

to curate or not to curate

2008 in Europe:
urban *BB5* and
post-industrial
Manifesta 7



nada prija

5th Berlin Biennial

When the curators Adam Szymczyk and Elena Filipovic were asked whether or not there was a thematic framework for the 5th Berlin Biennial: *When Things Cast No Shadow*, Elena Filipovic's answer was as follows:

...it is really indicative, I think, of the fact that we did not start with the title and we did not decide to find any singular theme. I mean, sure, we could pull out the main nucleus. But we definitely didn't think in those terms. Rather, we were giving a lot of freedom to artists... (ArtReview 21)

There is a certain lack of clarity, on a conceptual level, in Filipovic's proclamation of a lack of concept. Szymczyk and Filipovic's idea of nonlinear decision-making and provision of apparent freedom to the artists, is questionable. Even though it is an interesting idea, one must ask whether the curators were fully aware of the influence this kind of approach could have on the European art scene. There are so many questions that arise from this approach of 'refusal to establish specific meanings', such as: What criteria did the curators use as the conceptual basis for the Biennial? If there is no singular theme (or multiple themes), what criteria did the curators use in their selection of participating artists? Or simply, what did the curators want to convey with the 5th Berlin Biennial?

They have certainly enabled viewers to enjoy the art in most cases simply on the basis of being attracted to it on a visual level. This makes one wonder – is the visual/aesthetic relation between the various projects the main link between the works exhibited at *BB5*? Despite the fact that *BB5* had a specific 'aura' of a free and effortlessly crafted exhibition, there is nevertheless a notion within it that puts the future

of art in a danger zone. Does this situation, in reality, reflect the dictatorship of the curator rather than a 'loose concept', as the curators claimed? In this 'grey area', we are being asked to simply trust the curators' choice; we must enjoy their aesthetic visualisation, which does not allow us, as viewers, to create individual judgments by ourselves. Instead, it is all directed, prescribed, fully explained.

This comes as a surprise, if one considers Adam Szymczyk's experience as a curator and writer. He was born in 1970 in Poland. In 2003, he was appointed as director and chief curator of the Kunsthalle Basel. It is even more surprising, when considering Elena Filipovic's background as an independent curator and writer born in 1972 in Los Angeles. She has a doctorate from Princeton University, and was co-editor, with Barbara Vanderlinden, of *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* recently published by MIT Press. This highly recommended book has given Elena Filipovic an in-depth knowledge of various strategies of art biennials and ways to evaluate, academically, the position and success of numerous biennials and their relation to the city, visitors, art public and so on.

It is not my intention to be purely negative or critical, and I must say that *BB5: When Things Cast No Shadow* was an elegant, sophisticated, low-key and ambitious exhibition which deserves appreciation. It consisted of five daytime exhibitions – in the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Mies Van Der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie, the Schinkel Pavillon, Skulpturenpark; and a series of night events (mainly discussions and artists' talks) held in various locations in Berlin. There were numerous art projects worth mentioning,

such as Ahmet Öğüt's *Ground Control* where he covered the floor of the central gallery space of the KW Institute with a layer of tarmac, referring to asphalt as an emblematic symbol of the governmental modernisation projects in his native Turkey. The resulting effect was astonishing; as you entered the KW Institute there was a very familiar smell – the catalyst for a particular reference in each visitor's memory.

The notion of 'looseness' and expressive freedom was most evident in the work with video, which in most cases appeared unpolished, unrehearsed and unedited, in contrast to the perfect realisation of other installation and object-based projects. This sense of effortlessness is, for instance, skillfully used by Patricia Esquivias in the video work entitled *Folklore #1*. This is an ongoing video series composed of two parts: an image, created by a hand-held camera, of a top-view of a table surface onto which are juxtaposed photographs, cutouts and notes. These elements are kept in constant movement by the hand of a narrator, whose child-like voice is a very distinctive aspect of the video. Embedded in the magic of storytelling, the voice and image describe chosen moments of the history of 20th century Spain, a selective history modified and censored by personal memory.



Opposite: Guido van der Werve *Everything is Going to be Alright* 2007, 16mm to HD video, Gulf of Bothnia, Finland. Photo by Ben Geraerts. Courtesy Gallery Juliette Jongma Amsterdam, Monitor Gallery, Rome, Gallery Marc Fox, Los Angeles.

