Art in America

MANIFESTA

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Slippery Slopes in the Dolomites

A premier mechanism of cultural exchange across Europe's porous, post-Cold War borders, Manifesta has, in its seventh version, ventured to a remote region of Italy.

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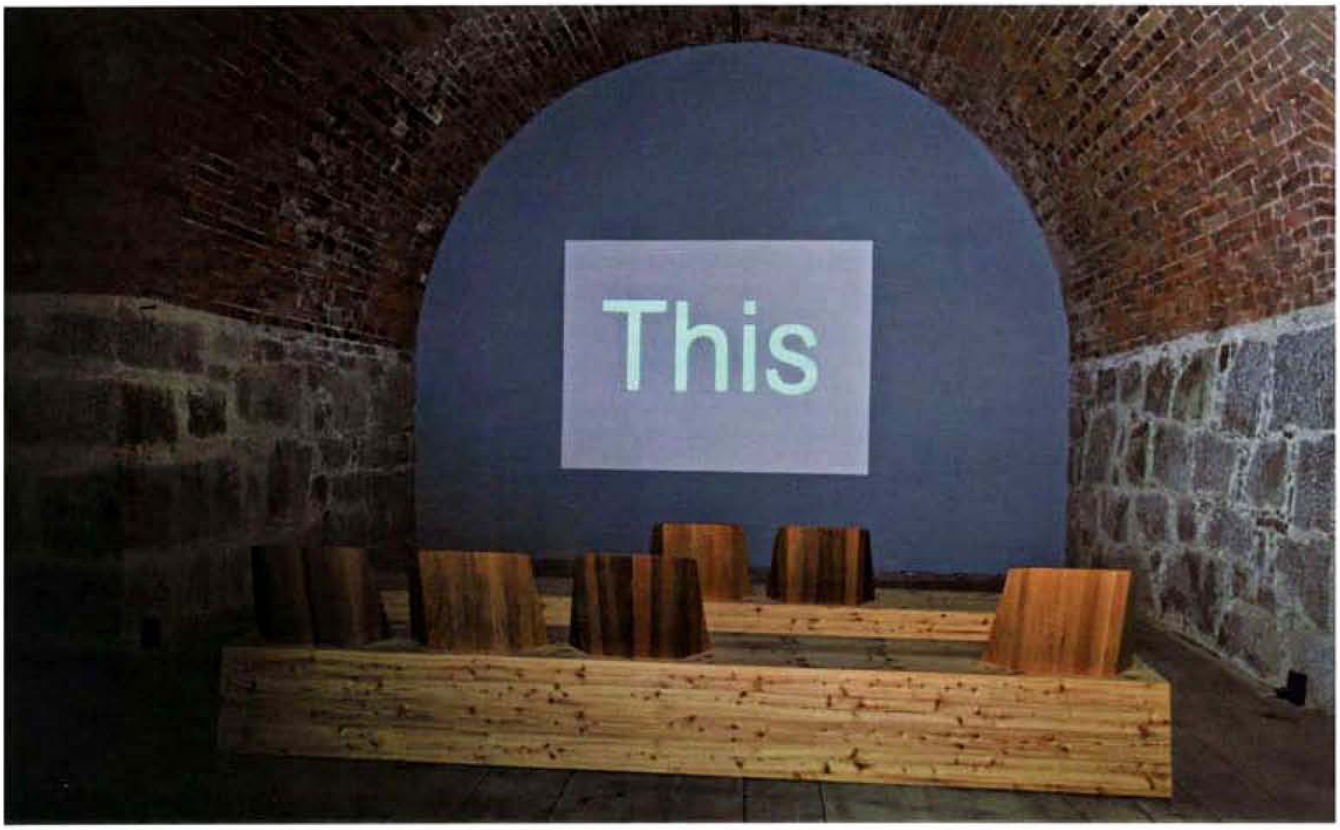

Michael Snow: So Is This, *1982, 16mm film, 45 minutes. Photo Wolfgang Träger.*

The 7th edition of Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, consists of four exhibitions conceived by three curatorial teams led by Adam Budak, Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg, and the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective. In all, more than 200 artists, writers, cinematographers, philosophers and architects were invited to participate. Visitors have to travel more than 75 miles by car to reach all four exhibition venues, which have been meticulously renovated by the hosting region of Trentino-South Tyrol in Italy.

Manifesta has always been an event committed to creating opportunities. Launched in the mid-1990s as an independent, not-for-profit Dutch initiative, the International Foundation Manifesta sought to support a broad range of contemporary artists, curators and communities, taking advantage of—and reflecting—the political and economic changes brought about by the end of the Cold War. Manifesta aspired to foster artistic production and to develop new audiences throughout Europe, especially in former Soviet bloc regions, where there were fewer resources and cultural institutions than in the West. Though the latest Manifesta does include a record number of curators and artists from far-flung regions, I doubt that the show has attracted a record number of international visitors. Not only are its locations remote and hard to find, but its program—as reflected in the three Manifesta 7 publications now in circulation, with a combined total of more than 800 pages of written text—will more likely engage the attention of academics than art lovers.

There seems to have been a shift in aims, as well. For more than a decade, Manifesta has offered visual art as a means to promote liberal cultural exchange in Europe. With this 7th edition, Manifesta apparently pursued exchange opportunities valuable above all for its local host, a politically conservative, separatist, ultra-Catholic region that dedicated a large sum to rehabilitate the exhibition venues. The decision to make such a generous investment is not likely motivated by an interest in or support of art per se; rather, according to rumor, it involves an elaborate tax scheme designed to increase property values and further separatist policies.

