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Moor the Merrier

MURCIA, SPAIN    10.20.10



Left: Wooloo's Mikkell Rosengaard and Sixten Kai Nielsen. Right: Curator Alistair Hudson, artist Ryan Gander, and Documenta's Eva Scharrer. (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

ON THE THURSDAY before Frieze, I hopped on the last public bus out of Cartagena to Murcia, Spain, where the opening-night party for Manifesta 8 was being held in a giant Moorish-style plaza. Enclosed by a former artillery barrack, the site is one of the venues for this roving show, which is known for examining the intersections of diverse cultures, a kind of meta-performance as exhibition. Huge plates of bland vegetarian paella—paid for by the city of Limberg, Belgium, the site of the next Manifesta—were being served to a long line of people while we were serenaded by human beat box Kenny Muhammad. I ran into artist Ryan Gander, who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely amid a sea of other Britons basking in the surprisingly sultry weather. "You know, the English Arts Council has sent down about two hundred curators," he said.

The next day I made my way down elegant Calle Mayor to the belle époque Cartagena Casino to view Stefanos Tsivopoulos's film *Amnesialand*, part of the section "The Rest Is History?" curated by the Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS). A poetic portrait of nearby former mining community La Unión, it employs gorgeous shots of bloodlike toxic water running through stark formations of denuded earth and archival photos of families and ruined mineshafts to depict how the exploited region "was networked for its own death" since slaves started working it in Roman times. Profits from the industry funded the present building, in retrospect a bit gaudy.

The most compelling installations were those that engaged the city's history: Next stop was the Prison of San Antón, another venue that added tangible material presence to the work, which overflowed with political prisoners in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. As we entered the pentagonal building, closed up for decades as if the prisoners just walked out, curator Roland Schöny announced, "I'm so excited: I love prisons and churches!" Just inside, Abed Robert Anouti's documentary *The Shadow of San Antón* revealed grisly facts such as a priest who denounced locals and then seized their property, later becoming director of the prison. "The charged atmosphere of the place nearly overwhelms the artworks," Documenta's Eva Scharrer observed.



Left: Chamber of Public Secrets curators Hannah Conroy and Khalid Ramadan. Right: Curator Nigel Prince and Manifesta director Hedwig Fijen.

In the Old Autopsy Pavilion, a purpose-built single dome next to the defunct bullring, Laurent Grasso's ominously striking film *The Bateria* slowly pans the port's Punic ramparts, medieval fortresses, modern military installations, and a submarine cruising sharklike toward land with lushly gripping viewpoints. KW's Denhart von Harling commented rightly that it felt like the perfect integration of site and work. Murcia's former post office made a fantastic peeling backdrop for "Overscore," curated by Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum, where Willie Doherty's video *Segura* contemplates details on the nearby river in painterly frames for twenty-four hours, and Gander's claustrophobic *The Language of the Exhibition* is a disconcerting invitation into an uninviting room.

The party that night was on the same hill in the Parque Torres, providing a stunning live panorama of the bay. After downing too much beer for safety, starting at a local Moroccan-owned bar, we descended precipitous steps to where Transit.org, one of the biennial's three curatorial collectives, was staging a performance in an amphitheater. An offshoot of their exhibition, titled "Constitution for Temporary Display," the incomprehensible spectacle was not temporary enough for some: as Karl Holmqvist muttered monotone poetry into a microphone, critic Alex Ferrando commented wryly: "I feel like I'm at a '60s happening—small H." At least all the layers of history were visible from there: just

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SCREEN PALEY

below was a Roman amphitheater abutting the shell of an Arab palace, with the Moorish Castillo de la Concepción in the distance.

Speculating as to who would travel to this relatively remote region to see the exhibitions, Mari Lagerquist of Sweden's Mobile Box noted the obvious: "I think you get people here who like art with a political dimension." The concept of this Manifesta, to engage in a dialogue with Northern Africa, seems to have been undermined by the complex curatorial structure—or perhaps the current intersection between the two regions is expressed precisely by its nonexistence. A curator explained that it was difficult to find African artists who work with this type of conceptualism, itself an attitude of exclusion calling for conformity to particular cultural constraints. The answer may have been at the prison in the form of a crudely outfitted "Penetration Space, for Northern Africans only," to which no artist ever showed up (including an Algerian who reportedly was to install a video).



Left: Artist Mariusz Tarkawian. Right: Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum's Bassam El Baroni and Jeremy Beaudry.

On Saturday morning at the official opening ceremony in Murcia, a city founded by Moors, demonstrators protested against a parking lot planned to cover the site of newly discovered Arab ruins. Meanwhile some city officials had just been arrested for misuse of public funds. (A Dutch journalist from Madrid told me, "We know this region mostly for its corruption.") I went upstairs to visit Wooloo's "New Life Residency," where Helidon Gjergji, one of the artists in a series, collaborated with a local blind woman to create a room filled with the harmonious aroma of various spices. You move through the pitch-dark along a rope, wincing from the blows of imagined obstacles, testing the confines of the space, and just feeling your way—an experience akin to the pleasure and anxiety of love. It was a great relief to make it out of there, sweating like hell.

For the closing party that night the entire entourage was shuttled to La Conservera, a canned-food factory converted into a contemporary art museum in the remote village of Ceuti. The pouring rain put a damper on a planned concert, and the festivities resembled a flash mob, with the fried food and beer running out within an hour. "They seem to have two basic flavors in this region, oily and salty," Ferrando noted. Gander summed up the weekend: "It all started with Indian summer and ended with hundreds of curators fighting to get on the last airlift to Murcia."

— Cathryn Drake



Left: Artists David Campbell, Willie Doherty, and Ian Brown. Right: Critic Alex Ferrando with Wooloo's Martin Rosengaard.

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