

¿THE REST IS HISTORY?

Alfredo Cramerotti and Khaled Ramadan discuss their curatorial approach to Manifesta 8, on behalf of CPS Chamber of Public Secrets.

We recognise that art is a field of knowledge, which does not try to prove something. It functions as an analytical, reflective, critical and sometimes confrontational instrument to discuss our human condition. Art constantly changes and shifts positions, expands in many directions, thus often generating new practices and narratives that may even be difficult to describe.

By operating as a roving biennial of contemporary art, Manifesta must each time address and negotiate a different context with specific geographical, historical, aesthetic and political structures. As curators, we find ourselves embedded in a complex configuration, which we have decided not to ignore but rather to embrace. Firstly, there is the current position of Manifesta as a biennial itself, at a decisive crossroad after 15 years on the run. Reviewing the previous Manifestas, we found that time and space demanded new strategies of thinking and practice in relation to what a biennial is and for whom it might be aimed. Thus, as a collective with a diversified background, CPS has attempted to re-direct Manifesta into a new situation, namely, a mutual dependence on other discourses and 'systems' – in this case, information systems. Secondly, there are the demands and expectations placed on Manifesta 8 by the Region of Murcia: a combined will to reshape the regional cultural policy, a desire for international visibility, a wish to adopt culture as a tool for regeneration. The third part of this configuration is the manner of CPS's own working processes, its collective history and performances: in short, our concern to avoid dichotomies of form/content, local/global and so on, and to realise a project that is simultaneously interdependent on audience, work and medium. Our labour for Manifesta 8 in Murcia and Cartagena should be seen in this light. We embrace the opportunity, and the challenge, to engage with networked communities (however physical or incorporeal; present, past or future), using a variety of media, venues and methodologies.

[1] AUDIENCE / CONTEXT

CPS searches out and engenders dialogues, placing them in the public realm through the practices of media, film and documentary production, artistic research and aesthetic journalism. Within this field of production, viewers can find the way to act in

response to the media construction of reality, its historicisation by means of a daily digest of a selection of 'news', and its subsequent transfer to collective perception and memory, generation after generation. We were (and are) subjectively keen to take onboard and unpack the contingent geo/socio/eco/political situation of the region of Murcia and by reflection Spain and Europe 'in dialogue with northern Africa'. But foremost, we wanted to understand and talk about why these contexts are there, where those situations came from, how they became perceived as common or normal, how many background stories were summed up (or excluded from) this contemporary history. And, importantly, how this daily history (making) will develop in the future.

With every step we took to re-address this notion of shared history, new challenges emerged. This gave us a sense of the necessity of stepping out of a conventional art biennale layout. Manifesta 8 became a series of 'transmissions' that critically use artistic, relational and media(ted) productions to explore ideas of what Murcia/Spain/Europe is today and to focus on its boundaries and relationship with northern Africa and the Arab world in general. We encourage questioning and a fresh perspective from viewers: what is the media's relationship to the construction of a local reality, how does it relate to ideas of truth, place, fact and history, and what are its possibilities for engaging with new communities? It is fascinating to work with the structures of mass media since the audience, ultimately, has a complex control over the content. Viewers can ignore what is presented to them, or switch it off. More subtly, they are also in control due to the pressure on mass media producers to 'fit' into the audience expectation, in order to exploit it. We should not underestimate the ability of the audience to add to the information in front of them. We should trust the viewer, reader or listener to own the capacity to consider what it is that they are intended to see, read or hear and envisage the ways in which what is proposed is intended to be experienced. This is a crucial point, not to be overlooked. In the case of M8, artists and independent contributors invited by CPS are dealing with a whole new audience who – for the majority – do not follow the rules,



Encounter, Production still, 2010
A Project by David Rych with contribution by Juan Cortés, Sergio Munuera, José García, Antonio Rabadán, Enrique Sancho, Leoncio Bermúdez, M.S.C., L.N.F., J.A.P., Y.A.G.M., V.M.S., J.H.P.

discourses or expectations of art. The demands and processes of mass media production are different to those of artistic production. The intentions of the artists could potentially conflict with the expectations of audiences. This is also a way to 'enter into a dependence on other discourses'.

[2] WORK / CONTENT

The history, and its rest, of the title, convey many earlier and present-day stories, some of them known, others not – their absence possibly due to forms of colonial and neo-colonial power, either political, financial or cultural. The issue is centred on how that history is archived and transferred (taught), while at the same time, other tales and memories can become tools for awareness and deed. Addressing these issues implies working with systems of information. Now that art and politics are again as connected as they were in the 1970s (and to some extent even more-so), the opportunity for debate on an extensive public platform can take place through mass media. Art, journalism and an aesthetic approach to journalism (which queries our idea of reality and 'given' contexts), not only have to raise questions but also be inventive and pursue new goals. The function of the CPS collective and invited contributors is to generate these relationships and to navigate the difficulties of inhabitation and problem-asking. They also face established ways of highlighting the 'otherness' with which groups are represented in society (and in the media). How not to fall in the trap of art-ethnography and geo-art? One way is to decentralise a field of inquiry, shifting ideas across multiple borders – physical and metaphorical.

