

Manifesta 8: Published Conversations

tranzit.org questions:

Manifesta, like many biennials, has been criticized as being yet another medium for stratification and striation of cultural and social antagonisms. When you accepted to curate Manifesta 8, what did you consider forces that engender the possibility of play, freedom and experiment within the grip of such a medium?

CPS For CPS, M8 is a grand experiment. The question was how to take on the risk without distress our concept. The answer came in careful planning, intensive analysis and large dose of critical thinking, among our contributors and us. The possibilities you mention, of play, freedom & experiment, for CPS were engendered in the idea of directing a film rather than curating a biennial; everything in what we do is connected, situated, related and implicated. CPS's 'film procedure' needed to be carefully constructed; it needed a coherent aesthetical approach in theory & practice, through different mental process.

ACAF

Do you see yourself, and your curatorial project in a situation, wherein thinking consciously of criticality and resistance to the conventions of the biennial is to be already co-opted by a totalizing spectacle? Or, spoken more generally, did certain forms of inquiry lose their capacity to provide autonomous reference points? Is institutional critique one of these forms, though it remains to be given a status and distinguished as element and as function? But, what function?

CPS Today's audiences (especially in art

biennials) are aware of what is attached to content and form, and what is detached from it. On our side, we are quite aware that whatever is received it is so according to the manner of the receiver, therefore we are proposing to re-frame both the 'exhibition format' and the 'biennial format' not by denying it but rather by expanding it – through mass media analyses, productions and the critical use of information systems. Ultimately the role of art is to push this limit in order to give room for new articulations in art itself. In relation to the second part of your question, we elaborated that specifically in the catalogue text. We find ourselves facing a triangular configuration, forming three major challenging positions to us as curators and contributors alike. The first challenge was mostly related to institutional critique, the current position of Manifesta itself as a Foundation at a crossroad after fifteen years or so. Reviewing the previous Manifestas we became convinced that a new thinking and acting in relation to the 'format biennial' was needed. The second position is interconnected to the establishment of the host country, Spain; this is linked to demands and expectations by the Region of Murcia, where a combination of cultural wish and political will is reshaping the region's cultural policy. The third position is more related to the aesthetical approach and constructions of CPS's production, history and performance. It is this third position, which eventually gave the input to think of a different Manifesta. Dealing with three strong positions meant contradictions and perhaps even concessions, an ongoing process of push and pull. But pragmatism was exercised on methodology and strategies only. As a multi-national / multi-disciplinary collective, CPS

was born as a media lab for information and aesthetics; we adopt and accommodate into a multiplicity of socio-political conditions in many different countries and situations. We chose to inject into the project our own notions, history and its multiple experiences, and not only to create the context (which was, indeed, a great deal to achieve). Now if all this can be regarded as institutional critique, perhaps it is too early to evaluate.

ACAF

How do you relate to the critical questions of anti-essentialism and anti-utopianism and to the aesthetic and the artistic as a 'free territory'? Are these fundamental to the respective functions and roles of the curator, the cultural critic, and the artist?

CPS

ACAF

What are the consequences of a contextualist, a comparatist and a universalist approach to curating? Did this question play any role in your invitation-policy for Manifesta 8? And if so, to what extent did you try to balance, avoid or force the contention between these approaches?

CPS

ACAF

Do you, in your contribution, relate to the motto of m8 proposing to implement a dialogue between Spain, a part of the global north, and the emerging countries of a specific global south, in this case of Northern Africa? And if, how did you balance between the need for topicality and the task of history-cization? Are the problems of cross-cultural work substantially altered by the

existence of considerable internal diversity of narratives & opposition in every society?

