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Fuel to the Fire by  
Natascha Sadr Haghghian  
20.10 2016–15.1 2017

As part of The Eros Effect:  
Art, Solidarity Movements and  
the Struggle for Social Justice



Tensta konsthall

Natascha Sadr Haghghian's new installation *Fuel to the Fire* raises topical issues like the militarization of the police, images as testimonies, and institutionalized racism and violence. Patio heaters and fleece blankets are important elements in the exhibition space. Usually associated with outdoor seating, they function in Sadr Haghghian's work as markers of enclosure or exclusion and appear in various roles in the installation. In one area, the blankets carry screen-printed images of incidents of police violence that have evoked significant protests. The installation also includes parts of a balcony from a million program housing unit, a sound piece with leaking headphones, and newspaper clippings echoing media stereotypes and alternative narratives. A newly produced newspaper contains material on the history of SWAT police and on the role of eyewitness video that creates a legitimacy crisis for the police. The free newspaper also includes interviews with activists Hamid Khan and Ailin Moaf Mirlashari, cultural geographer Irene Molina, and journalists Somar Al Naher and och Rouzbeh Djalae, and can be taken home to read.

Particularly highlighted in *Fuel to the Fire* is what happened in the Stockholm suburb of Husby on a night in May 2013 when Lenine Relvas-Martins, a 69-year-old resident of Husby, was shot by Piketen police (SWAT police) in his own apartment. Neighbors were present and waited out a crucial moment in which Relvas-Martins's dead body was carried out in a body bag, covered by a red fleece blanket adorned with a heart. The police had claimed in their report that he was injured during the incident and taken to a hospital. The images taken by neighbors and freelance journalist Björn Lockström proved that they tried to cover up the death, and the police were forced to "correct" their report. The incident caused protests in Husby and resulted in significant uprisings in many major cities in Sweden. Nobody was held responsible for the fatal

shooting, nor was it initially discussed in the mainstream media in the direct aftermath of the incident. Instead, the media reported mainly on car fires and youth violence, furthering a stigmatized image of the northern suburbs of Stockholm.

*Fuel to the Fire* traces the Piketen police, the Swedish version of the SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) police, back to its beginnings in the United States. SWAT was founded in Los Angeles in the late 1960s after the Watts rebellion and first used during a raid against the Black Panther Party of Self-Defense. The story of the emergence of SWAT police proves the intimate relation between police militarization, social segregation, and institutional racism.

*Fuel to the Fire* also examines methods of inclusion and exclusion. For those who have the time and can afford after-work drinks and dining in restaurants, patio heaters and fleece blankets may signal warmth and coziness, but for someone without access to private spaces that require consumption, these items may instead be excluding, contributing to further segregation in cities. Just like blankets and heaters, technical equipment also becomes something that floats in between the private, commercial, and public spheres. Headphones attached to mobile phones can generate intimate situations in public environments, isolating the individual soundscape from the surroundings. Simultaneously, there are countless examples of images and videos taken with private phones that develop profound public impact and explosive power through social media. Through these images, narratives that were excluded, like the police killing in Husby in 2013, force their way into the public realm.

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Since 2014, during research visits in Tensta and other parts of Stockholm, Sadr Haghghian has met with both individuals and groups who all contributed to the shaping of *Fuel to the Fire's* narrative. Participants of Nyhetsbyrå, Tensta konsthall's long-term initiative for young people interested in developing their skills in storytelling through artistic practices, have followed the process. In autumn 2016, Nyhetsbyrå will produce their own newspaper taking the exhibition as a starting point. Over the course of the exhibition and as part of Nyhetsbyrå's public program, an open reading group with Leandro Schclarek Mulinari, Ph.D. in criminology at Stockholm University, will meet, focusing on collective readings and text discussions. Issues like the construction of threat scenarios, the police's own reports, and how the suburbs are described by media will be addressed. Additionally, a film program and symposium will unpack further the themes and questions raised in *Fuel to the Fire*.

Sadr Haghghian's (Berlin/Tehran) research-based practice covers a range of artistic methods and techniques, including video, performance, and installations. Her work is characterized by critically examining how the world is communicated and commodified. With a special interest in the boundaries of the visible, she examines the socio-political implications of how power relations are created. When in 2007 she was invited to participate in the art fair Artissima in Turino, she contributed with the wall installation *I Cannot Work Like This (2007)*, questioning the interests of the commercial art world in a manner both witty and serious. The tools used during the installation process, like nails and hammers, were on display, pointing towards the labor put in rather than the expected art object. In a similar way, *Fuel to the Fire* opens up a critical discussion around how public space is divided, privatized, controlled, and militarized.

