

Curating in the context of Manifesta 8

A conversation between ACAF (Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum), CPS (Chamber of Public Secrets - Alfredo Cramerotti & Khaled Ramadan) and tranzit.org

tranzit: In recent years, biennials have been widely criticised as being just another agent of the "spectacularisation" of culture and the culturalisation of politics. They have been accused of being a medium for stratification and striation of cultural and social antagonisms. When you accepted the commission to curate Manifesta 8, what did you consider were the forces that engender the possibility for play, freedom and experiment within the grip of such a medium?

ACAF: The conditions of Manifesta 8 – as is true of most large cultural undertakings in which complex collaborations are required – for us collided precisely with certain trends within the contemporary art system: the over-abundance 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 link, but rather embodying the idea of an indescribable complexity.

CPS: The question was how to take on the risk without diminishing our concept. For CPS, the possibilities you mention, of play, freedom and experiment, were engendered in the idea of directing a film rather than curating a biennial. This ‘film procedure’ needed to be carefully constructed with a coherent aesthetic approach, both in theory and practice. And we asked ourselves: **what does 'curating' mean in a context where expectations are high, as well as politically and socially charged, considering the 'culturally charged' layer that we inhabit in Murcia.**

ACAF: The question of who holds power and how power is used is maybe more relevant. Our strategy has been to work with those factors we feel we have authority over, or can influence, within the context of Manifesta 8. These factors are mainly in the sphere of the curatorial and the cultural. We have developed a curatorial methodology and process which opens up new conceptual territories for us to create flexible space for our invited artists and contributors. Overall, the project can be seen as a prototype or model to lay the foundations for resisting an easy recuperation process by the politics that dominate artistic discourse.

tranzit:-To relate to local constellations is one of the most problematic of things. Not to fall into the traps of extracting the essence of locality, thus denying the complex layers of political and cultural narratives for each local context, which often remain ignorant of one another. In any case, many of the local *fantasmata* around Manifesta 8 have been deconstructed by the effects of the current crisis and the realities of institutional budgeting and co-option. What might happen is that the event will create a lot of local response and critique. This then, one would hope, will function as a unifying agent for political action at another, local level.

ACAF: Biennials are unofficially assigned the status of global art platforms for addressing global issues. In what ways do you consider your contribution to Manifesta 8 to be 'critical' in the sense that it probes certain socio-political conditions?

tranzit: Criticality is a battered term. Art that interests us-takes up a position of conflictive thought without, however, neutralising or making conflict an unsurpassable essence. Good exhibitions are models for spaces where conflictive forms, figures and events enter into mutual relationships. Our project for Manifesta 8 is intended to grow out of the topology and temporal conditions of these relationships – which, we hope, may not be reduced to mere representation. Working on a “Constitution” for a temporary display, we imagine our project is a space where the conditions and realities of exhibition-making are consequences of a common “constitutional effort”.

CPS: We understand ‘being critical’ in the sense of changing, providing the means and contexts to transform perspectives. ‘Shifting perspective’ is the crucial mode of working for artists and for anyone else who does not simply ‘address’ things within the art system but rather produces this shift in her/his own life, and in other people’s lives. Our invitation to a range of actors, from media producers, documentary filmmakers, writers, scientists, neuro-psychiatrists and other extra-artistic workers, is testament to this.

ACAF: To what degree and to what end have you - as a curatorial team - been brought into this edition of Manifesta in order to solve certain so-called crises (immigration, environmental, political, economical, for example) through an art project?

CPS: We don’t think anybody, including the community in Murcia, expects us and the other two teams to solve crises, even less through an art project. As a whole, we should stop considering an audience as a constituency of critically uninformed people who blindly believe whatever is brought to them. The reality is that in Murcia and Cartagena, like anywhere else in the world, there are various issues about which it is important to be aware. Why are these issues here, now, what are the ways to discuss them, how important are they, what will they potentially transform into, there and tomorrow? You can apply these questions to your own home or city, and provide answers for yourself – a biennial is not a necessary tool to address these issues, however it acts as a good platform for different positions and (shifted) perspectives. It offers the opportunity to build on these or articulate a personal viewpoint in contra-position, accordance or confrontation.

tranzit: Contemporary art practices are no remedies to any social problem.

ACAF: To what extent are you planning to differentiate or integrate theory and practice? How do you 'mind the gap', so to speak, between them? In relation to this, to what degree are you planning to reconsider the familiar formats of past biennials for the production and presentation of art in your Manifesta 8 project?

tranzit - Biennials and art shows based on elaborate theoretical concepts often suffer

from a certain incoherency – an inability to translate the proposed criticism into the form of an exhibition. The challenge for us is to reconsider the physical and mental space of the exhibition in order to bridge the gap between critical imagination and making. We were also led to this as a practice of persons linked to a climate of intellectual change in four countries of Eastern or Central Europe. We began to sense this conflict between theory and practice strongly in the 1990s, when Eastern European art in the eyes of a Western art institutional, non-institutional and academic practice found itself one of the offshoots of Orientalism. The historically new, already post-orientalist quality of arguments deriving from anti-essentialist paradigms, Deleuze epistemology, post-Foucault reception and antagonistic political reflections, was very surprising. We did not understand until later that this change of paradigms had only and exclusively a theoretical statute and dimension. On a practical level, such a theoretical apparatus, often driven by hegemonic, narcissistic, capitalistic and other power agendas, created much confusion and non-productive conflict which we needed to experience and then learn from. So we decided to make this a starting point for our considerations for M8.

