

## “U-Turn Quadrennial for Contemporary Art (Copenhagen)” *artUS*, issue 27, Winter 2009

Quadrennial | Copenhagen, Denmark

Only a week after traveling through the Tyrol region of Italy to absorb Manifesta 7, a two-day tour of the inaugural U-TURN Quadrennial for Contemporary Art in Copenhagen (through November 9, 2008) proved less daunting than I originally anticipated. While the first exhibition appeared structured to lure tourists to a relatively obscure area near the Austrian border, the second seemed primed to engage locals with great art by a range of mostly lesser-known figures. Among the 65 artists included, only Laylah Ali, Manon de Boer, Olafur Eliasson, Elmgreen & Dragset, Jens Haaning, Mona Hatoum, Romuald Hazoume, Jesper Just, Hannah Hoch, Joachim Koester, Ann Lislegaard, Wangechi Mutu, Helio Oiticica, Roman Ondak, Pavel Pepperstein, Dan Perjovschi, Walid Raad, Roman Signer or Nedko Solakov are familiar names on the international circuit. Aside from this list's six Scandinavian artists, I doubt the others regularly exhibit locally. However, a full third of U-TURN's exhibitors have Danish roots and only seven live outside Europe, so this survey is no less European in scope than Manifesta.

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U-TURN's stated goal is to demonstrate contemporary art's "radical change of direction," so its focus on European art risks falling far short of the mark. Even if one were to argue that "radical change" is a more obvious feature of non-European art, as it was in the 1950s when Osaka's Gutai Group presented participatory works long before Fluxus, or in the early 1990s with China's performance art scene, the task of importing radical art from abroad is a near impossible task. Being a curator is akin to being an anthropologist. Finding the most radical work requires one to live where one experiences the art. In this respect, U-TURN's strength is the way it illuminates radical changes taking place in the Danish scene, juxtaposed against related European practices.

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Increasingly in vogue, especially in Scandinavia, is singing as visual art, something that was audibly present in both Manifesta 7 and U-TURN. Ever since Annika Eriksson videotaped *Stockholm's Postmen Orchestra* performing a Portishead tune in 1996, the art world has embraced music as visual art, not sound art. Five years later, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *40-Part Motet* hit the scene. Today, artists of all stripes routinely stage musicals, launch spontaneous pirate radio stations, and ply songs from eager participants. Stockholm-based Johanna Billing has exhibited numerous videotaped musical events, such as her *You Don't Love Me Yet Tour* (2002-07), for which scores of bands performed covers of the 1984 Roky Erickson song in 17 cities across two continents. In 2008, Cincinnati's CAC curator Maiza Hixson organized "American Idyll: Contemporary Art and Karaoke." Manifesta 7 featured The Caregivers (2008), an operatic video by Spaniard Libia Castro and Icelander Olafur Olafsson, whose libretto quotes a newspaper article concerning the increasing numbers of Eastern European women now caring for Roveretto's elderly, as well as several sound works, including eleven loudspeakers mounted on the Ex Peterlini factory broadcasting field recordings from faraway countries.

Not surprisingly, songs filled the air at U-TURN. At the opening, American Lucas Ajemian collaborated with Giancarlo Vulcano to produce *Kanon U-Turn* (2008), a

musical composition in the form of a canon that involved four bands responding to Ajemian's recitation, accompanied by looped recordings. Helsinki-based artists Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, originators of the "Complaints Choir" concept only three years earlier, presented a live performance of the *Copenhagen Complaints Choir* (2008) plus a 55-minute video featuring the duo performing in Birmingham, Helsinki, Hamburg, St. Petersburg, Chicago and Singapore (2005-08). As visitors passed through the garden en route to the Carlsberg Brewery, they were serenaded by *Science Fiction 3113 (after "Close Encounters of the Third Kind")* (2008), Norwegian Ann Lislegaard's 44-minute sound-and-light installation sited in a tree. Similarly, *Symphony Natura* (1985-2008) by Danish Fluxus member Henning Christiansen featured eight zoo animals crooning sounds recorded at different times of the day, as visitors pass by loudspeakers mounted on the porch. For five months, the Danish collective Parfyme implemented musical activities to energize Copenhagen's harbor.

