

# SONG OF GIANTS

Biennale Arte 2024, La Biennale di Venezia,  
from 20 April through 24 November 2024  
www.labiennale.org,  
www.petticoatgovernment.party

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## PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT

We, Anna Laganovska and Koi Persyn, meet on 17 February at the Erasmus House in Anderlecht to witness the departure of the Erasmus giant to Venice. He will join six other processional giants who will travel from Belgium, France and Spain to the Belgian pavilion in the Giardini. They act as the central figures of *Petticoat Government*, the collective consisting of Denicolai & Provoost, Antoinette Jattiot, Nord and Speculoos, that has been selected by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and Wallonia-Brussels International to represent Belgium at the Venice Biennale. Observing the leaving giant, we muse on the project, zooming in and out on its various threads and different chapters, weighing its significance, both for ourselves and for the world of the Biennale. As words bounce from one speaker to the other, growing in the space between, we arrive at a fluidly co-authored dialogue in writing — a textual *compagnon de route* that embraces the collective methodology of our subject, *Petticoat Government*.

(Anna Laganovska) So, what do you know about *Petticoat Government*?

(Koi Persyn) A petticoat is an undergarment typically worn under a dress or skirt. The phrase 'petticoat government' has historically been used to describe a situation in which a woman, particularly the wife of a political leader or official, wields significant influence or control over governmental affairs, often behind the scenes.

Like the hidden supporting structure that holds the graceful volume of a gown. Later on, the term was used for all-female governments, though it still often had a pejorative connotation — petty, petite, small, language intended to keep women in their place.

*Petticoat Government* is also the title of a book published in 1910 and written by Baroness Orczy, the Hungarian-born reactionary and anti-revolutionary known primarily for her novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. The book is set in the eighteenth century and revolves around the French court in the period leading up to the French Revolution. The story focuses on the power struggles and personal relationships within the royal court, highlighting the influence

that women wielded behind closed doors. The novel was initially serialised in newspapers under the title *A Ruler of Princes* in 1909.

In that title, the word 'ruler' refers to a position of power. However, the other meaning of 'ruler' as a measuring instrument may be wittily fitting in the context of the artistic approach of *Petticoat Government*. The collective proposes playing with scale and size in their presentation at the Venice Biennale by producing rulers with different units of reference. Not to mention the coincidence, or not, that the collective has its own Antoinette, who shares her name with the protagonist of Orczy's book, Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, more commonly known as Madame de Pompadour.

Even the serialisation of Orczy's storyline through subsequent instalments in newspapers mirrors *Petticoat Government's* approach to mediation and media in the Belgian Pavilion. Before arriving at Giardini, the collective will print newspapers in a large daily format on pink paper using the printing press of La Gazette della Sport in Padua. This process will be overseen by seven towering processional giants who will travel from the Low Countries, where the departure of each giant was first announced in the local newspapers of the communities in which they originated. *Petticoat Government* unfolds as a serial and nomadic narrative in consecutive chapters, locating the project's journey in Leuven, Col di Resia, Padua, Venice, Dunkerque and Charleroi.

Although they have different national backgrounds, all the travelling giants are rooted in Western European cultures. While these cultures are certainly different, they are also similar enough that people unfamiliar with the sometimes subtle differences between Western European cultures might not necessarily perceive them as distinct.

Collectivity, on the other hand, has often been equated in recent art discourse with 'non-Western' ways of life. The choice to present forms of collectivity that originate in Western traditions underscores the idea that coming

together in collective bodies, for which the giants are a beautiful metaphor, is fundamental to life across geographies, cultures and time periods.

Although the giants that will attend the Belgian pavilion rather straightforwardly reference a national tradition, *Petticoat Government* also cultivates an air of ambiguity around these border-crossing characters and their relationship to national identities. Despite the Biennale's structural emphasis on nation states, the themes reflected in the national pavilions are expected to resonate with contemporary concerns. This implies embracing the multicultural fabric that shapes the dynamic communities in which we live, an element that the collective, itself a cross-national collaboration, subtly alludes to.

*Petticoat Government* is not a political party, but it seeks out diverse means of cooperation both with and as an example of micro-governance. A group of dedicated people is necessary to operate and care for the giants. The project begins and ends as a processional journey along and across paths that are not delineated by national or political frontiers, but by natural boundaries, such as the Alps and the (hopefully frozen) Lake Resia, which *Petticoat Government* and the giants will cross on their way to the sinking City of Water.

