

“Manifesta 7” artUS issue 26, Fall 2009

Spread between four small towns (populations ranging from 35,000 to 150,000), four disparately themed exhibitions spanned 100 minutes via regional rail from Rovereto, 15 minutes south of Trento, to Fortezza at the Austrian border, 45 minutes north of Bolzano. One needed three days minimum to manage it all, especially if one also wanted to visit local contemporary art museums. Missed trains left me dashing through Trento's portion, though I witnessed the other sites at a leisurely pace. Future Manifesta organizers should address visitor access, especially since each Manifesta occupies a new place. Clearer gallery maps should cut out backtracking to locate missed works. Manifesta 7 posted few street signs until one was on top of the spot. Even the locals complained that everything seemed so secretive. Having never before attended a Manifesta, I regretted the absence of something like Skulptur Projekte's painted footprints.

The scale of this latest European Biennial of Contemporary Art (nearly 200 participants) equals three compact Whitneys or two sprawling Havana Biennials. Manifesta 7's rumored budget was 4 million[euro], which sounds like a lot for emerging art (20,000[euro] per artist), but half could have been spent renovating Fortezza's fort, so it's difficult to surmise whether Trento's budget dwarfs Havana's or is just a smidgeon of what Kassel and Venice spend. Either way, this expense could have spawned a fabulous museum collection, if only the artists could leave their works behind (saves on return shipping and artist storage). Miraculously, South Tyrol, in the heart of northern Italy's wine country, actually supports contemporary art museums, something Milan doesn't do and Rome is at pains to sustain. In fact, MART (Rovereto's Mario Botta-designed contemporary art museum) offers more temporary exhibition space than any museum I've ever visited. Manifesta 7 thus doubled as a cultural tourism plug, staged to lure global art lovers to towns with burgeoning museums and historical significance, such as Fortezza, whose fortress was built by the Hapsburgs in the 1830s. Trento also boasts a MART, as well as a civic gallery that exhibits international contemporary art. An easy Venice daytrip, I'll return so long as the contemporary art flows alongside affordable, delicious food and wine.

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The "lure of the local" is apparently a routine Manifesta theme. While this approach can enhance site awareness, it unwittingly exploits artists when institutional directives or context specific buildings override artistic freedom. I felt this worry in spades in Bolzano's abandoned Alumix factory, where aluminum's magnetic fields once blocked clocks and electronic devices. Such a timeless place provided the perfect backdrop for artists bent on investigating labor rights (Ranu Ghosh or Rupali Gupte & Presad Shetty), income disparity (Darius Ziura), re-use (Jaime Pitarch or Zilvinas Kempinas), recycling (CandidaTV), environmental issues (Sanjay Kak), pollution (Jorge Otero-Pailos), childhood (Andreas Kreuger), and dying (Jorgen Svensson). Several Manifesta 7 artists focused on Italians hiring illegal Ukrainian ladies to care for their aging population. Given the absurdity of an opera whose libretto is taken word for word from a newspaper article regarding guest workers' living conditions, Libia Castro and Olafur Olafsson's *The Caregivers* (2008) compels viewers to watch the entire video in a way that straight footage, such as Alexander Vaindorf's three-channel *Detour: One Particular Sunday* (2006-08), documenting the weekly gatherings of 300,000 Ukrainian caregivers, cannot. A 1938 telephone exchange, apparently found at the Alumix plant and rigged by Graham Harwood, Richard Wright and Matsuko Yokojoji to tally calls dialed from London call

boxes to Nigeria, proved curious commanding its corner. That Hansa Thapliyal's drawings, derived from Kashmiri photographer Syed Muzafar's newspaper images, are veiled behind a muslin curtain reiterates their politically sensitive content. Ziura's photos of Russian boonies, hundreds of kilometers from nowhere, probably startle Europeans unfamiliar with vast tracts of open space. CandidaTV's sprawl of retooled, trashed TVs proves an eerie reminder of our hasty throwaway society. By contrast, Francesco Gennari's *Come Se (As If, 2001)* is an eternal cypress log rigged never to wither.

