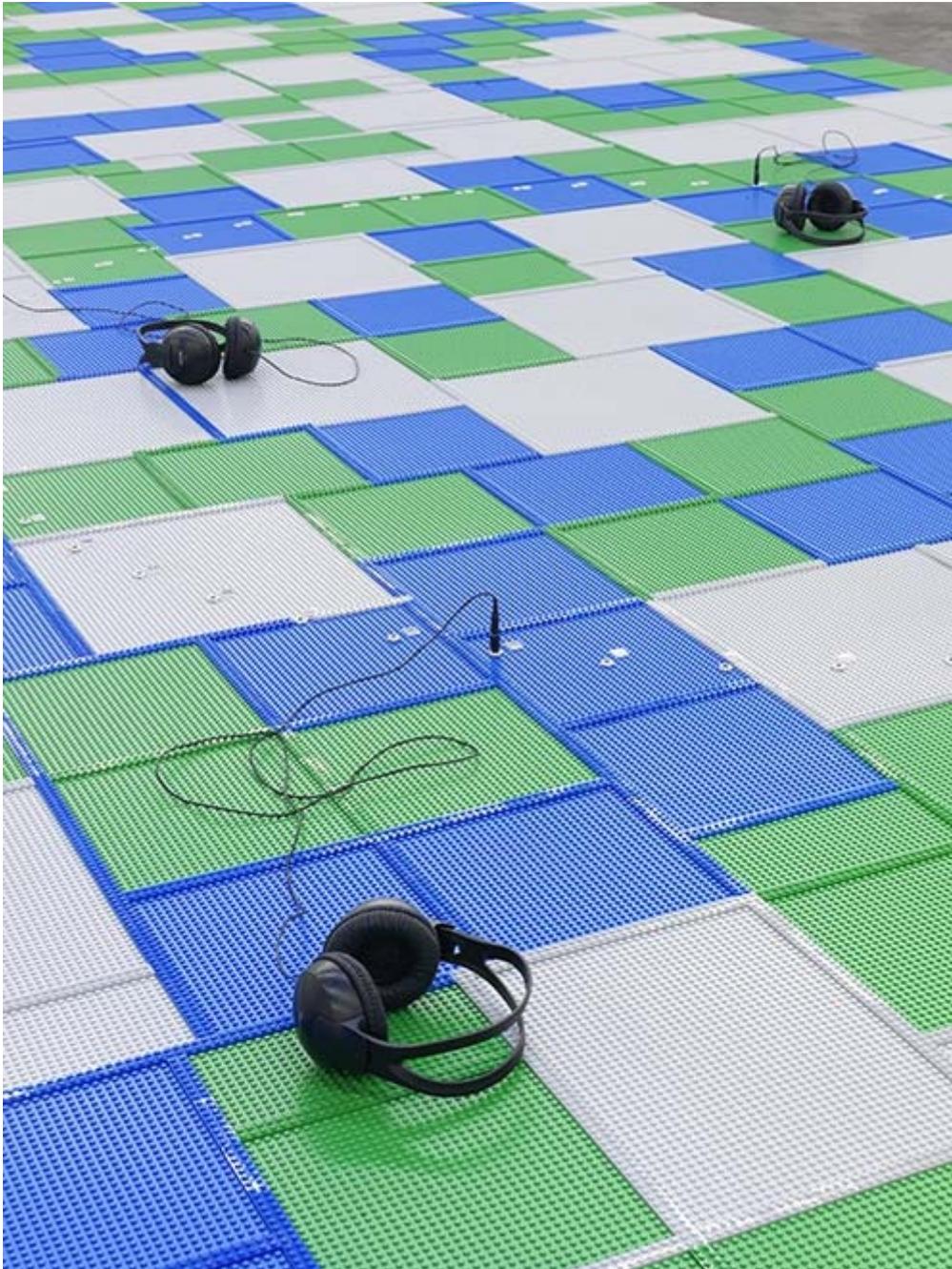


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Full Disclosure

Natascha Sadr Haghigian's works record and refract the mechanisms of power



pssst Leopard 2A7+(detail), 2013, mixed media (Exhibition view) Johann König, Berlin (courtesy for all images: the artist & Johann König, Berlin; photograph: Roman März)