Sadr Haghghian is also active in the Gulf Labor Coalition, a network of cultural workers and artists protesting against the slave-like working conditions suffered by the migrant workers who are building branches of western museums in the United Arab Emirates. She is also part of a tribunal scheduled for 2017 addressing institutional racism and collusion of right wing networks and the German state.

Instead of contributing to this biography with a resume, Sadr Haghghian encourages the reader to visit [www.bioswop.net](http://www.bioswop.net), a CV platform where artists, cultural and others, exchange their CVs.

## **The Eros Effect: Art, Solidarity Movements and the Struggle for Social Justice**

**Fuel to the Fire is part of The Eros Effect: Art, Solidarity Movements and the Struggle for Social Justice, a multi-year inquiry into the relationship between art and solidarity movements, performed in a series of commissions, exhibitions, workshops, presentations, and film screenings. Faced with fascist parties gaining ground in Europe and an increasingly tough social climate, we see the necessity to return to the notion of solidarity in order to try its validity today. Will solidarity still be relevant in the future, or is it a historical concept? Do we need to find new ways to describe the political movements of today and their struggles, sympathies, and commitments? What does recognizing the urgency of a situation imply, and how do we act upon it? The entire Eros Effect borrows its ideas from the researcher and activist George N. Katsiaficas's likewise titled essay from 1989. We will continue to build on the analytic tool "Eros Effect," which is an attempt to acknowledge the emotional aspects of social movements, parallel to the political dimensions.**

**The concept turns away from earlier theories that considered "mass movements" as either primitive, impulsive emotional outbursts or as exclusively rational efforts in order to change the norms and institutions of a society. With his notion of the Eros Effect, Katsiaficas suggests that social movements always been both and that the struggle for liberation is equally an "erotic" act and a rational desire to break free from structural and psychological barriers. Franz Fanon made similar observations when he stated that resistance towards colonialism causes positive effects on the emotional life of individuals.**

## **WORK DESCRIPTIONS**

### **Entrance:**

**Patio Heat (five patio heaters, print on newspaper)**

### **Center front:**

**Million Balcony (balcony facade, scaffolding, blanket, silkscreen print)**

### **Right side:**

**Million Phones (6 mobile phones, 6 amplifiers, 30 splitters, 120 headphones)**

**Million Blankets (15 blankets, scaffolding, silkscreen prints)**

### **Left side:**

**Heat Wave (patio heater parts, print on newspaper, blankets)**

### **Center rear:**

**Study: (Fuel to the Fire newspaper, books, articles, audio files)**

- 1. Images from media coverage on Husby uprising 2013**
- 2. Heart motive after original blanket used when police took Lenine Relvas-Martins dead body to the morgue.**
- 3. Vocoder sound combining heart beats with sounds of anti police protest**
- 4. Eyewitness images of incidents of police violence (for full list see newspaper)**
- 5. Archival material from the history of SWAT police, resistance and uprisings**

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**Conversation between  
Natascha Sadr Haghghighian  
and Maria Lind**

**Maria Lind: How did you learn about the events in Husby and other parts of Stockholm and Sweden in May of 2013?**

**Natascha Sadr Haghghighian: The uprising in Husby is a precise symptom of an ongoing conflict in the quest for social equality and rights. Its call was spreading on social media immediately after the uprising started, and I first encountered it on my social media feed. On my first arrival to Stockholm, the segregation in the city really struck me as profound. In Tensta, I found the people and places I was missing in the center of Stockholm, as if they were pushed out from there.**

**Tensta konsthall's role was complicated in an interesting way. It's difficult to integrate into this divided fabric of the city. On the one hand, it is aiming quite beautifully to overcome exclusions. On the other hand, it is part of the art system that is a notorious catalyst for gentrification and other processes of furthering the divide. There is an obvious contradiction here that we need to take seriously and not try to pacify. In this sense, I think that we have to fight segregation and the underlying institutional and systemic racism with open eyes and go straight into the conflict zone. That is why I chose to re-open the unresolved case of Lenine Relvas-Martins's killing by the Piketen police and its aftermath at Tensta konsthall. The African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said that "power concedes nothing without demand" and that all concessions are only won through struggle. Hopefully Fuel to the Fire will contribute to the struggle that found a specific expression in the uprisings in 2013 and the inherent discourse on violence.**

**ML: The conditions of visibility are something which you often elaborate on in your work. Can you tell me about this interest?**