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It is difficult to know whether Manifesta curators privilege artists whose practices entail excavating lore (local or native), Manifesta participants expect such assignments, or Manifesta's very survivability depends on convincing local officials that it's cheaper if artists, rather than historians, voluntarily cull cultural cues that can be later incorporated into marketing schemes. One imagines that much of the texts written for ten spoken-word installations presented at Fortezza's fort will furnish the information necessary to transform the venue into a historical museum. This is a 180-degree shift from Rotterdam's 1996 Manifesta 1 when, I'm told, Oleg Kulik shamelessly bit people and chewed up stuff.

With this in mind, Manifesta 7 seemed dominated by a late-1980s/early-1990s strategy that should be resisted at all costs, meaning art that obligates itself to convey problems responsible parties can easily ignore. This is the opposite of political art that interrupts situations, effectively doing what the prevailing institutions claim cannot be done, and inevitably forcing everyone to adopt new practices. Political art's preference for message over action led to its demise in the early 1990s. However didactic its perspective, political art fails when it promotes someone else's offense at its own expense. Lacking authenticity, such art is trendy and not genuine. When a work appears as radical as its message, political art succeeds. When its radical features later become common practice, works get reduced to their messages.

To effect political change, art must continuously acquire unfamiliar practices, so as to remain radical on a cognitive level. Surprisingly, some Fortezza listening stations held sway. Playwright Ant Hampton, creator of the participatory play *Etiquette* (2007), staged selected texts as dramatic readings. Despite narrators' tirades against injustice (slavery, colonization, immigration, military buildup, power, global warming, security, fear-mongering), several managed to hold one's attention. Fitted with headsets and balancing on Martino Gamper's unusual 3-legged chairs, while staring at walls whose exposed layers reveal time's marks, colors, and graffiti, one listened closely to discern the words. Arundhati Roy's excellent 20-minute fictional monologue, *The Briefing* (2008), featured a charismatic speaker listing the fort's past secrets and forewarning the emergence of intricate personal and corporate interests conspiring to destroy that region's ski economy. Also enjoyable was Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), a hilarious self-effacing text/film.

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A handful of Rovereto works stopped me in my tracks, causing me to miss a train or two. Knut Asdam's *Oblique* (2008) took place on trains, the icon of European mobility. Christian Mayer's four adjacent wall clocks displaying slightly different times captured my imagination. Prior to 1893, when time became standardized, the most northern town sped ahead. *The Submerged Town* (2008), Deborah Ligorio's 16mm video, captures the

1950 flooding of the lone Campanile di Curon in Graun, caused by dam construction that reunited two natural lakes. Feats of endurance, Guido van der Werve's two videos, accompanied by his own piano compositions, feature him walking on ice ahead of an icebreaker or pivoting atop the frigid North Pole for 24 hours. Heidrun Holzfeind videotaped eight fascinating interviews with participants from Mexico City's 1968 student demonstrations. Zimmerfrei, an Italian collective, presented *Ghost Track* (2008), a magical three-screen video in search of the phantoms of European memory and identity. Barbora Klimova exhibited posters documenting her carefully restaged performances of five Czech performance artists from the 1970s and '80s. Sonia Leimer's staged photographs of the transformation of Rovereto's train station into a movie set were as startling as they were disarming. How Danh Vo got hold of letters from Henry Kissinger thanking New York Post columnist Leonard Lyons for theater tickets is anybody's guess. Sheer genius, their display casts light on Kissinger's Broadway obsession (a possible escape from the atrocities he wrought by negotiating the Vietnam War's extension), as well as his wheeler-dealer allure that inspired suck-ups even while panhandling.

Trento featured artist-created mini museums, another genre borrowed from the late 1980s/early 1990s (consider Fred Wilson, Ronald Jones, or the dozens of artist-derived archives). Such installations included a number of provocative examples, like the museums addressed to European Normality, Franco Basaglia (the controversial author of Italy's reformed mental health system), Projective Personality Testing, Learning Things and the Stealing of Souls. All told, it's no surprise that Manifesta 7 (through November 2, 2008) consumed far more time and energy than Documenta 12. The former introduced mostly new names and particularized themes on smaller scales, while the latter blended known with unknown projects on familiar ground.

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