

Recreating the nightmare

Lars Cuzner and Ali Fadlabi talk to [Deborah Lam](#) about revisiting Oslo's 'Human Zoo'

Tuesday 6 May 2014

[Photo courtesy of Will Bradley](#)

Photo courtesy of Will Bradley

For artists Lars Cuzner and Mohamed Ali Fadlabi, nowhere does the adage “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” ring truer than in Norway.

In 2013, the Scandinavian country was ranked the first overall on the Legatum Institute's Prosperity Index for the fifth consecutive year and dubbed the 'Happiest Country in the World'. However, the beacon of freedom and human rights was radically different in 1914. At the one hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Constitution of Norway, an exhibition titled *The Congo Village* was showcased, with eighty individuals and their lives on display. It was effectively a human zoo.

Another hundred years have passed and the Swedish and Sudanese artists are now re-enacting the same exhibition at the same celebration, this time for the two hundredth anniversary.

Cuzner stresses that the nation has witnessed a paradigm shift from the ethnic superiority of the past to that of the present. Evidently frustrated at how Norwegians seemed to have “completely wiped out of the collective consciousness of the country” the need to understand both the “heritage” and “evolution” of racism, Cuzner explains recreating *The Congo Village*, this time with volunteers, is necessary to bring back to the surface issues that time has buried.

“
You learn so many things about yourself. You discover that you're a bit racist yourself”

”
Having met when their works were showcased in the same gallery, the duo ended up discussing ideas which would eventually lead to the creation of *European Attraction Limited*. The piece was named after the English company that was contracted to build *The Congo Village*.

No strangers to investigation into specialised topics, Cuzner and Fadlabi are more than comfortable with the demands of the show, requiring an exceptional amount of research and attention to detail in order to reproduce a village as close to the original as possible. In the process of researching for the project, they spend a lot of time immersing themselves in archives in Senegal and Oslo, but still have very few details about the original exhibit.

They are quick to point out that the installation art piece was only different “the same way every show is different from the one before”, despite the uniqueness of the piece. “It's just another exhibition,” Fadlabi says.

Although *European Attraction Limited* is rooted in history, Cuzner and Fadlabi are adamant that the exhibition is not a historical one. “It's definitely an art exhibition... because we said it's art,” Fadlabi

assures me. Arguing that the piece is based on the fiction that the Scandinavians have created to convince themselves of their racial superiority, Cuzner maintains that “misconception” and “misinterpretation” are “common devices in an artistic endeavour that really seems unnecessary to say”.

However, their research is what often exposes these very misconceptions that they hope to debunk, many of which Norwegians have taken for fact for years. One particular example being that the exhibition’s name, *The Congo Village*, was in fact a misnomer because the individuals on display were actually Senegalese.

“
The indexes are just supposed to prove that these are the most humanitarian and best fucking people again.

”
The process of preparing for the exhibition has also been enlightening for the two artists. They reveal that the most shocking and disappointing discovery for them was how no one was interested in their exhibition at the Bergen Triennale about a human zoo in Northern Thailand that still exists today. Cuzner sees this as evidence that Norway is less concerned about the dehumanisation of humans on display, but are more preoccupied with what damages the country’s image.

“You learn so many things about yourself. You discover that you’re a bit racist yourself,” Fadlabi confesses. Cuzner agrees, “I think that’s the most profound thing, that you end up having to confront your own beliefs and understand where they come from and understand what those beliefs are, what they’re based on.”

However, art, in its divisive nature, is not without its naysayers. Fadlabi reveals how difficult it was when criticism toward the project turned ugly and developed into ad hominem attacks on him and his partner. Amongst these naysayers are, ironically, anti-racism organisations.

When asked why, when the showcase tries to combat and raise awareness for historical racism, these organisations would object so aversely, Cuzner patiently dissects this anti-racist tradition and explains how it stems from “a superior understanding of one’s position in the world”.

In light of this, their anti-racist position and efforts are thought of as superior, and anything that challenges this is seen as a threat.

In spite of opposition, Cuzner and Fadlabi manage to remain devoted to their project. Racist science, seeking to prove racial superiority, has been replaced by lifestyle and happiness indexes designed to illustrate Norway’s adherence to human rights. Cuzner says, “[The indexes] are just supposed to prove that these are the most humanitarian and best fucking people again.”

Angry at self-centred efforts to prove ethical supremacy rather than admit to the darker past hidden behind a manicured façade, the artistic pair hopes to remind Norway of the history that, as Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* laments, is “a nightmare from which they are trying to escape”.



Most Read Discussed

1. [The Movements: The Theatre of Cruelty](#)
2. [Old Favourites: Mary Poppins](#)
3. [Theatre Review: An Inspector Calls](#)

4. [Old Favourites: Looking for Alaska](#)

5. [Theatre Review: Antigone](#)

6. [Review: After The End](#)

Write for Nouse Arts

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

[Join the Facebook group](#)

More in Arts

[Old Favourites: Mary Poppins](#)

[Old Favourites: Looking for Alaska](#)

[Theatre Review: Antigone](#)

[Matilda's Turning Thirty](#)

[Listen Up: Generation Podcast](#)

[A Simple Light in the Dark](#)

[About Nouse](#)
[Who's Nouse](#)
[Website Credits](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Archives](#)
[Student Discounts](#)
[Print Editions](#)
[Mini-Sites](#)
[Nouse on Twitter](#)
[Nouse on Facebook](#)
[Nouse on Google+](#)