CPS CPS 'designated' its approach by a question: ¿The Rest is History? And we can probably say that no, the rest is not history and will never be; however, that question became the critical approach which almost all CPS's contributors related to for M8. Spain/Europe and north Africa/Arab world share one history, which yet conveys many stories. Until these days European researchers who studied the history of northern Africa and the Arab world divided it into several epics, namely: the emergence of the era, the era of translation, the era of intellectual formation, the age of stagnation and decline, and that of Renaissance. Most European scholars saw the Mamluk and Ottoman empires as eras of twilight, and considered that the Arabic Renaissance begins with Napoleon to Egypt in 1798. For the Arabs, this is a division coming out of an Orientalism-inspired Western civilization, and call Napoleon in Egypt an invasion. Here memory becomes a driving force behind the political awareness in contemporary Africa and the Arab world. To answer directly to your last question, we think that cross-cultural work it is not and will never be a simplistic task of historicization and 'correction'; precisely for the huge array of diverging narratives, point of views, layers of identity (not only cultural) and existence that insist on every society. It is much more useful to create a context in which all these diversifications and problematizations emerge 'organically' and learn to co-habit and question each other – also via the use of information systems.

ACAF

How do you relate to the »geographical« given

of the Motto? Do you break down this massive corpus into meaning-bearing contexts or units of analysis?

On what maps? The map of personal narratives, of artistic subjectivities, the map of cultural geographies, of political agendas, of social structures, the map of conflict and dissent, the map of communities, of localities, of nation-states, of transnational economies; or different maps, maybe still smaller and more specific or larger and more universal—continental, hemispheric in scope?

Or do you not relate to the Motto at all?

CPS Starting with the end of your question, in relation to the Motto ('in dialogue with northern Africa'), that was one of our biggest challenges. We rarely see a biennial relating to geography, nation-state and the rest of your categorization in such specificity, as it is the case with this Manifesta. So the Motto can be valid after all – despite all due criticism in relation of what is 'northern Africa' and what is 'dialogue' and so on; if we decide to ignore the Motto it will keep knocking reminding you and us of its existence in very corner of the region, in every peace of news and in every street of the Murcia region. We didn't refuse the Motto a priori, we opened up a space, and ever-expanding, spiralling-out space, and through this space we have seen the Motto emerge, almost at every step. So we took it onboard through our contributors' work, we processed it, dismantled, re-arranged, re-assessed, re-negotiated, re-digested and metabolized, with everyone being very much implicated even if not living there.

ACAF *****

For you personally: is there a universality of artistic creation? Is it one of the functions of art

to propose another universality, an overarching impetus that serves to create sociality and politics?

CPS *****
ACAF *****

Do you intend to establish contacts between the audiences and the production spheres of your project?

Is there any educational prospect in your curatorial considerations?

CPS *****
ACAF *****

Art can be solar, hypertrophic, contradictory, cynical, obscene, deviant,...etc. Curating always runs the danger of endeavoring to integrate, domesticate, and appropriate the excess that it resists (and rejects) for didactical or thematic reasons. Is it not to this function of domestication of excess that can be referred the power of thematization?

What is your favourite format-violating biennial piece?

CPS *****
ACAF *****

Vampires, as we know, do not generate their image in a mirror. Do you still?

CPS *****
ACAF *****

Tranzit.org Auto-Reflections

What we had to do is ascertain the specific context and conditions in which we arrived. From that understanding we could begin to

determine where our agency lay and where we could exert control. This analysis provided us with constraints about the scope, format, and methods for creating our exhibition and projects for Manifesta 8. The conditions of Manifesta 8 -- as is true of most large cultural undertakings in which difficult collaborations are required -- for us collided precisely with certain trends within the contemporary art system: the overabundance of rather generic projects that are presented as “critical” or that grossly simplify conditions through narrative-making. In this we found an opportune moment to rethink the relationships between art, the curatorial, the cultural and the political by coming to grips with the inherent and incalculable complexity of life. As we abandoned well-rehearsed formulas, the challenge and opportunity for experimentation arose in the embrace of a deeply iterative, circuitous process by which we would arrive at a multivalent, diverse range of artists and projects with no clear conventional thematic but rather embodying the idea of an indescribable complexity.

In the idea that every curatorial or artistic act is somehow useless because it will - in the end - be co-opted by a totalizing spectacle; we find a nihilistic element that originates in the inability of ‘criticality’ to find its place outside a nagging desire for ‘the real’ in the Lacanian sense. If curatorial practice is based only on ‘criticality’ then it lacks the powerful dimensions found in ‘the imaginary’ and a pragmatic acceptance of ‘the symbolic’. Institutional critique, because it is a form of criticality, is ultimately about an imagined possible freedom, it has no one to account to because freedom is seen as an absolute value that is a very strong currency in the art-world just as in the realm of nation-state politics. Institutional critique can be of

great value if it begins to take on positions that cannot be boiled down to desires for freedom, and re-establishes itself as a discourse that has the potential to develop and build systems and models that can offer prototypical solutions to the things being critiqued, while embracing the fact that freedom is never and has never been absolute.

