

Hamburg Marathon

by Arslougho



Arslougho, *Hamburg Marathon (DW26)*. 5940 x 4200 Pixels. CMYK, 300 dpi.

There are jokes so obvious that nobody makes them. "Hamburg Marathon" is exactly that kind of joke — and the question of why nobody made it before Arslougho belongs to the productive mysteries of this work. Since 1986, the city of Hamburg has hosted one of the largest marathons in Europe every spring. In English, the city is unavoidably named after what its citizens apparently do not eat when 26.2 miles of running come at them: Hamburg, that is, hamburger. In English, the city is the bun with the patty. In German, der Hamburger is the citizen of Hamburg. Arslougho's image makes both readings visible by laying them on top of one another.

We are looking at the finish gantry — or is it the start? — of a marathon. The digital clock reads 0:00:01: a single instant after the gun. The field comes toward us, a tightly packed pack in running shoes and compression shorts, but where the heads should be, burgers float. Classic cheeseburgers, double-deckers with lettuce-tomato-onion, sliders, glossy sesame buns oozing molten cheese — an entire menu sets off running. Above the gantry it reads "AD-FREE"; on the right, mirror-reversed, "EERF-DA." To the left and right of the arch, two "NO ADS" prohibition symbols are mounted. As in *King of the Savannah*, the scene is consistently desaturated — trees, legs, asphalt, grandstands all in gray — and only the absurd glows: the burgers in full advertising-photography saturation, fresh from the food-styling studio.

This is lohgorhythmics in three layered moves. First layer: "Hamburg" becomes "hamburger" in English, that is, the food. Second layer: in German, *der Hamburger* is the citizen of Hamburg. Third layer — and here it turns vicious — in German, *Bürger* (citizen) and *Burger* (the sandwich) are separated only by an umlaut. To run in Hamburg is to be a Hamburg citizen; and to appear as a Hamburg citizen in the visual space of advertising is to be a burger. The image says: consumer culture has long since processed the citizen into a consumable. The marathon runner, supposed icon of self-optimization, runs head-first into the very product he is running against.

The iconographic punchline sits in the gantry itself. Real-world marathons are saturated with advertising: every kilometer marker, every water station, every race bib carries logos. This marathon, with its "NO ADS" shields and its AD-FREE banner, is demonstratively ad-free — and precisely for that reason, full of advertising. Because the advertising is no longer next to the runners; it has become the runners. It has migrated from the trackside hoardings into the body and taken over the head. The doubled prohibition sign is the self-assured lie of the picture: in the very place where advertising is forbidden, advertising occupies the subject.

The mirrored inscription "EERF-DA" on the right side is more than typographic play. It shows what happens when one reads this German Hanseatic city from the opposite shore — from the Dutch side of the North Sea, from the English-speaking world. What was meant as "ad-free" comes back reversed: an unintelligible acronym, a brand name, a sponsor, EERF-DA Inc. Language, held up to the mirror, turns into advertising. The composition is axially symmetrical like a Rorschach test, but the writing breaks at the mirror axis. The asymmetry of the world, *Arslohgo* suggests, sits inside language itself.

Placement within the Dutch Works series draws another line. Hamburg is the German city with the most Dutch soul: Hanseatic city, port city, mercantile, free-trading, traditionally looking more toward Amsterdam and Rotterdam than toward Berlin. "Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg" is the official title — free as in "AD-FREE," free as the medieval burgher who breathed the city air and after a year and a day was no longer bonded. Stadtluft macht frei — city air makes one free; the air of advertising, Arslough intimates, produces a new kind of bondage. The free Hamburg citizen has become a free-range hamburger — free in the sense of released onto the market.

It is an alert, sharply pointed work whose comedy does not blunt its hardness. The clock stands at one second: the field has only just set off, the whole marathon still lies ahead. We are watching a movement that does not end. The consumer's race against the product he is has no finish line. Only new starting signals, again and again.