There they will follow in the footsteps of Desiderius Erasmus, the Dutch humanist on whom one of the giants is based, who crossed the very same ridge on his way to London while writing *In Praise of Folly* in 1509. The landscape around Lake Resia is marked by a fourteenth-century bell tower that emerges from the reservoir, the only survivor of a village that was destroyed and submerged after the construction of a dam by Mussolini's fascist regime. There 163 houses were cleared and their inhabitants brutally displaced, adding a grim undertone to this modern touristic attraction. On 9 March 2024, this charged landscape will set the stage for a convivial picnic with and by the giants, festively traversing and transcending nations, identities, histories and scales.

The giants cross horizons that evoke pan-European storytelling in an almost mythical setting. This backdrop channels sentiments of romanticism — a movement that coincided with the formation of nation states in the nineteenth century. During this time, the fusion between cultural production and political thought resulted in forms of national romanticism, which emphasised the development of local languages and folklore and glorified the landscape, vernacular culture and mythology, as well as the

local mediaeval past. Serving as means to resist imperial hegemony, national romanticism emerged as a tool for the proponents of ethnic self-determination across Europe.

Although there are thousands of processional giants globally, the vast majority come from Belgium and France, where the traditional processions of which they are part have been recognised by UNESCO as 'Masterpiece[s] of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. The seven giants were handpicked by the collective and are neither political nor religious emblems of power. Rather, they complement each other in their humanistic, interpersonal, communal, contemporary and non-human qualities.

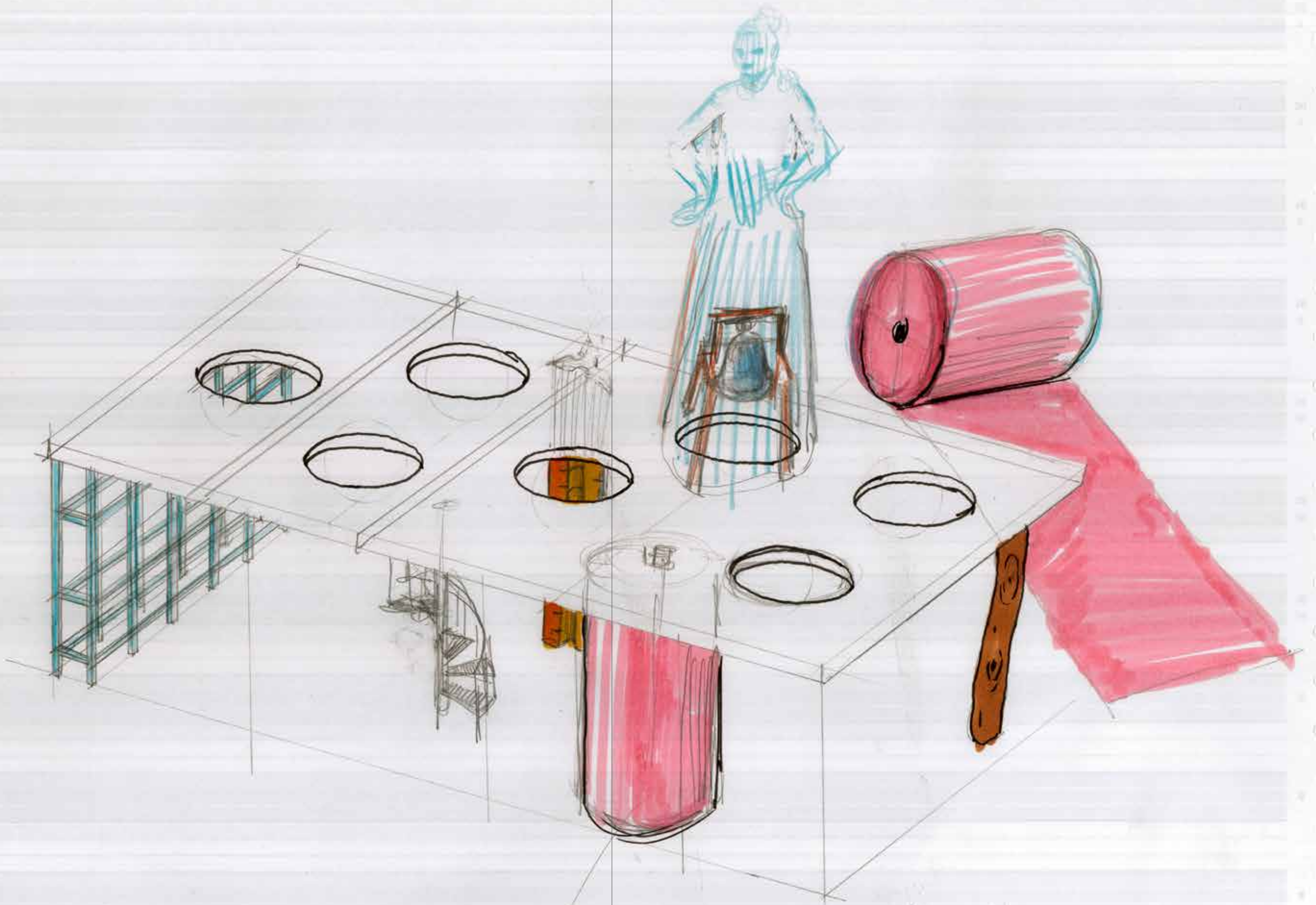
There is a clear reference to folklore in the way the artists claim their sympathy with the traditions of craft, epitomised by an amateur artist who 'does it for the love of it'. With this frame of reference, the presentation can be seen as an infiltration of institutional contexts with ready-made popular culture.

