

Biennial of Ljubljana

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As a pre-opening press conference marking the convening of Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana, Slovenia was about to begin, two uninvited artists suddenly bolted through the auditorium onto the stage, chanting slogans and tossing leaflets as they ran. "Sabotage Manifesta 3!" "Attack the neo-liberal art system!" "Long live political and cultural resistance and active disobedience!" Before they could be apprehended, the twosome had defaced the projection screen and the main Manifesta banner with their declarations of dissent. In the same vista we could see the phrase FREE AS A BIRD, the logo of Mobitel, Manifesta's main Slovenian corporate sponsor, emblazoned on signage and programs throughout the hall. The most 'free-thinking' of art exhibitions was being

challenged for its policies by advocates of even more extreme leftist ideology. The demonstrators, the Russian artist **Alexander Brenan** and a friend, confined their "art action" to salvation from an international conspiracy of taste-makers (especially the curators of Manifesta) who, they claimed, were including multiculturalism and gender politics in the packaging of culture for the marketplace. Another border to negotiate. Another deliverance to debate. In the global endgame of border hostility at the start of this new century, where does the artist stand? Manifesta, celebrating its third appearance, this time in Slovenia's capital of Ljubljana, had always taken itself very seriously as an outlet for young or under-recognized European artists with a message of some socio-

political position. So it was logical for the guest curators for Manifesta 3, **Francesco Bonami, Ole Bouman, Maria Hlavajova** and **Kathrin Rhombert**, to use the opportunity to apply the question to the border circumstances of a Europe in the throes of change. The curatorial committee chose the theme of *Borderline Syndrome: Energies of Defence*. The term 'borderline syndrome' and its 'manifestations' comes from psychoanalytic textbooks, but the mental disorder itself was applied broadly by the team to examine not only the symptoms but the means of resistance—social, political, physical, spatial and psychological—that have marked recent European artmaking in the continental stress zones. Geo-political questions of where to draw the line between the threat of

global cultural homogenization and nationalistic backlash were also raised under the rubric of this 'borderline syndrome' phenomenon. Manifesta joined the circuit of international contemporary art surveys in far-flung capitals from Cairo to Kwanjgu in 1996, as the first biennial to be staged in a different European city each time around. After two successful summer-long events in Rotterdam (1996) and Luxembourg (1998), Manifesta 3 was on view in Ljubljana from June 23 until September 24, 2000. The first non-EU member to host a Manifesta, Slovenia is itself a 'border republic' surrounded by Italy, Austria, Croatia and the Adriatic at the 'crossroads' between eastern and western Europe. Independence from Yugoslavia was won in 1991, and in stark contrast to other

The Russian artist ALEXANDER BRENNAN covers the screens with slogans at the beginning of the symposium in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the 22nd June, 2000. To the far right, BRENNAN being apprehended



Balkan nations where territorial claims, religious differences and minority riffs cause constant turmoil, Slovenia is a model of post-communist democracy. Borders are at the forefront of current events in the wake of the torrential watershed events that have engulfed Europe over the last decade: namely, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Empire and the gains of European Union efforts. Long-beleaguered areas like Northern Ireland and Israel were represented in this Manifesta, but the main focus here was on Central and Eastern Europe. Most of the exhibiting artists came from the Balkans, the Baltic nations and other former Soviet republics. Issues of boundaries and canons of freedom for the Manifesta artists have been unalterably conditioned by living in territories experiencing extreme unrest. Changing borders, shifting political doctrines, internecine feuding, immigration and emigration have dramatically shaped many of the various visual strategies applied by the artists in the show. Unprecedented access to a free flow of information via the internet and other media technologies elevated the discourse here to a more sophisticated understanding of the issues-at-large and served to sharpen the artistic authority of work that might have succumbed to mere political profiteering. Some sixty projects were mainly housed in four buildings and about ten were installed in scattered public spaces surrounding Ljubljana's compact city center. The participating artists were not familiar, even in the most informed art circles, excepting perhaps **Marjetica Potrc**,

