

# At the Venice Biennale, the German Pavilion Undergoes a Transformation

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Blocking the front of the German Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale is a mound of dirt from land that the artist Ersan Mondtag inherited from his grandfather in Anatolia, Turkey. Credit...Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

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Reporting from Venice

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At the 2022 Venice Biennale, the artist Maria Eichhorn exposed the foundations of the German Pavilion, long the event's most controversial building. By tearing up a stretch of the travertine floor and parts of the wall plaster, she revealed the remains of the original building before it was altered in 1938 according to the monumental principles of Nazi architecture.

For Cagla Ilk, curator of the German Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, that bold artistic act was a sort of exorcism. "When Maria Eichhorn opened the ground, I felt that everything went out," she explained. Freed of the ghosts of the building's past, she felt that her task as curator was to find a way to fill the symbolic void left by Eichhorn's interventions. "Now we need to put it back [together] and make it again," Ilk said.

Toward that end, Ilk, 47 has recruited artists from various backgrounds to contribute to this year's edition of what is arguably one of the art world's most important events. At the Biennale she is curating two projects with strong narrative elements inside of the German Pavilion as well as a series of sound installations on La Certosa, a nearby island in the Venice lagoon.

"I wanted to do something *un-disciplinary*," said Ilk, who was born in Istanbul and has lived in Germany for the past 20 years. She trained as an architect in Istanbul and in Berlin, and worked in theaters in the German capital before being appointed co-director of the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in 2020.

Ilk brings an unconventional approach to curating the high-profile event. In an interview at a restaurant in the Biennale Giardini, one of the event's two main exhibition sites, told me she aims for the "unique moment of encounter" only theater can provide. In addition, she favors collaborative work over the radically individual approach that often dominates the art world. In Venice, she has put together her team the way one assembles a theater production. With nearly 70 people, it includes architects, actors, designers, composers and even a dramaturg.

"From theater, I collected really the precious parts," Ilk said, noting that the German repertory theater system enables "long-term relationships" among artists to flourish. "That's how I brought these terms into the contemporary art," she said.

Ilk has chosen the theme of "Thresholds" to unite the six artists working under her aegis in Venice at the German Pavilion in the Giardini and on the island of La Certosa. For inspiration, Ilk turned to the Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov, whose novel "Time Shelter," won the International Booker Prize last year.

"How we think about the near past was for me very important," she said. One of the main themes of Gospodinov's novel is how our understanding of the past enables us to make sense of our present. According to Ilk, the book is something of a rough script that guided the artists through their work.

On La Certosa, four artists — Robert Lippok, Nicole L'Huillier, Jan St. Werner and Michael Akstaller — are creating a series of beguiling sound installations that interact with the island's environment. Ilk said she considered this site a refreshing contrast to the weighty architecture of the German Pavilion.

"The island has no borders," she said. "Sounds doesn't have borders," she added.

For the main pavilion, Ilk invited the German stage director Ersan Mondtag and the Israeli artist and filmmaker Yael Bartana, who have devised two ambitious and wildly different projects.

Mondtag, known for his eye-popping aesthetic in theater, has boarded up the front of the pavilion. "For me, it was important to close the main entrance," said the Berlin-born artist whose family comes from Turkey. "It's like something is broken in this building and in

German history,” he added.

Blocking the front of the pavilion are mounds of earth from land that Mondtag inherited from his grandfather in Anatolia, Turkey. “We will have for eternity now Turkish soil on the ground of the German Pavilion. I call it poetic justice,” the 36-year-old artist said.

During a recent visit, we entered the pavilion through a side entrance. It was one big construction zone and the sound of saws and drills was earsplitting.

A multistory structure with a spiral staircase in the pavilion’s central room is the main set for Mondtag’s “Monument to an Unknown Person,” an installation performance about his grandfather, Hasan Aygun, who came to Germany in 1968 as part of the guest worker program and died of cancer after working in an asbestos factory. In addition to a live performance for five actors, including one who plays Mondtag’s grandfather, the exhibition also features a video Mondtag filmed on a misty day on La Certosa. “It’s very poetic and it looks like a Tarkovsky movie,” he said.

This will be Bartana’s second time contributing to a national pavilion at the Biennale. In 2011, she represented Poland with her video trilogy “... and Europe will be stunned.”

“My line is that I’m not representing Germany,” Bartana, 53, who lives in Amsterdam and Berlin, told me when I spoke to her by phone. “Germany represents me.”

In Venice, “Light to the Nations,” (“Or LaGoyim” in Hebrew) will be the latest in Bartana’s cycle of speculative fictions that often explore Jewish themes. In the past, they have included videos about a group urging the return of 3.3 million Jews to Poland and a film about the construction of the third Temple of Solomon in São Paulo, Brazil. Like many of Bartana’s projects, “Light to the Nations” is a long-term one: an earlier version was presented in Israel last year as a virtual reality installation.

A central concept to “Light to the Nations” is tikkun olam, the Jewish imperative to repair the world. In the video installation, a generation ship for Jews sets off into space like a futuristic ark, leaving planet Earth to heal from the wounds that humanity has inflicted on it. In a phone interview, Bartana said she was influenced by science fiction literature, the kabbalah or Jewish mysticism, and even Mel Brooks’s “Jews in Space.”

“Many of my works are so much about alternative histories,” she said, but added that in this project she was “imagining a future” based on our alarming present. “Within the frame of an artwork,” she said, her exhibition “proposes a salvation machine for humanity.”

At the Biennale, “Light to the Nations” won’t be presented in virtual reality, which Bartana considers too impractical for the large crowds that the event draws. Instead, the installation inside the pavilion includes a 360-degree video projected inside a dome to allow for “a more collective experience of the life inside the spaceship.”

Bartana acknowledged that Ilk had gone out on a limb by inviting artists like her and Mondtag to the Biennale.

“I appreciate this daring, because it’s a real experimental approach,” she said.

“With all the heaviness of the history of this Nazi building,” she added, “I think it could be quite a refreshing way to deal with that.”