**NSH: We think that what we see is inevitable and plain visible. But visibility is shaped by racial and gendered codes, by technologies, by access, and many other factors that can result in hysterical blindness as much as in hyper visibility. To examine the battlefield of visibility is to learn to see the forces that operate in my eyes, in your eyes, in the way the media works and in the way we make and see images. When Rodney King was brutally beaten by police in Los Angeles in 1992, an eyewitness recorded what he thought was obviously a testimony of blatant violence and injustice by the police. Yet the predominantly white, pro law enforcement jury was easily convinced by the defense to see in the images an immanent violent threat coming only from King's black body. This shows that visibility is not to be taken for granted.**

**ML: Fuel to the Fire includes a newspaper. You often publish texts, among other places, in e-flux journal. What is the function of writing in your work?**

**NSH: The newspaper has a specific role in Fuel to the Fire. Media, and especially corporate media, play a mayor role in stigmatizing and criminalizing subjugated populations, specifically people of color who live in segregated, impoverished neighborhoods and struggle to correct the picture. In the case of Lenine Relvas-Martins, the media created a picture of him as a barbaric "Machete Man" who had to be eliminated, thereby justifying the police killing. Afterwards they portrayed the following uprising as senseless violence by youths who are by nature troubled and can't integrate. There have always been counter information strategies in creating alternative news. Before social media, people would print flyers or make their own newspapers to challenge the official narrative. The Black Panther Party had their own newspaper. In this sense, writing can be a very important way to voice and tell the important stories.**

**ML:** Can you please elaborate on your own relationship to writing, and its place within your own practice?

**NSH:** Writing always takes me a long time. Not the writing itself, but finding the position from where I can write, finding the specific voice that can tell a story most accurately and matches the urgency I sense for writing the story down. I mostly start from an experience or observation that left me confused or wondering. Then I start to unpack it. In a text called “Disco Parallax” that I wrote last year for e-flux journal’s edition about ‘The Politics of Shine,’ I started from watching the traffic lights on an intersection that was under police siege as a response to the refugee strike movement in Berlin. I found the image of the functioning traffic lights that tell you to go or stop in a police lock down very telling — a strong image to think about. What and who is allowed to go when the light turns green? Who is allowed to cross lines, or borders? In the case of the refugees, they are detained, forced to risk their lives and those of their families to cross borders that I cross easily having a German passport. This is a starting point for writing and for trying to understand first and then tell the story of how restrictions of movement came into this world, and how they only seemingly contradict the seemingly boundless world that we encounter in our phones and other interface devices. What I like about writing is that, firstly, you learn a lot about your own thoughts in the process and, secondly, texts can be shared across long distances and even with people you will never meet. Texts have a life of their own once they are out in the world. I like that.

**ML:** In this exhibition you have met with and in other ways engaged with a number of different activist groups in Stockholm. At the same time, you are yourself engaged with certain activist activities, for example the translocal Gulf Labor Coalition and lately also the self-organized tribunal against the German authorities and their collusion

with the extreme right terror group Nation Socialist Underground, who for a number of years killed migrants in Germany. Can you share what you are doing with the two different initiatives?

**NSH:** The Gulf Labor Coalition has been organizing since 2011 to push for labor rights in the construction sites of big museums built on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. The migrant workers who build the museums that we as artists will potentially have exhibitions in are exposed to severe abuse and slave-like working conditions. We are trying to motivate the museums to implement the International Labour Organizations (ILO) standards and abolish the Kafala system, a sponsorship system in which workers are exposed to abuse and exploitation by their employers and recruitment agencies.

The tribunal that I’m part of is an initiative in which many grassroots anti-racist groups are joining forces. The tribunal under the title “Unraveling the NSU Complex” will address the racist murders that began in the year 2000 by a German right wing terror group who called themselves NSU, National Socialist Underground. The official trial against the sole remaining member of the NSU is coming to a close without uncovering the supporting network that made possible as many as ten murders, two bomb attacks, and maybe more over the course of ten years. In the aftermath of the murders, the police suspected the family members and shop owners, who mostly have Turkish backgrounds, instead of following clear evidence of a racist motive. In their investigations, the police named the crime series the ‘Döner murders,’ which suggests Turkish ‘milieu’ crimes. This happened in most places in which the NSU murdered or injured people with migrant backgrounds and is one of the aspects of institutional racism that the tribunal will address. Together with the families of the victims of NSU terror, the tribunal will point out the support the NSU had from within German society and the state apparatus. It will accuse