CPS: We understand theory as practice and practice (or better 'praxis') as theory. Therefore there's no need to 'mind the gap'. We collaborated with theoreticians, who do their work as fully effective practice and with practitioners who are transforming the theoretical basis of their fields. For instance, through his research and the work with CPS, neuro-psychiatry scientist Professor John Kennedy is challenging his own environment in relation to blindness and visualisation. His work redraws the history of art (and visuality), from cave inscriptions via the founder of the *camera obscura* Ibn al-Haythm (965-1039) and the appearance of Filippo Brunelleschi's perspective drawings, to the birth of the phenomenological blind artist Eşref Armağan (1953). CPS is itself overturning curatorial practice since it deals not only with art history but information processes.

tranzit: Do you see yourself, and your curatorial project being co-opted by a situation, wherein by consciously thinking about criticality and about resisting the conventions of the biennial, you are already catering to the whole sense of spectacle?

CPS:-Ultimately the role of art is to push this limit in order to give room for new articulations in art itself. We find ourselves facing a triangular configuration, forming three major challenges for our contributors and for ourselves. The first was closely related to institutional critique, the current position of Manifesta itself as a Foundation at a crossroads after fifteen years in operation. Reviewing the previous Manifestas, we became convinced that new thinking and action in relation to the 'format biennial' was needed. The second challenge is connected to the host country of Spain. This relates to demands and expectations by the Region of Murcia, which is reshaping its cultural policy through a combination of cultural aspiration and political will. The third issue is related to the aesthetic approach and constructs of CPS's production, history and performance.

ACAF: 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'.

CPS: What thoughts are driving your collective (we know we are 3 very different collectives, but since we've been invited as such...)? What do you focus on in your approach, how do you intend to develop these ideas within (or without) Manifesta 8?

tranzit: Curating always runs the danger of endeavouring 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 thematisation? We are interested in the very moment of blurriness, of the liquefaction of condensed, formal meanings and structures, that opens up the relationship of aesthetic space, of art and of histories – to politics. Art can be solar, hypertrophic, contradictory, cynical, obscene, deviant, ...

ACAF: A curatorial project without an imposed narrative that does not use the usual vocabulary of criticality, a curatorial approach that magnifies the intricate complexities of contemporary socio-political and socio-cultural life, a curatorial project that does not declare a crisis because we will always be in some sort of crisis, an approach that is not afraid to pose solutions however unfinished these solutions may be, a project that looks at the collective unconscious of the art world as a force to be reckoned with and that seeks answers in the institutional and cultural files of the 80's. These are some of the aspects built into our project for Manifesta 8.

tranzit: How, if at all do you, in your contribution, relate to the motto proposed by the Board of Manifesta Foundation: to implement a dialogue between Spain (a part of the global north) and northern Africa (as representing emerging countries of a specific global south)? And if so, how did you balance between the need for topicality and the task of historicisation?

CPS: We 'designed' our approach by a question: ¿The Rest is History? (Probably no, and will never be.) Spain/Europe and North Africa/the Arab world share one history, yet one which conveys many stories. European researchers who studied the history of Northern Africa and the Arab world divided it into several eras, namely: the era of emergence, 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's campaign in Egypt in 1798. For the Arabs, this division comes out of an Orientalism-inspired Western civilisation. Here memory becomes a driving force behind political awareness in contemporary Africa and the Arab world. To answer your last question, we think that cross-cultural work is not, and will never be, a simplistic task of historicisation and 'correction'; precisely for the huge array of diverging narratives, point of views and layers of identity (not only cultural) that exist in every society. It is much more useful to create a context in which these problematic issues of diversification can emerge 'organically' and learn to co-habit and question each other – also via the use of information systems.

