

# Reviews

## MANIFESTA 5 European Biennial of Contemporary Art

Donostia/San Sebastián, Spain

The day I left the UK for Spain, elections were held to choose representatives at the European Parliament. The British public in its quixotic wisdom chose to elect, alongside delegates from the principal political parties, members of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – a right-wing group opposed to the European Union and championed by Robert Kilroy-Silk, an ex-TV chat show host known for his outspoken views on immigration. By the time I heard the results I had arrived with the rest of the art world's low-budget jet-set in Donostia/San Sebastián, a coastal city at the heart of Spain's contested Basque region and the host city for Manifesta 5. To travel from a nation ambivalent about European integration to a region wishing to attain political, cultural and linguistic autonomy from Spain seemed an oddly apt set of circumstances in which to see a politically inflected exhibition of work by artists from across Europe.

This Manifesta, curated by Massimiliano Giono and Marta Kuzma under the title '... With All Due Intent' (contributed by Lawrence Weiner), made cogent and healthily troubled sense – perhaps surprisingly so. Big international group shows are calendar fixtures at which sets of curators can puff their chests, proudly touting righteous agendas employing artworks as ready-to-go ciphers, drafted in to tick socio-political boxes, fill geographical quotas or just revel in their own neo-infantilism. More often than not disparities abound, as the world of biennials struggles to keep up with the fast-moving world around it. At Manifesta 5 a clear agenda could be discerned, yet a lightness of touch safeguarded it from didactic tub-thumping. Clear conversations could be seen and understood between the works. It proved intelligently adept at allowing manifold voices and readings, acknowledging, unlike many ideologically driven projects, that for all our geographical, social or political allegiances, we're ultimately just individuals trying to get along in the world – and that alone is tough enough.

Ten venues across the historical quarter of Donostia/San Sebastián and the neighbouring industrial port of Passaia hosted the biennial. With its deeply complex and often troubled history, the area provided Manifesta with a cultural ambient

noise, whisperings in the ear about the efficacy of individual action from the interior plane of imagination to the turbulent arenas of political conflict.

Some salient moments, then. Private languages and gestures were explored and valued. Cathy Wilkes' quixotically precise arrangement of objects *Cara Studies Votes for Women* (2004) was a highly tuned circuit of ideas that existed in a state of exquisite stillness, sensitizing the visitor to his/her own presence in the room, yet never relinquishing the sovereignty of its own objecthood. An oblique echo of this could be seen in Michaël Borremans' mute, painterly visions of isolation. Daniel Roth's set of meticulous drawings and sculpture *Gladswaldsee* (2003–4) explored secret connections and labyrinthine webs of conspiratorial ideas. The inclusion of four Bas Jan Ader films – *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1971), *Fall II, Amsterdam* (1970), *Broken Fall (Organic)* (1971) and *Broken Fall (Geometric)* (1971) – speculated, with melancholy humour, on the effectiveness of our bodies as agents for our hopes and ambitions.

Jan de Cock's hugely ambitious *Denkmal #2* (Monument #2, 2004) transformed the interior of an old shipbuilding warehouse in Passaia with a mind-bogglingly intricate set of interlocking planes, floors and walls, taking visual cues from architectural features of the warehouse in order to form a sculptural language that obstinately refused to settle between interior and exterior space. On a far smaller scale, Vangelis Vlahos' cardboard *Buildings Like Text are Socially Constructed* (2004) mounted a rhetorical attack on high-rise hotels and financial headquarters – paper tigers, but symbols of economic and national power.

Documentary video abounded. For the most part, however, a range of approaches to the genre was adopted, acknowledging that personal testament after personal testament becomes hard going in a gallery context. Hito Steyerl's video *November* (2004) is an elegiac meditation on the life of her friend Andrea Wolf, assassinated in 1998 as a suspected Kurdish terrorist, having already been implicated as a member of Germany's Red Army Faction. Steyerl's work pulls in references to martial arts films and the exploitative

iconography of Russ Meyer's trash masterpiece *Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!* (1965), broadening the scope of the video to explore the ways in which 'terrorism' or 'freedom fighting' develops a visual vocabulary. Gillian Wearing's *Tedi* (2003) adopts the guise of a tourist guide to the Albanian capital, Tirana, with a boy describing the city's monuments with the zealous pride of a young party convert. *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*, Mark Leckey's 1999 video loosely following the development of British dance culture from Northern Soul to Acid House, works found footage into a hallucinatory study of ritualized crowd psychology. Basque collective D.A.E. (Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak) presented *Film ideal siempre* (Ideal Film Always, 1964–2004), a project taking as its starting-point *Operación H*, a 1963 film ostensibly made as a documentary, yet perhaps closer to Structuralist filmmaking than conventional public information film.

The inclusion of Eyal Sivan and Michel Khleifi's *Route 181* (2003), however, was problematic. At four and a half hours in length this study of the lives of inhabitants on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian border was badly suited to the gallery context. With visitors drifting in and out, a deeply complex issue became flattened. Surely this would have been better suited to the wider audience of television, rather than speaking to art world peers. To wield any real political clout, perhaps an artist needs to forget whether any curators or critics are watching, or even ignore art altogether and engage directly with the world. In this sense Jeremy Deller's *Parade* (2004) through the streets of the city, drafting in cadres of local alternative societies and support groups, was a far more profound and enjoyable political gesture.

My favourite moment of the opening week came when one of the simultaneous translators at the press conference began to add his own commentary. 'Well now he's just repeating himself', he remarked during one speech. 'He's just reading this from a newspaper!' he exclaimed later on, before pleading with the speakers to talk more slowly. Although language is a group activity, requiring tacit agreement and mutual patience, ultimately there's always a communication gap, leaving us, like the translator, marooned a few steps behind. All art can do is wave. *Dan Fox*