The giants and their personal narratives are reminiscent of Jos De Gruyter and Harald Thys' kinetic puppets in *Mondo Cane*, the French Community of Belgium's contribution to the 2019 Biennale. Most of them are depicted engaged in amateur crafts, such as spinning yarn, pottery and knitting, surrounded by plein-air landscape paintings depicting the four seasons in Belgium. For the second time in a row, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and Wallonia-Brussels International have selected a project that alludes to folkloric and amateur practices and traditions — which have historically often been claimed by right-wing politics. Both *Mondo Cane* and *Petticoat Government* address folklore as a means of resilience. In both cases, the products of traditions often labelled as reactionary are sourced as a vehicle for interrogating Belgium's complex and apologetic stance towards its own identity. *Mondo Cane's* puppets had a static, self-referential strength, even though they were constantly in motion. *Petticoat Government's* approach, on the other hand, isn't really about the giant objects themselves, but about embracing folklore as a conversation partner and living community, rather than as a dead simulacrum.

Historically, the motif of processional giants dates back to the Middle Ages. The giants initially embodied biblical characters and aided the clergy in imparting religious teachings to a largely illiterate population, fulfilling essentially the same function as most forms of visual art in medieval European societies. As is typical for invasive forms of Christianity, saintly Christian figures and



PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT, *Chapitre Resia*, *Petticoat Government* #7, 2023, courtesy Petticoat Government (Denicolai & Provoost · Antoinette Jattiot · Nord · Speculoos) & LMNO Bruxelles



CARDA  
GAZZETTA  
DELLO SPORT

iconographies often took on elements of local pagan traditions and customs. In later centuries, the assembly of giants (again paralleling the tendencies in broader history of Western art and culture) was desacralised and grew to become part of agricultural festivities and commemorative rituals.

These folkloristic happenings were, and still are, invitations to share stories and convey experiences over generations. Folklore is etymologically rooted in the German *Volklehre*, meaning 'popular learning'. The collective-oriented methodology of *Petticoat Government* reflects this educational perspective.

The approach of the collective renders the notion of authorship redundant through a cooperation that merges art, curation, scenography, typography and cartography under a newly constructed overarching agent. However, this co-authorship is embodied even more clearly in the collective's decision to share ownership of the project with the communities that construct and conserve the giants.

This inversion of power hierarchies is performed through a polyphonic, dissonant choral work made up of voices from the peripheral localities (Baaigem, Tourcoing, Steenvoorde, Letteligen, and others); giant ventriloquist puppets speak out as narrators of a shared storyline in becoming.