Above: Patricia Esquivias *Folklore #1* 2006, Institute for Contemporary Art / Installation view of the 5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, DVD, 15 min., color, sound, loop. Courtesy Patricia Esquivias. Copyright Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art, Uwe Walter, 2008. **Left:** Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson *Care-givers* 2008, video work, color, sound, 14 min. Installation view at Manifattura Tabacchi, Rovereto. *Manifesta 7, Principle Hope*, curated by Adam Budak.

Manifesta 7

Overall, the appearance of *BB5* was extremely urban and modern, within what could be described as the most European city, Berlin. In contrast to this, the vision of *Manifesta 7* was to occupy the whole area of Trentino, South Tyrol in Italy, in locations of industrial archaeology existing in the Brenner axis, from Rovereto to Trento, from Bolzano to the fortress of Fortezza, spreading out in an area of over 100 square kilometres. In Rovereto, the curator was Adam Budak; in Trento, the exhibition was conceived by Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg. In Bolzano/Bozen the curators were Raqs Media Collective, while in Fortezza/Franzensfeste, the curators collectively created an event entitled *Scenarios*.

The distances between the cities matched the dynamics of the euphoria of the opening events, allowing for chance meetings between art-goers on the train between the various destinations and the possibility of engaging in a decent conversation during the 40-minute journeys.

My disappointment with the exhibitions *Rest of Now* and *The Soul* in Trento was countered by my visit to Budak's *Principle Hope* at Manifattura Tabacchi¹ in Rovereto. Immediately upon entering the building the atmosphere was captivating, as the videos, installations and large-scale sculptures were appropriately positioned within the vast spaces which were left almost in the same condition in which they had been at the time of the industry's closure; this gave the exhibition a sense of direct, unpolished appeal.



The feeling of hope and a sense of utopia was exemplified by the video of Guldo van der Werve, entitled *Everything is Going to be Alright*. The visual matrix overall was about belief in mankind, human nature, its strength and courage. The title is derived from the book *The Principle of Hope* by the German neo-Marxist Ernst Bloch whose encyclopaedic research into mankind and its relation to nature, society and technological improvement, served as inspiration for Budak's concept. Budak's intention to relate the exhibition to the past, to the current situation as well as to the future, through the notion of 'hope', was very well-conceived. He himself relates the concept of the exhibition to a few coincidental links that were found in the city of Rovereto, such as the book *The Constitution of Social Justice* by Antonio Rosmini-Serbati and the Futurist Manifesto *How to Re-construct the Universe* by Fortunato Depero. This approach opened the possibility for artists' engagement with and reflection upon the local environment, the social and historical context of Rovereto.

The music-video *Care-givers* by Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson portrays two migrant care-givers from Ukraine and Romania and their (elderly) Italian clients, in the process of carrying out their daily activities in the area of Rovereto. Conceived as a music video, it is intertwined with documentary facts concerning immigration legislations and rules in Italy, regarding the influx of New Europeans to the country. The fascinating element of this video is the power of the humanitarian aspect of the work. Although it describes the specific situation of immigrants in Italy, the video reflects the current situation in numerous countries in Europe. This video work is not embedded within a thick layer of historicism; instead, it reflects and comments on the present.

In the search for models of new curatorial methods, I asked Adam Budak to clarify his reasons for using the historical and social network of the city of Rovereto as the foundation of his project. His response was as follows:

My very first idea for Rovereto (and Trentino, Alto Adige) was based on an attempt to reconsider the early 80s (quite influential although somehow underestimated) concept of critical regionalism (theorised mainly by Kenneth Frampton) since Rovereto with its perverse Mart (the biggest museum of modern art in Italy, designed by one of the most significant representatives of critical regionalism, Mario Botta) and

some other unexpected complexities (you rightly point to the 'laboratory of principles' orchestrated by, amongst others, Depero and Rosmini) provokes to dream (or rather daydream) a region as a phantasm, imaginary and construct. Thus the task of daydreaming the region, and a daydream as a vehicle which carries both hope as a militant emotion directed towards the future and critical regionalism as a perceptive agency and tool to uncover the perversities of the vernacular.

Rovereto took this concentration on what is small and possibly insignificant, although very ambiguous in terms of its value and potential (it was also a very Blochian interest...). Without a dangerous fetishisation, we wanted in fact to pay tribute to this town, that at some point turned out to be quite self-sufficient with its mind-blowing, real and imaginative (cultural, political and social) potential. Such has been, for example, the main drive behind the idea of turning ex-Peterlini into an active, critical space, a non-stop exhibition, a monograph of a site, a town and its local community and its recent social and political history. All these amazing paradoxes that we encountered in Rovereto made us consider this town as a certain model, a primary structure which provided many artists with incredible strength and energy.