Why do we need to expand the existing boundaries of art by introducing the notion of media, and mass media in particular? It is not the role of mainstream media to maintain ideological doctrines (except in a few cases), but it is a site for artists and curators to commit to new ideas, to use art to change the way we view the world. It is important to detect any shifts in ideas and to make available (readable, accessible, distributed and diffused) the innovations and phenomena which have not yet been acknowledged. It is also important to present and discuss the intentions of these ideas to audiences. Modernity and what followed has developed the concept of the public sphere as something which is shaped and fixed by the influence of mass media in everyday life. That is to say, media space has produced – and is producing – public space, though maybe not entirely as expected. Due to the fast-paced growth of mass media production, one of the central points in today's culture is precisely that of 'information'. In mass media, the scale of coverage and of mediation of everything that is not possible to be experienced at first-hand, has established itself as an indispensable conduit for knowledge. We need printed journalism and broadcasts to help us make sense of the world around us. The amount of administrative, cultural, political and financial processes that occur during our average day cannot be digested in any other way. Mass media has an incomparable influence over society, and yet it is dominated by entertainment and advertising. What we gather from Marshall McLuhan's analyses a

few decades ago is that the medium, which actually carries the content, is essentially devoid of any content – a point now in need to re-evaluation since 'mass media' is often produced by members of that mass. Perhaps the medium being the message is not quite the point any more; however, what influences our perceptions and social relations are both the information delivered to us and the forms of communication that deliver it.

[3] MEDIUM / MEDIA

Our approach to curating encompasses television, Internet, radio, magazines and newspapers, alongside other exhibition and workshop formats and critical thinking. Broadcast, online and printed space, human relations, research study and physical places are all 'channels' in which we present different types of constructions – for instance, the construction of history and/or visual history and the current approach to visuality. At times, we asked others to generate those constructions because they can do it better than us. We have involved the detention centres in Murcia (as site of production) and Cartagena (as site of exchange) since there – like in all other prison environments – the physical and mental dialogues need to be negotiated with the very space in which they take place. This in turn has spawned an entire body of conversations in relation to the media and social space, widely taken onboard throughout the project. At other times, we directly constructed the dialogues (or found ourselves implicated within) and opened them up for de-construction. Starting with the neuro-psychiatric radical theory that visualisation (and its tradition, that is, history making) does not depend on our ability to see, we advanced a special site (a museum in Cartagena) for re-thinking the information practices and traditions, involving contemporary artists, scientists and educators. As seen above, those media(ted) channels and the constructions that happen through them are the principal realm in which our concept of reality takes shape. There are considerations to make. For one, CPS does not think of art as substituting journalism in delivering the important information – replacing the journalistic point of view with a new one – but as expanding the possibility to understand (and

critically evaluate) the first. Fiction is not journalism, but the latter is not reflecting reality either. An artist is (can be) in a privileged position within this structure because he or she might have the ability to access significant means and uncover restricted information. This implies time, and time is what dictates the limits of present-day researching and reporting. Artists do not have to work within the deadlines of traditional news production, but can 'investigate' (make inquiries, travel, talk, read, display, write) at a slower pace to develop meaningful relationships with communities. Through the assistance of curators and an organisation such as Manifesta 8, artists have the means to infiltrate the public and private infrastructures and reveal new takes on past, contemporary and future issues.

CPS's choice to work intensively with mass media – both as distribution systems and pivotal concept for other approaches – was strategically relevant also because we involved a range of contributors, not only artists but also media workers, writers, educators and scientists, to re-address the idea that reality is not a fact to be understood but rather an effect to be produced. Our co-workers had the opportunity to envision 'a' Europe in 'a' discussion with 'a' northern Africa. Part of the curatorial endeavour was to present contributors who work with ideas of 'shifting perspectives' and invite them to act within new fields; this often resulted in challenging contributors to explore terrains beyond their usual practice. By engaging with exhibition, conversation and workshop structures but also with television, radio, newspapers, Internet and cinema, artists, participants and audiences do not just comment on culture (or politics) but also become culture (and politics), directly adding or eliding a slice of history. By inviting contributors to generate specific space situations and media productions – in cooperation with the very places and outputs with whom we engage critically – CPS engenders a vehicle for a new kind of content. Neither complaining about the media's lack of 'serious' matter nor adapting to its hypnotic effect, the participants of this process create a place for awareness that can be used by the 'consumer' to query his or her perspective, and pose a question on how to use information.



*Laurent Grasso, 2010

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Manifesta 8 will take place in the Spanish cities of Murcia and Cartagena in 2010, with the aim to engage with the north-south divide, specifically with Europe's present-day boundaries with northern Africa and its interrelations with the Maghreb region.

Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS) has been selected as one of the three curatorial collectives to curate this years biennale. In the vision of CPS, Manifesta 8 is a series of 'transmissions' (including works of art and interventions in the mass media) which use artistic methods and the strategies of negotiation to explore the specific geographic and socio-political structures that define reality today, and its history. CPS seeks out and promotes dialogues which simultaneously occupy and interrupt the basic boundary conditions that define the framework of Manifesta 8, placing them in the public realm through the practices of media production, documentary-making, artistic research and aesthetic journalism.

<http://cpsman8.wordpress.com/>
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