Encountering the giants, these larger-than-human entities, at local festivities is an exciting and awe-inspiring collective experience. The presentation by *Petticoat Government* makes one wonder if the Biennale could also be perceived as similar to the carnivals or processions the giants usually attend: a unifying collective event, centred around aesthetic wonder and transgenerational storytelling. Seen in this light, the Biennale might serve a similar function to the international contemporary art community as a carnival does to the Belgian 'folk': something to look forward to at the end of yet another long and grey winter, but more importantly a form of celebration, entertainment, community building, social bonding and (re)narration of (local) identity.

One may also wonder how these migrating giants resonate with the geopolitical state of the world today, where displacement of people is not only an often tragic consequence of global power struggles or a strategy in hybrid warfare, but an anticipated consequence of the climate emergency. With so many people confronted with their powerlessness, the giants' journey and invitation to claim power represents a privilege, freedom of movement, which is not granted to many people living in Europe, nor to those who have been rejected at her gates.

The theme of this year's Biennale is 'foreigners everywhere', a pressing if contested curatorial premise with a geopolitical urgency. Adriano Pedrosa, the curator of the central exhibition, describes the theme as follows: 'The backdrop for the work is a world rife with multiple crises concerning the movement and existence of people across countries, nations, territories and borders, which reflect the perils and pitfalls of language, translation and ethnicity, expressing differences and disparities conditioned by identity, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and freedom. In this landscape, the phrase 'foreigners everywhere' has (at least) a dual meaning. First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners — they (or we) are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always, truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner.'<sup>1</sup>

In such an international context, we could say that Petticoat Government's response to the theme of the Biennale is rather hermetic. Objects that are embedded in hyperlocal, 'microscopic' spheres — normally seeing the light of day only once or twice a year — are suddenly displaced to the Belgian pavilion, exposed to an average of 3,000 pairs of exhausted eyes and a multitude of international mother tongues per day. It is not hard to imagine how foreign the giants would feel as performers in this macroscopic cultural celebration over the course of seven months.

One could also interpret the presentation as a subversive tactic, in which the folkloric is inserted into a semantic territory from which the 'art of the people' seems to have been expelled, and to which it is therefore foreign — the high-brow, status-driven world of contemporary art. On the other hand, the folkloric as a theme and an aesthetic

strategy, alongside practices that draw on mythological and indigenous traditions and sources of knowledge, is operational in several of the national pavilions each year.

To help connect with the audiences, the giants and the collective are joined by fellow travellers — eight young curators who assist in the daily operations of the pavilion in bilingual pairs. The Young Curators Programme facilitates a crash course in mediation during a two-month stay in Venice. Each trainee is matched with one of the giants, delving into their origins and cultural context as a spokesperson for Petticoat Government. The project's catalogue is printed 'on demand' in the pavilion's copy centre, while the walls vibrate to a continuous score of drum loops, inviting the visitors to move their limbs accordingly.

Perhaps we should stroll to the neighbouring pavilions? The Dutch pavilion this year will present a joint project of the artist collective CATPC (Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise), artist Renzo Martens and curator Hicham Khalidi; together, they delve into the colonial legacy of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Spanning both the Rietveld Pavilion in Venice and the White Cube in Lusanga, the project offers a critical examination of the plantation system and advocates for the restoration of a sacred forest, aiming to rectify past injustices and restore equilibrium. Meanwhile, the neighbouring Spanish pavilion will show work by Sandra Gamarra Heshiki, a Peruvian Japanese artist born in Lima, marking Spain's first representation by an artist born overseas.

The Dutch pavilion confronts the colonial heritage of Belgium, while the Belgian pavilion positions itself in a context of institutional critique by highlighting certain elements of a national (and European) folkloric heritage. Placed alongside the Dutch entry, which tackles geopolitical injustices head-on, the Belgian pavilion risks being perceived as politically insular. Simultaneously, juxtaposed with Spain's presentation, it may seem less overtly statement-driven in its choice of representation. However, *Petticoat Government* and the giants, in their reevaluation of amateur art practices, gesture towards a different genre of foreignness than those implied by the theme of this year's Venice Biennale, enriching the repertoire of standpoints represented in the Giardini.

But the question remains: who will win in the battle with the hungry, complex and (and let's be clear) problematic giant that the Biennale of Venice itself is?