Submerged in historicism, the exhibition *The Soul* was curated by Anselm Franke and Hilla Peleg in Trento. By adding parallel displays entitled *The Museums* (compilations of books, various documents and drawings displayed in beautifully made vitrines) this supported the concept of *Manifesta 7* similar to the way that *BB5* supported the idea of looseness and incompleteness by including poems and various artists' references within the exhibition catalogue. The most interesting of *The Museums* was *The Museum of European Normality* by Maria Thereza Alves, Jimmie Durham and Michael Taussig, which introduced the notion of the complexity of everyday life in European societies. This 'museology' points to the fact that, currently, art is in need of a strong factual base of references (from history, science, or medicine).

It is not a coincidence, therefore, that there is a sudden 'rebirth' of the work of Stephen Willats who participated in Budak's Rovereto exhibition). Willats, an English artist born in 1943, has experimented with 'scientific methods' since the early 1970s, by researching the social trajectory of communal living in the UK. The only difference between the methodologies applied by Willats and other, younger contemporary artists is that now the facts are sourced from books and archives (mostly from history books, as exemplified by David Maljkovic's work at *BB5*) without the need for the artists' direct engagement with other segments of society. Therefore the information now used as references for artistic inspiration are somehow safe and legitimate, but due to this they will remain 'buried' within the past. Again the issue of 'historicism' is greater than it appears at first glance, if we ask the question - how does historicism exist within the contemporary social and political milieu of Europe - does art today have the possibility to effectively change and influence other segments of society?

'...What else could Art possibly do? What else could Art possibly be?...', writes Tim Griffin in *Artforum's* introduction to the September 2004 issue *The Art of Politics*. These kinds of issues,

however, did not seem to be a concern for the curators of this year's *Manifesta* and *BB5*. Perhaps Budak's amalgamation of local 'symbolising' and the interpretation of these by international artists, could be seen as a model of curating which aligns with the curatorial practices of WHW and Nicolas Bourriaud - curators in the limelight for 2009.

WHW (What, How & for Whom), the female curatorial collective from Croatia, have been chosen to curate the next *Istanbul Biennale*, in 2009. WHW are responsible for 'creating' and supporting a whole generation of new artists (mainly in South Eastern Europe, including the well-established David Maljkovic) and making more visible the work of older generation Croatian artists such as Mladen Stillinovic, etc. WHW have apprehended the importance of working locally, and the significance of applying the methodology of working locally, to their international projects.

My hope is that the most interesting manifestation in 2009 will be the *Tate Triennial*, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, which promises to secure this title with the planned series of debates around the themes: *Exile, Travellers, Borders and Altermodern* (Bourriaud uses this last term to describe the art that belongs to the global era and is a reaction against nationalism and standardisation).

He writes about the theoretical underpinning to the show:

The times seem propitious for the recomposition of a modernity in the present, reconfigured according to the specific context within which we live - crucially in the age of globalisation -

understood in its economic, political and cultural aspects: an altermodernity. If twentieth-century modernism was above all a Western cultural phenomenon, altermodernity arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a centre, it can only be polyglot. Altermodernity is characterised by translation, unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial West, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic phenomena in origins and identities. We are entering the era of universal subtitling, of generalised dubbing. Today's art cultural landscape is saturated with signs, creating new passageways between multiple formats of expression and communication.

Hot topics, which will again question our understanding of the local and the global, which, in this time of global movement, is a highly appropriate approach. Perhaps 2009 in Europe will 'cast a shadow' over some of the curatorial decision-making that has been manifested in 2008. ☛

31st Berlin Biennial's April - 15 June 2008 <http://bb6.berlinbiennial.de>; *Manifesta 7* 19 July - 2 November 2008 <http://www.manifesta7.it/>

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OPPOSITE: Patricia Esquivia *Folklore #1* 2006, DVD, 15 min, color, sound, loop. Courtesy Patricia Esquivia. **BELOW:** Stephen Willats *Assumptions and Presumptions* 2007, three-channel video installation, commissioned by Art on the Underground 2007. Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London. Copyright the Artist.