Elmgreen & Dragset, **Bulent Sangar**, **Manfred Pernice**, and a few others who have appeared intermittently in other recent international art events. In keeping with world-wide artistic practice, the "media-du-jour" for this Manifesta were video (or film) projected or monitor-bound, photography and installation. There was scant representation of performance, sound, new media and sculpture, and no painting. Yet four projects of noteworthy artistic accomplishment in the spectrum of media could serve to capture the breadth of the Manifesta 3 theme: **Pawel Althamer's** *Film 2000*; **Ene-Liis Semper's** *FF/Rew*; **Matthias Muller's** *Vacancy*; and **Darij Kreuh's** *Bar Code*. Because of its complex reflection on a metaphysical borderline phenomenon – the microscopic distinction between art and life, between fiction and reality, between audience and actor, between public and private space, it seems to me that the project of Polish artist **Pawel Althamer** would stand out in any context. In perhaps his most ambitious production to date, premiered at Manifesta 3, Althamer 'directed reality', so to speak. Each afternoon, a *tableaux vivant* entitled *The Film*, 2000 was enacted in a public square surrounded by shops and cafes. The "cast" of ordinary types – an old man, a policeman, two young girls, a tourist, a skateboarder, lovers, and a bum– mingled among the shoppers virtually indistinguishable from the crowd – except on close observation. The audience, many of whom were unsuspecting participants,

became in effect part of the play as they strolled through the scene. After about a half-hour, the "actors" abruptly left the plaza, the denouement as elusive as the drama. Seeing reality as a motion picture sets up a situation where the viewer can instantly enter a 'picture', crossing a border into a space where gallery, museum and art longer influence the experience. Conversant with the history and language of independent filmmaking as well as the whole spectrum of art practice in the 90s, Althamer pushes the envelope. His particular means of blurring the distinction between observer and participant, his uncommon use of living 'sculpture material' taken well beyond action and happening, and even performance art into a post-media cultural melieux, are a provocative conceptual subtext for our times. Another effective piece, this time addressing the mental anguish associated with classic borderline syndrome was Estonian **Ene-Liis Semper's** video *FF/Rew* (1999). Semper uses her own body to express a personally-charged form of brinkmanship. One of the few ironically plotted works in the exhibition, the projection comments not only on video technology's rudimentary ability to contract, expand and repeat time and space, but on the artifice of play-acting, in order to wrest emotion from within the border between the body's interior and its surface skin. In a theatrically-feigned skit on madness, the artist, a lean and gangly presence with shorn hair, is seated next to a small table, quietly reading a book. Against the insistent



ENE-LIIS SEMPER
FF / Rew, 2000
Video installation

refrain of a Beethoven sonata, the woman suddenly rises, moves forward and attempts to hang herself. Just after she kicks the stool from under her dangling feet, the film suddenly rewinds and the story repeats in reverse except that the pseudo-suicide is by gunshot. The cycle continues back and forth for 17 riveting minutes, and the polarities of expression and suppression gush and abate through the body's mantle, a portrait of schizophrenic angst – the psyche of a jettisoned refugee. The folly of globalization when it is purged of regional identification was dramatically portrayed in *Vacancy* (1999), a new film by German filmmaker **Matthias Muller**.



PAWEK ALTHAMER, *Motion Picture*, 2000, Performance at MANIFESTA 3, Ljubljana, Courtesy Foksal Gallery Foundation

Muller, whose work has appeared in dozens of prestigious film festivals worldwide, is one of the young prodigies in his field. *Vacancy* was shot on location in Brasilia, the abandoned capital built in the interior savannah lands of Brazil the late 1950s as a model of progressive city planning. One long haunting present-day sequence of a maintenance crew cleaning a concrete wall which supports a highway where cars pass no longer pass is an elegy to the utopian modernist dream. Charting the history of Brasilia, Muller collaged a prism of professional archival material and original home movies documenting the process of building the city, with his own footage. Old sound tracks

have been intermixed with the artist reciting texts written by **Italo Calvino**, **Samuel Beckett** and **David Wojnarowicz** as well as his own reveries. Trafficking back and forth from present to past to present, this portrait of cultural ambiguity at the 'border' of the new millennium brings us full circle to the current European situation.

In the new media category, *Bar Code*, a complex interactive cyber-installation by Slovenian **Darij Kreuh** and his colleagues teemed with ideas about digitally reconfigured bodies learning to exist harmoniously in virtual communities where intruders who disrupted the balance were identified and absorbed. The Platonic society of avatars

whose composition was based on the user's height and weight translated into a computerized bar code, was to be experienced as spheres of light orbiting in a dark planetarium-like environment. Philosophically and metaphorically linked to the theme of borderline syndrome, in which the very core of identity is technologically dissected, *Bar Code* was a missed opportunity for some at the opening. Not always such a 'smart environment' – the computers and the Internet component were often not working. Nevertheless, the project seemed to have interesting potentiality, but as is so often the case with new media experiments, artistic ambition remains the servant to the

recalcitrant technological master of an immersive installation.