Manifesta 7's northernmost venue in Fortezza, both daunting and picturesque, is an imposing stone fortress built by the Hapsburgs in the mid-19th century; later, it housed 2,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers, Nazi gold and, more recently, munitions. Working together on this exhibition, called "Scenarios," the three curatorial teams invited visual artists to conceive sound installations based on texts, often by nonartists, that were translated into a multitude of languages. I expected the use of sound stations to be a convincing approach to the particular challenge of unpacking and properly confronting the site and its dense layers of history. But as I proceeded through the show,

Manifesta was not improved by the expanded number and kind of its curators, who included writers, architects and philosophers. When agency is replaced by agenda, art's wisdom and poetry often get sacrificed.

the successive recitation of essays by tenured professors about the plight of migrant workers, poems by DJs in the narrative voices of orphans and stories by novelists about a nuclear weapons storage site became a less convincing curatorial strategy. Too much of the Manifesta experience is buried in text, and not just at Fortezza.

The most successful group of works in Fortezza is, in fact, visual: a small selection of silent films projected onto screens along two walls of a central axis of the site. Along with Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), a deconstructionist film of isolated written words, and Karø Goldt's close-up, abstracted pastel floral studies (2006), one finds Harun Farocki's thoughtful 2007 portrait of the cameraman Rudolf Breslauer, which uses the subject's own footage of Dutch work camps, shot before he was deported to Auschwitz.

The few sound works that do make an impact were accompanied by installations of Martino Gamper's quirkily disjunctive furniture, as in a room where Mladen Dolar's digressive prose poem *The Voice and the Fortress* (2008) is heard in German, English and Italian. A circular wood bench surrounds the globe-shaped speaker, but seat backs at the bench's interior cause viewers to face the surrounding walls rather than the speaker (or each other). The arrangement inverts Jeremy Bentham's circular Panopticon prison, famously described in Foucault's critique as "a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism." The constraints of Gamper's circular design, by contrast, are meant to challenge a culture of complacency, instead inspiring resistance to structural delimitations.

Elsewhere, Gamper's furniture entices entry to many of the cavernous vaulted cells that run in rows along several levels of the riverside fortress. Unlike the commissioned sound pieces, which felt too lofty for the concrete reality of the site, Gamper's absurd-looking yet genuinely usable chairs, benches and lights, which seem to have been assembled from mismatched parts, do more than translate function into form. Rather than try to make intellectual activity supplant artistic production, Gamper's design objects make manifest the difficulty of accurately synthesizing what remains of history.

At the second Manifesta venue—the Palazzo delle Poste in Trento, designed during the Fascist era with a mythical, Futurist sensibility—curators Franke and Peleg staged "The Soul (Or, Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls)." A number of artists responded directly to the site, and several works were positioned to draw attention to the building's details. In the entryway and beside a central stair leading up to the first floor of exhibition rooms, Luigi Ontani's decorative masks, sculptures and lenticular photographs engage with the building's ornamental and structural features. Similarly, Bernd Ribbeck's small-format paint and ink renderings on wood of quasi-Constructivist graphic schemes,

Beth Campbell: **Following Room (Trento)**, *2008, mixed medium installation.*
Photos this page Wolfgang Träger.

based on utopian Anthroposophic plans, seem custom-made for the site. Both at home and alien in the space, Beth Campbell's *Following Room (Trento)*, 2008, creates a spatial paradox, its two rooms meticulously constructed to look as if one were a mirror image of the other. Similarly integrating fact and fiction, Barbara Visser's installation *Former Futures* (2008) presents a video narration of the correspondence between the Palazzo delle Poste's architect, Angiolo Mazzoni, and the Futurist artist Fortunato Depero, who designed the stained-glass windows elsewhere in the building. For her installation, Visser has covered the windows with colored gels.

Interspersed with these works, which determinedly engage the exhibition venue, are a few that focus on the region's complicated political history and multiethnic, polyglot identity. Andree Korpys and Markus Löffler's video *Villa Feltrinelli* (2008), for example, is a slow pan shot of architectural details in the former home of Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli (1926-1972), who was born into one of Italy's wealthiest families and became a renowned activist with ties to radical leftist groups. There is still speculation about the circumstances surrounding Feltrinelli's violent death. The villa is also an ambiguous symbol, having been Mussolini's headquarters in 1943, the location where Pasolini shot *120 Days of Sodom* in 1972 and, since 1998, a grand hotel.

Other artists chose not to address any specific site or scene, but rather to delve into problems inherent to the region that are also prevalent elsewhere, including political antagonisms arising from ideologies of autonomy. Tamy Ben-Tor's 2007 video, screened on a single monitor in a small room, features the artist in a number of roles: a Swedish angel, a Hasidic woman, a Polish folk dancer. Ben-Tor crafts the voice of each character with an accomplished balance of fidelity and mockery as she spouts various brands of radical rhetoric.

Despite the number of outstanding artists selected by curators Franke and Peleg, the pair's overall effort is weakened by the five "miniature museum" sections they commissioned, each with selections of ephemera: color charts ("The Museum of Learning Things"), hospital records ("The Museum for Franco Basaglia"), Rorschach test inkblots ("The Museum of Projective Personality Testing") and receipts ("The Museum of European Normality"), all stashed in remote corners of the building. Assembled and installed by teams of academics, editors, artists and other cultural workers, these mini-museums aim to