Here we would like to quote Jacques Rancière: «There is no reason why the sensory strangeness produced by the clash of heterogeneous elements should bring about the understanding of the state of the world, no reason why the comprehension of the state of the world should bring about the decision to change it.»[1] This quote and Rancière’s work in general is an important station for us because it constantly tests and challenges the limits and boundaries of our agency as curators. Recent curatorial inclinations tempt us to “go beyond” the homogeneity of contemporary art where everyone has to be subjected to the same measuring devices in order to be let into the bosom of contemporary practice. They tempt us to portray the world and its politics as heterogeneous. But, for us portraying or establishing heterogeneity for heterogeneity’s sake is not enough, because the roots of the cultural-ethnic strain problematic in the art world lay outside it in the first place. The question then is how do we position ourselves curatorially in this condition in which we know we cannot bring about change? Looking at it from the angle of the engineer who builds systems and the mathematician who develops interfaces then seems to be a valid option. Since, a curatorial interface or system can be taken and developed further, modules that can be reinforced and updated with the ideas of others later. This implies that this condition will continue for many years to come and that we need much more than a dog-eared copy of

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a few denouncing curatorial statements, and a bunch of exhibitions that 'represent' a region to reconfigure it. The Theory of Applied Enigmatics is our attempt at building such an interface, as both tactic and logic.

There is an intrinsic link between the generic look of a contemporary world map and the inability of the curatorial to develop non-generic strategies when addressing issues of culture and geography. We try to avoid using the words map or mapping, for many reasons. The coordinates that shape socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political conditions happen or have happened in the frontal lobes of human beings or in the cosmic chemistry of orbital territories. The coordinates that shape our existence combine with and confront each other in unusual and sometimes mysterious ways. We relate to coordinates that cannot be pinpointed down to a map, maps cannot keep up with the complexity of life.

The problem with the idea of universality is that it has very few coordinates, meaning that it relies on there being a given to measure up to or to measure against, it depends on equivalence, if we cannot find a similar or translatable equivalent to something then it cannot be introduced into the universalist encyclopedia. Thus to reach, for example, a universal form of artistic creation, one must subject oneself to the coordinates of universality, its measuring tools etc. which have ultimately been formulated according to histories and philosophies that are not at all culturally subjective, to say the least. There are many sub-universalities, most of them branch out from what has just been described but one interesting universality that is yet to be solidified in art - and that has very different parameters

- is the universality of complexity, complexity as universality. When you understand that you cannot possibly understand yet still attempt to understand, universality with an almost infinite number of coordinates emerges; this is a complex universality that surpasses the historically, culturally, economically biased versions of universality that dominate most discourses. This is the universality that we think art should be concerned with.

We always find it difficult to talk about education. What we call 'the collective unconscious of art' establishes the view in peoples' minds that education as an art-tactic is 'good' and 'positive' almost always. Even if they know better, there is still a residue of this that can't be gotten rid of or perhaps needs to remain. Perhaps this is one of the ways art survives in late capitalist societies, by convincing itself that it should or can educate. This became particularly evident in the 80's, a period we look back to in our project for Manifesta 8 as the decade that saw the final fermentation of art along various social and cultural lines, a kind of fixative period where already problematic conceptions became permanently part of art-logic. The question then is not if art should educate, because this happens anyway unconsciously at least on some level, but what and whom should it be educating and in which way? In our project, we find it important to speculate about and delve into the origins of the pedagogical strain in art practice in the same way as we do with the cultural-ethnic strain, and the criticality strain, since all of these strains seem to be constructed from the same source material and for varying but similar reasons. These strains also seem to have developed a similar permanence in contemporary practice. Interesting curators should be half human half vampire like Wesley Snipes in the film 'Blade'.