The many video documentaries, which told tales of border divides of displacement, defiance and defense, ranged from creative journalism to interpretive storytelling. **Ursula**

Biemann's *Performing the Border*, 1999, shifts the gaze from Europe to the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez, near El Paso, Texas, where US corporations have built assembly plants for computer parts. Her video essay sought to highlight the growing culture of 'techno-genderization' that is the outgrowth of border belt capitalism. The American 'maquiladoras' or Golden Mills, as they are called, offer thousands of low-paying jobs which attract mainly adolescent girls from poverty-stricken villages far south of the border. Biemann mixes interviews and voice-overs with activists and workers, and clips from work-place, bars and strip joints to describe the lives of this new caste of border refugee. The tedious repetitiveness of the work day, the night life of bawdy entertainment and prostitution, the fate of children born in the town, the harrowing descriptions of a serial killing epidemic, pointedly link the growing global high tech industry with the creation of a war zone of identity crisis and social malais.

Molestation of different sort, that of one's childhood, is depicted in **Adrian Paci's** poignant *Albanian Stories, 1997*: a gripping personal tale of the Albanian civil war as told by **Jola**, the artist's three-year-old daughter, after the family's escape to Milan. Her curly-headed image close-up and head on fills the screen of a small monitor. Jola's childhood innocence is conveyed and betrayed in her big, limpid black eyes as she nonchalantly acts out with her toy animals the clashes between local and UN troops to which she was eye-witness. In his *Nocturnes, 1999*, **Anri Sala**, also Albanian, shows on a small monitor a video of two intertwining stories which can be thought of as a metaphor for life in the war zone. Two male survivors of the crisis have remained presumably in Tirana, the capital city. One man lives alone with several tanks filled with fish in constant fear that they will somehow perish because he has not cared for them well; another, a former UN soldier, is haunted by war incidents whose memory he cannot escape and whose only defense is playing war games on his computer. Velvety black and white images are counterpoised with anxiety-riddled voice over. And the plaintive cry rings out, "How do you find the right social balance?" Scaffolding as shield and support is another provocative conceit for two other media

works in the show: the photographs of Italian **Simone Berti** and the video of Bosnian **Maja Bajevic**. Berti constructs group and individual portraits in which the posers are stabilized and secured by a grid of metal prostheses, or perhaps buttressed by columnar wooden frameworks, or situated atop a makeshift plinth. Referencing classical props neatly secures this work in the domain of art; yet, questions of equilibrium, gravity, and stasis and the fragility of maintaining that measure of repose within the current socio-political disposition is the subject of Berti's work. Maja Bajevic, on the other hand, used the temporary scaffolding surrounding the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo to orchestrate an action, *Women at Work, 1999*. Bajevic invited five women, widowed refugees, to embroider traditional motifs onto netting applied to temporary scaffolding. A video of the happening showed the women crafting their handiwork. For the artist, the project yields a clear feminist message. Woman's work, enduring acts of the domestic, is ceremoniously bound to the residue of a society crippled by man's war. **Stalker**, the Italian artists' collaborative, has been addressing the issue of immigrant border crossing in their interventive actions in

Rome since the mid 1990s. During the opening days of Manifesta 3, **Stalker** was seeking an appropriate location at the real border between Italy and Slovenia to place their Transborderline tube. Simultaneously, at the exhibition site in Ljubljana, the group transformed a room with doors on opposite walls into a symbolic place of skirmish. In order to pass through to the other side, the audience had to negotiate a floor to ceiling plastic tunnel filled with soccer balls. These "stumbling blocks" were a challenge to maintaining one's balance, and the route was perilous. **Stalker's** Transborderline tube, along with the reincarnations of all the border situations in this Manifesta, can not help but invoke the historic stone bridge arching over the Drina River in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina. Destroyed by the retreating Austrian army during the First World War, the bridge has been rebuilt and still stands. It has

been the site of many crossings, killing grounds and barricades since it was constructed by the victorious Ottoman Turks in the 16th century; yet it remains in the minds and hearts of all a symbol of rapprochement, of negotiation, and of brotherhood. The river itself flows eternally at the borders of Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia maintaining a fragile peace. It is a steadfast reminder of nature's will to protect diversity, and at the same time it is a warning against ethnic, economic and cultural homogenization. **Ivo Andric**, the Bosnian Serb Nobel prize winner, wrote his epic historical novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*, as an homage to multicultural harmony in the community of Muslims, Christians, Jews and gypsies living side by side for centuries in the small border town of Visegrad. Andric's voice reverberates still in the diplomacy of the peacemaker artists and curators in all the projects in Manifesta 3.

MAJA BAJEVIĆ

