

Antigua Oficina de Correos y Telégrafos (former post office), Murcia, Spain.
Manifesta 8, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, 2010.
Photo: Ilya Rabinovich.



MANIFESTA 8

Seeking a dialogue with Africa

■ Alison Carroll

Murcia (Moo-rr-sia, or, in Castilian, Moo-rr-thia), lies 50 kilometres inland from the other site of *Manifesta 8*, Cartagena (CartaHena), which is situated on one of those points, like Wilson's Promontory, that seem to head off into promise. In this case it juts out into the Mediterranean on the south-east 'point' of square Spain, right towards Africa. In fact Cartagena is really 'new Carthage' if roughly translated, and splendid with a Roman theatre and amphitheatre, built by the sons of Augustus to affirm civilization in this corner of their Mediterranean empire. This iteration of the nomadic biennial exhibition *Manifesta* takes advantage of the physical and historic legacy of the two towns to weave the focus of the show – a place in Europe facing Africa – through their streets, refurbished artillery barracks, disused post office, ex-Franco-used prison, former autopsy pavilion, casino, the Roman theatre (for one performance) and also a few art spaces and the main art museums.

Manifesta 8 is a show of over 100 artists from Europe (66), North America (26), the Middle East (7), Asia (3) and Africa (10), to give very rough figures based on where these nomads were born. Of these 11 are from Spain (and the most, 13, are from the UK, which is in direct contrast to the *Liverpool Biennale* which had only one: how quixotic is that). The last iteration was in northern Italy and the province of Limburg in Belgium is next.

Head office remains in Amsterdam, but with a strong sense of the depth and breadth of 'Europe'. As you see, a lot of artists are not from Europe originally or still, but the site is European and the dialogue is European, extending out.

A focus of *Manifesta* is giving young artists and curators a chance to engage in a big international event, as well as engaging new audiences in new places which are seen as 'outside' the main cultural hubs of Europe. It is a very professional organization: everything very well-done with those accoutrements of a 'big show': excellent publications, a strong media core, an education unit, good signage, excellent audio-visual equipment needing to be supplied and used by almost all the artists, the beautifully restored and presented old buildings, a very professional, focused crew from Amsterdam and also locally engaged. For this, the city of Murcia paid Euros 5,000,000 and they got excellent organisational value.

The disappointing side of this 8th iteration, however, is that the art didn't match up. The curators seemed like apprentices given the highest quality tools and let loose too early.

Three very disparate curatorial groups put the show together. They talked a lot – it is a very wordy show, with the central focus of the main space in the key Post Office venue being a video of one of the curatorial discussions – but not enough about dialogue with two key constituencies: the



Mariusz Tarkawian *Looking for Art / Anticipation in Art* 2010. Commissioned by *Manifesta 8*. Courtesy of *Manifesta 8*. Photo: Ilya Rabinovich.

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local audience who I saw as baffled in the main, and the intended dialogue partners in North Africa. How did these words, liberally sprinkled through the show, resonate with local people: “the theory of applied enigmatics”, or “conflict of transfers of the imagination”, or “transformational enquiries”...? The art world might be used to such words (more’s the pity) but this is a show about dialogue and reaching out and I doubt this audience knows, or cares.

The number of artists from Africa were few, and of those most from Egypt. There were some beautiful pieces, including Egyptian artist Khaled Hafez’ dialogue between two “indispensable historical philosophers and scientists Abul Abbas al Murci, a.k.a. Al-Mursi Abu’l-Abbass and Sufi Ibn Arabi” (Guide p.94) who had both lived in Murcia in the 13th century, bringing the personal Islamic relations of this area into a human form. A rare piece, evocative and lovely – but rare. The focus of the curators was more on the agony in Israel or Lebanon than the beauty and richness of the area’s Semitic past.

I was there to discuss how *Manifesta* has developed and compare it to the fledgling Asia-Pacific equivalent *Utopia*. (Indeed there was a discussion in Murcia between likely *African* arts leaders about a similar venture in that continent.) *Utopia* is an unknown pup as yet which I think will grow in its own way: not based on a central office responding to bids from any city or place in Europe, but a group of partner cities which gradually develop their own rhythms and communications. *Utopia* would mean a flatter and more permanent relationship structure, with each of 9-11 partner cities taking turns at hosting the event, and each with obligations to the others to provide a lot of the support for each venture, such as sending their own artists to participate. It works well with the reality of arts funding in the Asia-Pacific currently, as well as being sympathetic with the Asian consensus model of the group and community working well together. As with Africa, there are different beats to the drum in the Asia-Pacific, as in Europe, and that is all to the good. ■

Manifesta 8 took place in southern Spain from 9 October 2010 to 9 January 2011.

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I spent the Sunday before the river peaked at GOMA and 21st Century: Art in the first Decade. Brisbane was being pelted by sudden downpours and we were drenched rushing from the Library back into the Museum. Unthinkably the Queensland Art Gallery and GOMA have both been closed since the flood hit three days later, on January 12th, and web updates indicated a month later that remedial work was being carried out on the lower ground floors, the (too-aptly named) River Café and the car parks, that no artworks were damaged, but that there was no date for reopening yet. That thrilling site on the Brisbane River, like the healing views from the Cairns Hospital right on the foreshore, were chosen in defiance of the knowledge that both spots are in the direct line of Queensland’s notoriously fickle elemental forces. The Hospital was evacuated in



State Library of Queensland and The Edge inundated

advance of Category 5 Cyclone Yasi which changed its mind at the last minute and destroyed several small towns further south, but cultural collections cannot easily be evacuated in advance of raging rivers. Museum staff were able to move the work from the ground floor up to higher floors, but like the Hospital this floor was spared damage. GOMA has become more than a museum for Brisbane. The mood on that packed Sunday was more fairground and family fun day out than I have ever witnessed in an art museum. GOMA is starting to be ranked as one of the top collections in the world, and its curatorial verve and blue sky thinking has brought the public along with it in an unprecedented way. Perhaps this ingenuity will find a way to ensure that next time the Brisbane River rears

its muddy head it will not mess with the pleasure palace, but short of raising the whole magnificent pile on stilts, like the Queenslanders of old Brisbane, which some planners are now advocating for buildings on the riverfront that have been destroyed, it remains to be seen whether the South Bank cultural precinct



Richard Tipping’s Watermark 2005 retells the story

is doomed to be flooded out again. Downriver at the New Farm bend the Brisbane Powerhouse to general amazement escaped with only minor damage. The water lapped at the feet of its famous Watermark sculpture by Richard Tipping, (a conceptual piece made in 2000 to trigger memories of the 1893 and 1974 floods) but retreated again, establishing the base of the work as the new 2011 flood watermark. Artists once more taking the long view.

Tony Albert, whose studio escaped damage, donated an artwork to raise money for flood victims. *Pay Attention* is a mixed media print signed by the artist and made in collaboration with