(A strange synthpop melody emerges in the bar, interrupting the 'petticonversationalists', while on the square outside a giant rises, ready to embark on his long journey. *Milžu Cīņa (Battle of Giants)* by Dzeltene Pastnieki)

*For these giants, one chance remains  
To participate in the battle of giants  
It will be broadcast on the radio, it will be shown on TV  
The world will be informed about it*

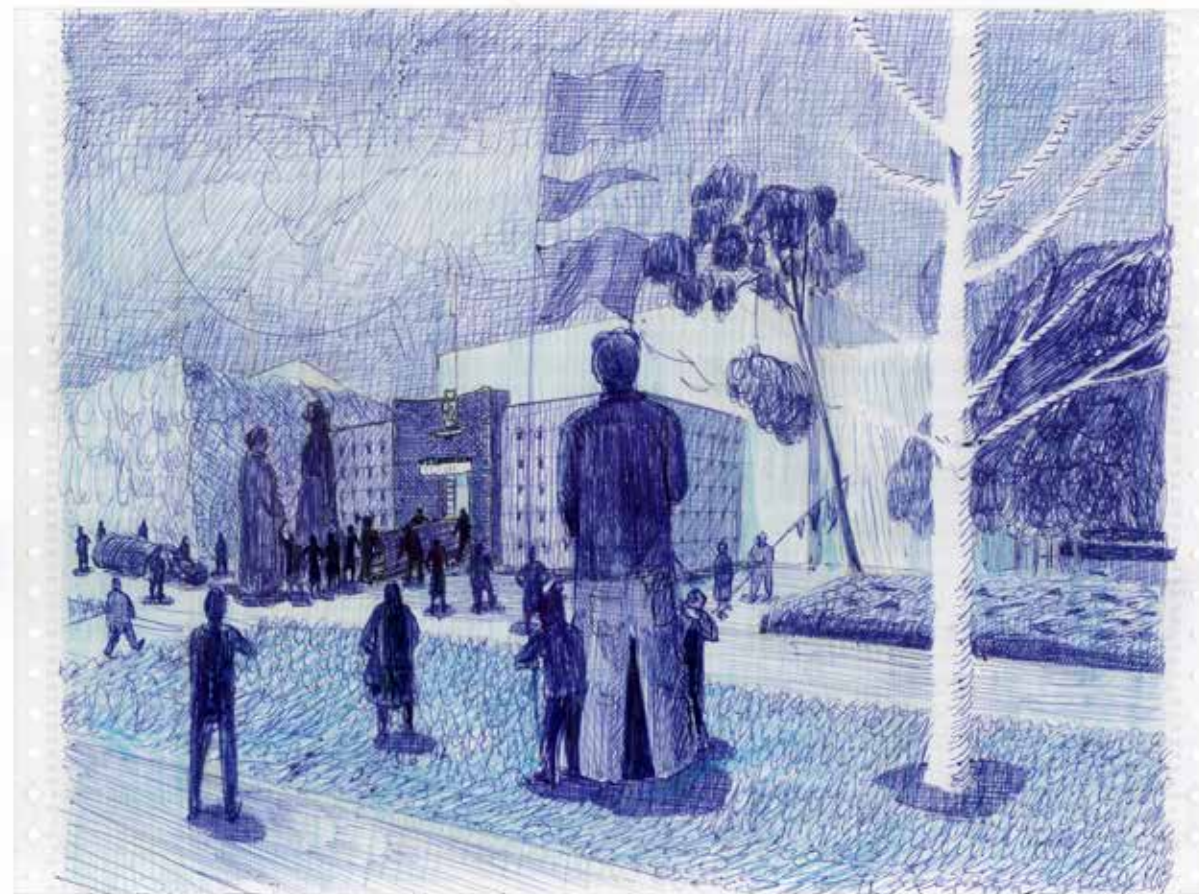
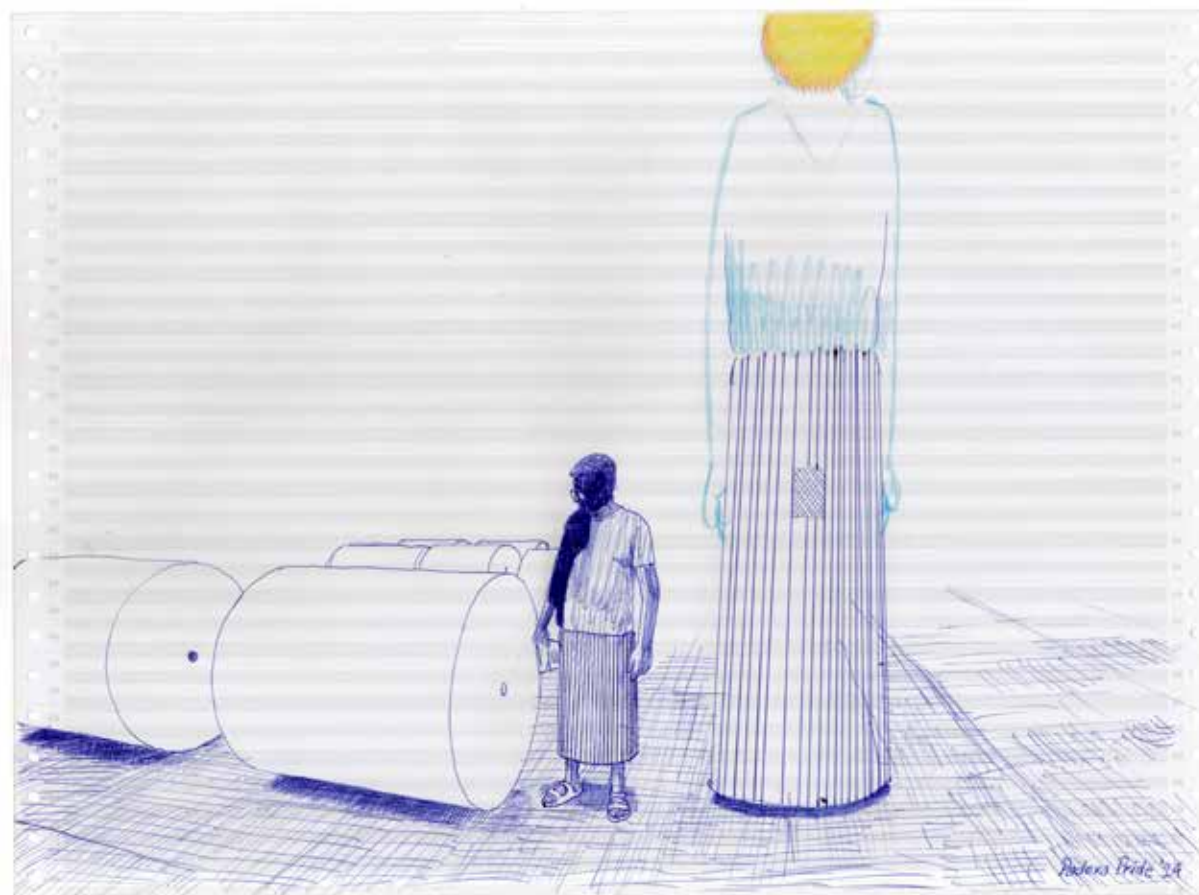
*Who will triumph in this battle of giants?  
Will be invited to a banquet?  
Everyone will applaud and everyone will call out  
Everyone will rejoice and exclaim upon seeing them:  
'Battle of giants, battle of giants!'*

*But behind the scenes, whispers will spread  
You know, he's already such a huge giant  
And everyone, everyone will speak, will say  
He's a miserable giant  
(Because he's already a giant)*

*These giants are hungry, they have nothing to eat  
They can't just go to the forest to hunt bears  
They have intellectual prowess  
They're not at all from the provinces*

*They read newspapers every morning  
They watch all the new performances  
But what can they do, they want to eat so bad  
They want to eat so bad, they could tear out their hair*

*Battle of giants, battle of giants! ...<sup>2</sup>*



PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT, *Chapitre Padoue, Petticoat Government #2, 2023*, courtesy Petticoat government (Denicolai & Provoost - Antoinette Jattiot - Nord - Speculoos) & LMNO Bruxelles

PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT, *Chapitre Venise, Petticoat Government #8, 2024*, courtesy Petticoat government (Denicolai & Provoost - Antoinette Jattiot - Nord - Speculoos) & LMNO Bruxelles

1. 'Biennale Arte 2024: Stranieri Ovunque — Foreigners Everywhere', La Biennale di Venezia, 22 June 2023, [www.labiennale.org](http://www.labiennale.org)  
2. Translation of the song, originally written and performed in Latvian.