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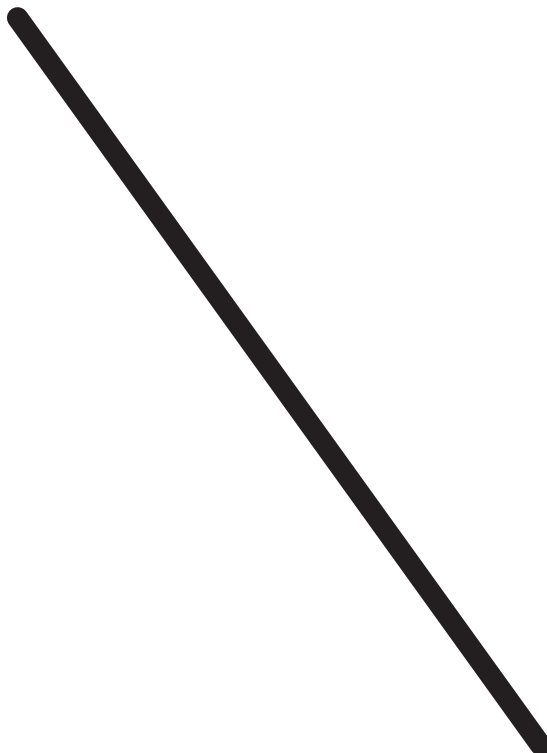
the German authorities of collusion with right wing networks, of destroying and hiding evidence, and of a racist investigation practice.

**ML:** When, where, and how will the NSU tribunal take place?

**NSH:** The tribunal will take place over four days in May 2017 in Cologne, in the former factory compound Carlswerke, now housing a theater and other venues. It is located near Keupstrasse where the NSU carried out a nail bomb attack in 2004, injuring more than twenty people. It will include hearing different testimonies, visualizing contradictions in the official narrative, discussing the connections between right wing networks and the German authorities, and workshops and working groups, and every day will end with publicly formulating a part of the accusation. The tribunal will be live streamed into different locations and complemented by events in partner venues all over Germany and abroad.

Maria Lind is the director at Tensta konsthall.

Visit [www.possest.de](http://www.possest.de) to read a full list of Natascha Sadr Haghigian's texts.



## **PROGRAM**

Thursdays and Saturdays, 14:00  
Guided tour of the exhibition  
Fuel to the Fire

Wednesday 19.10, 17:00–20:00  
Opening: Fuel to the Fire

Thursday 20.10, 14:00  
Artist presentation with  
Natascha Sadr Haghigian

Wednesday 16.11, 19:00  
Screening: Handsworth Songs (1986) by  
Black Audio Film Collective

Wednesday 23.11, 19:00  
Screening: Riots Reframed (2012) by  
Fahim Alam

Thursday 12.1  
Symposium Fuel to the Fire with among  
others Gregory Everett and screening  
of 41st & Central (2010). More  
information to come

Saturday 14.1, 16:00  
Artist presentation with  
Natascha Sadr Haghigian

Reading group: on the criminalization of  
the suburb and its residents with Leandro  
Schclarek Mulinari, PhD in criminology at  
Stockholm University.

Wednesday 26.10, 17:00–19:00  
Media Representations and crime

Wednesday 16.11, 17:00–19:00  
Racism and police practices

Wednesday 30.11, 17:00–19:00  
Police ideology and criminality

What happens to a society in which  
certain groups are subjected to increased  
control by the police? How is it that this  
happens? The reading group departs  
from critical criminology, contemporary  
research and police reports and tries  
to capture the mechanisms that lead to  
the criminalization of the suburb and  
its inhabitants. No prior knowledge is  
required, just an interest in discussing and  
learning in group. Registration and info:  
[hedvig@tenstakonsthall.se](mailto:hedvig@tenstakonsthall.se)

**Staff at Tensta konsthall**

**Fahyma Alnablsi, host**  
**Emily Fahlén, mediator**  
**Ulrika Flink, assistant curator**  
**Asrin Haidari, communication and press**  
**Maria Lind, director**  
**Hedvig Wiezell, producer**

**Intern**  
**Didem Yildirim**

**Hosts**  
**Arazo Arif**  
**Alice Jansson**  
**Minna Magnusson**  
**Jin Mustafa**

**Technical staff**  
**Carl-Oskar Linné**  
**Johan Wahlgren**

**Silkscreen printing on blankets**  
**Anne Deval**

**Amplifiers**  
**Martin Kuenz**

**Printing on newspaper**  
**Eva-Teréz Gölin**

**Newspaper design**  
**Pierre Maite (Ça ira!)**

**With support from Goethe-Institut  
Schweden and ABF Stockholm.**

**The exhibition is a part of the  
collaboration They Were, Those  
People, a Kind of Solution with WHW  
(Zagreb), eipcp – European Institute  
for Progressive Cultural Policies  
(Vienna) and Centre for Peace Studies  
(CMS) (Zagreb). With support from the  
Creative Europe Programme of the  
European Union.**



Co-funded by the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union

**With organizational funding from the  
Stockholm Municipality, Swedish Art  
Council and the Stockholm County  
Council.**