ACAF: Here we would like to quote Jacques Rancière (from *Aesthetic Separation*,

Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art, 2006): "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." 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? A valid option then seems to be to look at it from the angle of the engineer who builds systems or the mathematician who develops interfaces. A curatorial interface or system can be taken and developed further, modules can be reinforced and updated later with the ideas of others. 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 to build such an interface, as both tactic and logic.

tranzit: **But 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 and colonies, of localities and of nation-states, of transnational economies; or different maps, maybe ever smaller and more specific or larger and more universalist - continental, hemispheric in scope?**

CPS: The Motto 'in dialogue with northern Africa' was one of our biggest challenges. We rarely see a biennial relating to geography, nation-state and the rest of your categorisation with such specificity. So perhaps the Motto can be valid after all – despite the due criticism emerging from the questions: what is 'Northern Africa' and what is 'dialogue'? If we decide to ignore the Motto, it will still keep reminding you and us of its existence in every corner of the region, in every street and news story. We didn't refuse it *a priori*. We opened up an ever-expanding and spiraling-out space. And through it we saw the Motto emerge almost at every step. So we took it on-board through our contributors' work, we processed it, dismantled, re-arranged, re-assessed, re-negotiated, re-digested and metabolised it, with everyone being very much implicated.

ACAF: 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 pin-pointed on a map - maps cannot keep up with the complexity of life.

CPS: But why did you think it was important for the Manifesta Board to again propose a sort of geopolitical framework?

tranzit: Recently, it is obvious that Europe and the Maghreb, the European Union and the states of North Africa, have once again become more deeply embroiled within a mesh of political considerations and re-evaluations. It is just a recent generalisation that speaks about North Africa as a singular political current, a region, which in its inner ethnic, social, religious and political complexity is hard to define – and which reminds us of Eastern Europe. Therefore every *a priori* polarisation of Europe and North Africa disregards history as it disregards the stormy developments of the last thirty or forty years. We would argue to implicate the latter in a shared history of transition. There have been colonies and anti-colonial movements, a long series of religious and trade battles, a long history of changing domination and subalternity; but there are also cultural and social copying processes, a history of multiple exchanges and interchanges, mingled and intertwined. A field full of projections, counter-projections and translational turbulence. For us there is no Europe and no North Africa existing as separate entities. But there are people – and there are borders, there is an economic split, there are different forms of governance. And there has always been a history of migrating humans and ideas since the times of the transhumance. The ‘African North’ has been a driving force in the creation of Europe since antiquity. And: there is a North Africa in Europe – and not only in the *banlieus* of its cities – just as there is a Europe in North Africa – not only in the modernist dwellings near the historic souk. Deriving from the idea of the creation of ambiguous imagery about the past and present of the region, the intention of our approach is to link and generate parallel channels of thought and understanding, to research hidden histories, pinpointing alternative structures and temporary concepts of resistance.

ACAF: Who is your Manifesta project for? Within the context of the excess of aesthetics, ideas and representation that is Manifesta, how do you intend that the audience - local and non-local, expert and non-expert - will understand the inclusion of such an array of international artists?

tranzit: We do not consider the exhibition as a school where audiences are taught, nor as a mere space for consumption. Instead of trying to work between the different presumed expectations of possible audiences, we try to self-thematize the conditions of production and perception of the exhibition. We’d rather rely on the potential of the disinterested, aesthetic viewpoint of the visitor. However we are in favour of maintaining the tension between the interested community (thus including specific histories) and the idea of a general public in a formalist act – our *Constitution for a Temporary Display*. We believe that art maintains this tension – and an exhibition is an engaged ‘manifestation’, to the extent that the artworks it comprises have an engaged character without verging on politics – this is what constitutes its resistance as well. In keeping with Godard’s definition, artistic form (but also an exhibition, we think) is the *a priori* figure of engagedness. This is why we consider it of the utmost importance that artists be a part of the process of creating the forms of the exhibition – this is also

reflected in our team.

tranzit: Do you intend to establish contacts between the audience and the production spheres of your project? Is there any educational prospect in your curatorial considerations?

ACAF: We always find it difficult to talk about education. What we call 'the collective unconscious of art' establishes the view in people minds that education as an art-tactic is 'good' and almost always 'positive'. Even if they know better, there is still a residue of this that can't be removed, or perhaps which 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 80s, a period we look back on in our project for Manifesta 8 as the decade which saw the final fermentation of art along various social and cultural lines, a kind of fixative period where problematic conceptions became a permanent part of art-logic. The question then is not if art should educate, because in most cases you cannot develop an exhibition without at least some hint at education, even on a subconscious level, but what and whom should it be educating and in which way? Here again, Jacques Rancière's ideas are important - the idea of starting from a position of equality with the spectator and not presuming anyone's ignorance is, we think, vital for art production in the upcoming years. In our project, we speculate about, and delve into, the origins of the pedagogical strain in art practice in the same way as we treat the cultural-ethnic strain, and the criticality strain, since all of these strains seem to have been constructed from the same source material, for varying but similar reasons. These strains also seem to have developed a similar permanence in contemporary practice.

CPS: Today's audiences (especially those of 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 is done so according to the manner of the receiver. Consequently, we are proposing to re-frame both the 'exhibition format' and the 'biennial format' not by denying them but rather by expanding their remit - through mass media analysis, productions and the critical use of information systems.

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

ACAF: Interesting curators should be half-human, half-vampire, like Wesley Snipes in the film *Blade*.