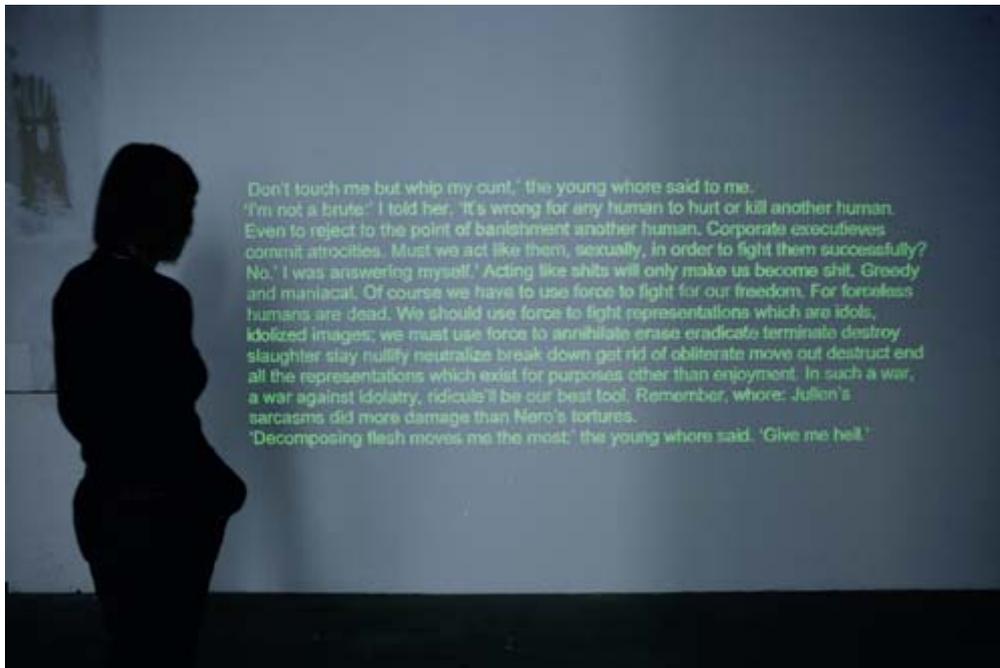
Germany is the third-largest weapons manufacturer in the world. Its factories build clever machines that kill people, and its salespeople's success in selling them contributes to the country's relative economic stability. Not that this is secret knowledge – what's built and bought, and by whom, is easily accessible online. In 2010, for example, the arms manufacturer Krauss-Maffei Wegmann debuted the

Leopard 2A7+ battle tank, designed specifically (partly thanks to its high-spec air-con) for cities in hot climates, used, perhaps, in order to quell riots, protests and the actions of an armed populace. In 2011, Der Spiegel reported, the German government had agreed the sale of 200 of these anti-revolution devices to Saudi Arabia, whose own troops put down pro-democracy demonstrations in Bahrain a few months earlier. In the UK – which admittedly has sold weapons to the Saudis for years – a report on the *Guardian* website noted: ‘This, it seems, is Germany’s contribution to the Arab Spring.’¹



pssst Leopard 2A7+, 2013, Mixed media, (Exhibition view), Johann König, Berlin
(Photograph: Roman März)

Yet there is no rippling outrage in the Federal Republic, for to point a finger at Germany’s ethically lamentable industry would be to mark oneself as a hysteric who has seemingly just discovered what everyone else knows and has elected – or been conditioned – to accept. Such are the mechanisms that underpin what Michael Taussig, in *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (1999), himself drawing on Elias Canetti, characterizes as the public secrets on which societies depend. What would outrage were it deliberately concealed must be made imperceptibly visible, its liminality underpinned by a state apparatus whose own workings surface only intermittently. They might be noted, for example, in Toys R’ Us, where one can buy Lego models of Leopard tanks – profoundly uncreative, subjectivity-moulding kits allowing citizens to participate in the mimesis of power. Against this, against what Taussig calls a manufactured ‘epistemic murk’, whither the cynosure of representation, visual art?