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St. Petersburg foursome Chto delat? (aka What is to be done?) delivered by far the most impressive musical of the show, *Perestroika-Songspiel: Victory over the Coup* (2008), set in August 1991 during the dissolution of the USSR. Periodically interrupted by a choir representing the masses, nine scenes portray serious discussions between a democrat, a businessman, a revolutionary, a nationalist and a woman concerning daily life during perestroika's economic restructuring, which began in 1987. The Super16mm film *A Question of Silence* (2008), just one segment of a video installation by Dane Jesper Just presented at Nikolaj CCAC, showed the Danish actress Benedicte Hansen becoming cheerful, as she sings along with a ventriloquist's doll discovered under a table. *Song of My Great Grandfather* (2008), an installation by South Korean-born Danish artist Jette Hye Jin Mortensen, included the projected video *New Song Books* (2006), which featured a choir singing fake versions of particularly "Danish" songs composed by nineteenth-century musical icon Carl Nielsen, who also composed the Danish national anthem. Romanian Irena Botea's video, *Elena Ladybug* (2006), captured a local gypsy girl's singing suggestive songs.

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Another U-turn theme concerns capitalism's capacity in two short decades to erode public access to former communist values and sympathies, a point Boris Buden's catalogue essay considers. Russian Irina Korina's *The Hut* (2008) posits a log cabin surrounded by large sculptural flames, covered with faux-wood wallpaper to suggest the declining authenticity of treasured national pastimes such as isbas, Soviet-era vacation cottages. *16 Dead Danish Problems in Afghanistan*, Dane John Korner's colorful paintings of unrecognizable figures sacrificed to America's war, suggest how economic alliances carry undesirable obligations. Pole Pauline Olowska's collaged drawings from the series *Nova Scena* (2006) combine images from Poland's 1980s punk scene with those employed in the superpowers' propaganda wars, as depicted in the Russian-language *Ameryka* and the English-language *Soviet Life* magazines.

No one captures capitalism's inequity, inadequacies and contradictions better than Romanian satirist Dan Perjovschi, who scrawled blue witticisms across shop windows in the nearby meatpacking district. Serbian Mladen Stilinovic has created art since the Cold War era, so he's well equipped to joke about yesteryear's lack of art resources versus today's emphasis on clever, edgy marketable stuff. After inviting people to visit his home gallery, where anarchy is the rule, he soon realized that the idiom of anarchy is self-

defeating, inspiring *Insulting the Anarchy* (2007), the video on view here. A mini-survey (1969-2005) of works by deceased Slovakian Julius Koller facilitated access to this conceptualist's "anti-happenings," such as photographing himself with UFOs, tempting viewers with ping pong and drawing question marks on banners and walls, or with children who form a question mark. Taking advantage of capitalism's access to cheap foreign labor, the Berlin collective Rimini Protokoll established *Call Cutta in a Box* (2008), whereby a dozen trained Calcutta call-center employees randomly dial telephones installed in U-TURN and five other cities, chatting with whomever picks up, not unlike Yoko Ono's *Telephone Piece* of 1964.

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To counter memory loss, performance artists increasingly treat performance art as theater, scripts to be restaged repeatedly, so as to be experienced as discussable art, rather than detached documents of historical actions. Most famously, Serbian Marina Abramovic restaged six classic performances at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2005. Manifesta 7 featured videos and posters from Czech Barbora Klimova's 2006 reenactment of five of her countrymen's performances from the 1970s and '80s, while U-TURN's Copenhagen-based Lilibeth Cuenca's *How to Break the Great Chinese Wall* totally upstaged Abramovic by presenting the gestural remnants from reenactments of *The Lovers--The Great Wall Walk* (1988), Abramovic's infamous 90-day performance piece with Ulay, as well as painting actions by Yayoi Kusama, Niki de Saint Phalle, Orlan, Ana Mendieta, Shigeko Kubota, Helena Almeida, Yoko Ono, Janine Antoni and Lynda Benglis. Norwegian Roi Vaara's *Wet Paint Handshakes* (2008) performance recalls Alberto Greco's early-1960s *Arte Vivo* actions. Similar in spirit to reenactments, the Dane Mads Lynnerup followed nearly a dozen people, posting on site posters that depicted their daily routines in and around Copenhagen's Sonder Boulevard. Tracking her own reactions, Romanian Ioana Nemes posts briefs from her archive, *Traveling Series, Monthly Evaluations* (2008). Dane Tanja Nellesmann Poulsen transforms 2-D news stories into 3-D sculptures.

While the three curators identified U-TURNS' four themes as "Cultural Translation," "New Europe," "The City in Transformation" and "Performativity," I would counter that the survey covers topics like "The Audible as Visual," "Contestable Cultural Hegemonies" and "Keeping Memory Live." With so much fantastic art to experience here, it's no wonder I missed airport check-in by 39 minutes--I was trapped watching Dutch artist Manon de Boer's fascinating 39-minute video *Resonating Surfaces* (2005).

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