platform that literally pulled the floor out from under the feet of those entering. Natascha Sadr Haghighian—who called herself Natascha Süder Happelmann for the occasion—divided the main room in two with a huge wall that was reminiscent of an arch dam while also alluding to the so-called “Festung Europe” (“Fortress Europe”).

The general sense of unease characterizing many of the contributions is not least of all a reaction to Germany’s twentieth-century history and the atrocities committed by Germans against the Jewish population and all who did not conform to the ideology of the Nazi regime. What position does a country with such a past adopt in the context of the current global crises? What possibilities does art have against this background? And how can art take on these questions while at the same time developing a stance and pictorial language of its own?

It is with these questions in mind that the German Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2022 will focus on aspects of political and cultural representation and what artistic production means to society—issues of particular relevance in today’s challenging times.

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