

A walk-through the exhibition 'MONOCULTURE – A Recent History' at M HKA (Antwerp), with Nick Aikens and Nav Haq in conversation

Nick Aikens, Nav Haq

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Soviet Corn Campaign Poster, *За велику кукурудзу!* (For Great Corn!), 1962. Published by Міністерство культури УРСР (Ministry of Culture of The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic).
Image: M HKA.

Nick Aikens, co-organiser of the two-day conference "Considering Monoculture" in conversation with Nav Haq, curator of the exhibition *MONOCULTURE – A Recent History*.

Nick Aikens: Where did the idea come from to stage an exhibition on monoculture, and how did you begin your research?

Nav Haq: Exploring the notion of 'monoculture' was related to thinking about the stagnation of the 'multiculturalism' debate. Like my conceptualisation of the Gothenburg Biennial in 2017 on the subject of secularity, which opens on to questions of ethics and cohabitation, the idea of monoculture is a way to talk about many interconnected things at the same time – from agriculture and linguistics to ideology and officially sanctioned conceptions of culture. Monoculture gives a name to what Chantal Mouffe repeatedly referred to as the 'forces of homogeneity' at the 'Considering Monoculture' conference. In a societal sense, monoculture means cultural homogeneity, and it felt urgent to address and raise awareness of something that is increasingly prevalent.

Nobody, to my knowledge, had made a map of monocultures, so I had to sort of invent one. The first step was a complex mapping exercise, looking at different understandings and manifestations of monoculturality. It was hands on, with massive sheets of paper, which I filled in with artists, ideologies, ideas and practices, as well as all kinds of case studies – then it just kept growing. It was particularly relevant to chart the relationship of art to ideology – so Socialist Realist art in the context of the Soviet Union, to give one example, running into the Corn Campaign, which proliferated monocultural farming in that region. I spent a year or so developing this map, before translating it into an exhibition.

NA: How did you form this? Were there specific books that informed you, specific historical narratives of the twentieth century? Nationalist Socialism, eugenics, *Négritude* immediately come to mind...

NH: It felt important early on to approach monoculture from a philosophical perspective, rather than a purely epistemological one. I am more broadly interested in bringing more philosophical dimensions to the projects we undertake at the M HKA. There also seemed to be a natural correlation with psychoanalysis, in relation to some of these historical case studies. Else Frenkel-Brunswik [Polish-Austrian Jewish psychologist] was a central thinker for viewing monoculture through the lens of ambiguity from the start. It became clear that this was not a new subject for artists, who have either explored forms of monoculturality, or been guided by it, even if they are not necessarily using the term directly.

NA: How did you come across Frenkel-Brunswik, who is relatively unknown?

NH: It was when I was undertaking my research for the Gothenburg Biennial that I came across her work. I didn't refer to her for that particular project, but she became a significant reference for 'Monoculture'. At the very core of this exhibition, and also in the project on secularity, are questions of equality and freedom, ultimately asking: What kind of society do we want? Attached closely to this – and

what L'Internationale is largely concerned with – is the question of the role of art and cultural institutions in society.

NA: Essentially, the exhibition presents a history of ideas and ideologies of the twentieth century. Yet there is no clear trajectory, no chronology. There are certain groupings - relating to language or agriculture, for example; historical moments like the section that addresses *Négritude*, or intellectual projects as is the case with the publications around psychoanalysis. How did you structure the exhibition and decide on these groupings of works?

NH: It was about combining positions that seemed to make sense thematically, and that are connected. The word 'monoculture', as we learned from the conference, comes from agriculture. This relationship to agriculture recurs throughout and is also centrally located to the exhibition. So most people will experience Åsa Sonjasdotter's work on the industrialisation of agriculture and the development of monocultural farming practices, which sits in proximity to N. S. Harsha's work reflecting on the high suicide rate among farmers in India who have been forced to adopt monocultural techniques. The idea of ambiguity was crucial as well, as we'll discuss I'm sure, and from there came building blocks into other case studies and practices.

As always, there is a lot of intuition. Then, there are pragmatic questions, because individual artworks need certain conditions like space or light, along with the given architecture. At M HKA, when you come up the stairs to the exhibition space, you arrive right in the middle – and I like this quality of starting in the middle. It felt important not to lead people by the hand with the route, and experientially speaking, to relate the spatial design to the idea of monoculture, thus privileging people's subjectivity.



Entartete Kunst, including works by (L-R):
George Grosz, Lovis Corinth, Karl Hofer. Photo:
M HKA.

NA: Yes, the architecture of M HKA is really constructive for this show. The space is asymmetrical, and you don't present a progression from a beginning to an end – people have to figure out a journey for themselves.

NH: Exactly. Still, we had to transform the space quite a bit, in order to create different zones that would feel as 'natural' as possible. I wanted walls to look like solid walls, as if they had always been there. But there is a differentiation between

the white walls and the wooden walls. in my mind are more connected to this notion of ambiguity.

NA: So the white wall, the white cube, is also a form of monoculture?

NH: Yes, broadly speaking. The white walls are the background for case studies of monoculture – from the dominant ideologies of the twentieth century to attempts at artificial universal languages, like Esperanto. The wooden walls are the backdrop for works by Carol Rama and Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, as well examples of Entartete Kunst [so-called ‘Degenerate Art’] paintings, or the writings of Frenkel-Brunswik and Ursula K. Le Guin. There are exceptions to the rule, but that was the basic principle.

NA: Let’s turn to some specific examples in the exhibition to understand your approach to relating different histories and ideas. For example, in one section, material related to the Non-Aligned Movement appears close to Jonas Staal’s *Freethinkers’ Space* (2008–ongoing). Nearby there is Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). How were these constellations conceived?