Empire of the Senseless Part I, 2006, Mixed media, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (Photograph: Uwe Walter)

On recent evidence, Natascha Sadr Haghghighian's response is neither to represent nor to refuse representation, nor necessarily to make 'visual' art at all. Where she deploys exposure as a method it's with regard to what sustains the oscillating secret itself. But exposure is not the entire ambit of her practice, for one doesn't get far in exposing what already exposes itself. In her latest exhibition at Johann König, Berlin, for example, Sadr Haghghighian presented a sardonic travesty of the Leopard tank. Her sound installation *pssst Leopard 2A7+* (2013) sat in the centre of the space, a disarmed copy of the 'real' Leopard: a wooden base identical in area to the real thing, covered with a blue, green and grey camouflage pattern of Lego baseplates. Into these, in a circle where the tank's turret would have been, are inset sixty headphone sockets. Sit on the silent, immobile 'tank', dip a headphone jack, and one of twenty sound works – made by Sadr Haghghighian and six other contributors – is heard. In some she recites, publicly in Berlin, the hundred-page *Rüstungsexportbericht*, or German Armaments Export Report, from 2011. Another features an anonymously drafted letter written during the Egyptian revolution two years ago – asking soldiers and policemen not to quit their jobs but to shoot poorly and not break bones – recited through a Vocoder, the carrier signal substituted by the noise of demonstrating crowds. In still others are field recordings, electronically processed, abstractly showing the Leopard achieving sentience, becoming self-aware.



Trail, 2012, sound installation dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel (Photograph: Nils Klinger)

The latter reflects, and mangles, what Sadr Haghghian discerns as an atavistic sorcery at work. Following Walter Benjamin's thoughts in *On Language as Such and the Language of Man* (1916), on the relationship between nomenclature and magic, she sees the naming of tanks after animals as, if not a pseudo-shamanistic summoning of animal prowess, then at least a weird irrationalism within the scientific purview of armaments that's echoed elsewhere: emotive references to 'enemies', for example, glimmer in the ostensibly dispassionate *Rüstungsexportbericht's* massive catalogue of chemical and biological weapons. Following Taussig's articulation of the responsibilities of the 'sovereign individual'

within an administered reality – ‘a skilled revelation of skilled concealment’² – Sadr Haghghian’s exemplarily unaccepting rejoinder isn’t merely to stress that these things’ brazen visibility is connected to concealment, but also, using acrid humour, to ‘deface’ them. Accordingly, from its title onward, the castrated prototype *psst Leopard 2A7+* is a mockery that alternates between mimicry and metaphor. Like what it burlesques, this faux-tank fuses presence and absence (so much of the work lies literally beneath its surface), problematizes multiple mimesis, instrumentalized language and apparent neutrality in a cracked mirroring of power’s operations.

Not least because of its sonic component, such a work also operates under the had-to-be-there sign of the encounter, in which given conventions – e.g. that art will be explicitly visual – are jettisoned in favour of the delimited. This has been a gold thread through Sadr Haghghian’s work over the last decade and a half, her projects pointedly walking the margins of art making. Asked to participate in Manifesta, for *Present but not yet Active* (2002) she invited the three curators to Frankfurt Zoo to see (or not) a tiger enclosure that placed the animals in a relatively authentic habitat but with the result that they couldn’t necessarily be viewed. Two years later this resistance to tight corralling manifested in bioswop.net, a self-described ‘CV-exchange platform’ aiming to ‘devalue the notion of CVs altogether’. (Sadr Haghghian, refusing to be read through her background, releases a different CV for each show; most lately she was born in 1987 in Budapest.) For her 2008 exhibition Solo Show at MAMbo, Bologna she collaborated with art production company mixedmedia berlin to create a fictional artist, ‘Robbie Williams’, who supposedly authored the show’s contents. The unromantic fact that no artist really works alone, Sadr Haghghian notes in conversation, is one of the best-protected public secrets within an art world that, vis-à-vis labour, hierarchy, and restricting convention, is merely a microcosm of the wider social.



Solo show, 2008 (Installation view) MAMbo, Bologna (photograph: 7 Matteo Monti, Bologna)

Perhaps most decisive for her recent thinking, though, was 2006's *No Matter How Bright the Light, the Crossing Occurs at Night*, the five-person show (including herself) she conceptualized with Anselm Franke, Judith Hopf with the filmmaker Deborah Schamoni and Ines Schaber for Kunst-Werke in Berlin. Here the inveterately researching Sadr Haghigian found herself, like Franke, recurrently reading around notions of the spectral (from Derrida's *Specters of Marx* [1994] onwards), recognizing in them a dual condition of withdrawn rights and a Marxist quality of revolutionary force that might have more traction for its intangibility – resulting, in her case, in allegorically visible-invisible works such as *empire of the senseless part 1* (2006), a Kathy Acker wall text in phosphorescent paint. Motion detectors trigger light and charge writing that only becomes legible, in darkness, when people stop moving.

Spectrality, then, cuts multiple ways in works that suggest critique and its object must collapse together. Spectrality is the weapon of power and of an oppositional multitude, and deep significances might slip quietly behind it: see *De paso* (Of the Way, 2011), an installation shown, in different formats, in Barcelona and London that amplifies the sound made by a displayed piece of hand-luggage rolling mechanically over an empty mineral water bottle, foregrounding these ubiquitous yet peripheral objects. Accompanying research opens onto the history of airline deregulation and the decommissioning of public fountains, siting small items within resonant shifts.

Perhaps most pertinent, though, in presence/absence terms, is the project whose research backdrop led to *pssst Leopard SA7+*, Sadr Haghigian's *Trail* (2012) for DOCUMENTA (13) (her spurious CV in the catalogue presents her as a male British architect born in London in 1966).



De paso (detail), 2011, Sound installation, mixed media, MACBA, Barcelona
(Photograph: David Campos)

Touring the Kassel grounds with the curatorial assistant, she became interested in a trail on a slope near the Ehrenmal, the monumental steps connecting Schöne Aussicht with the Karlsaue park that memorialize German soldiers who died in the two world wars. The trail, Sadr Haghigian discovered, is made up of debris – rubble from the WW2 bombings of Kassel. Her proposal was in part a mere act of designation, offering up the trail for traversing so that one didn't necessarily have to honour the Ehrenmal by using it. Along the way, though, she secreted in the foliage recordings of onomatopoeic animal sounds by inhabitants of Kassel representing all

the different languages spoken there. For the town has a strong immigrant tradition: partly because of forced labour, partly because of foreigners choosing to come and work in the factories – weapons factories, which produced the armaments that in turn got Kassel bombed, and in turn again made the alternative trail.

Kassel, where Krauss-Maffei Wegmann has its roots and continues to operate factories, is still an important site for weapons manufacture and hosts an arms fair; and so further levels of irony present themselves. There are Kurds in Kassel, for example, because Germany sold tanks to Turkey, which used them on the Kurdish people, who sought asylum in Germany and, in some cases, found jobs in the same factories that built the tanks. The Ehrenmal's scuzzy twin, *Trail* is visible but ontologically muddy; it only becomes a trail in being used, in an alternative pathway being pointed out. If what's made evident within it is Germany's arming of the world, Sadr Haghghian has only pointed to what is already accepted (the background being filled in via an accompanying website, www.d13trail.de), alarming enough in itself; and concomitantly defaced the official picture of events embodied in the grand steps, offering a reminder that within the arsenal of defacement, humour is an invaluable element. A Documenta-goer treading the official path could thus hear, from a patch of manmade nature nearby, a richly accented response to a continuum of mimesis, unapologetic war-mongering and dissimulation: 'baa', 'tweet', 'woof'.

—by *Martin Herbert*

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