

Manifesta

Stuart Morgan on the new European Biennial

Every day in the same room a bearded man, profoundly deaf, holds a conversation with anyone who comes along. Another artist chooses to replace the tablecloths in a restaurant with fabrics from her own country. In the streets a naked man on a leash is seen crawling on his hands and knees. All these activities have one thing in common: they are part of the inaugural Manifesta, planned as a biennial event. Manifesta gives Rotterdam a more interesting image: bombed relentlessly during World War II, it was restored with more vigour than style. More recently, it has boasted Postmodernist follies like a museum complete with an imitation moat and drawbridge. Little wonder, then, that a backlash is under way, and that questions of sheer usefulness are being broached. 'If there is to be a new urbanism, it will be based on the two fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallised into definitive form; it will no longer be about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about discovering unnameable hybrids; it will no longer be obsessed with the city but with the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensifications and diversions, shortcuts and redistributions – the reinvention of psychological space.'

The reinvention of psychological space, it seems, has less to do with establishing new structures than with revising the uses of older ones. (A good example is Douglas Gordon and Rirkrit Tiravanija's collaboration, *Cinéma Liberté* (all works 1996), showing only films censored by the Dutch authorities. Another is Rietveld's Café de Unie, which for the duration of Manifesta has become an information centre and a headquarters.) The aim is to take received ideas and release them from their moorings – 'to alter the general mentality over time', as the catalogue announces – one reason, perhaps, why the five curators (Rosa Martínez, Viktor Misiano, Kataliú Néray, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Andrew Renton) chose to make unanimous decisions on every aspect of the event. The element of revision might have been one reason why, unexpectedly, part of the work they chose is shown at what used to be called the Museum Boymans van Beuningen,



Soo-ja Kim Untitled 1996
Textiles

now altered permanently to its new spelling 'Boijmans'. There visitors to Manifesta can enjoy themselves in the huge 'Raid the Icebox' experiment upstairs, for which Hans Haacke was asked to choose anything from the collection and show much of it without labels. Was that planned as part of Manifesta or not? The answer seems deliberately vague. Since the points at which Manifesta begins and ends are unclear, the entire concept of the event depends on a principle of quiet revolution, less to do with politics than with people, work and time.

Of the themes chosen, probably the most important is migration. 'We have no intention of altering the art world', the curators admit in the accompanying catalogue. Instead, their self-avowed intention is to destabilise our perceptions of Europe over a long period, during which time the idea of a Europe without borders will have come into existence – an important point, for Rotterdam remains the biggest port in the world. A powerful comment on this subject comes from Hale Tenger from Turkey, whose image appears on both sides of a screen in a large, darkened space. On one side the back of her body is visible, on the other the front. From time to time the image reverses, as she continues to recount her difficulties in trying to apply for a visa to leave the country. After a while her even tone comes to seem tragic. Seldom has frustration been registered as literally and rarely has execution

sued subject matter so perfectly, recalling every aspect of passport offices: their impersonality, their heartbreaking matter-of-factness, most of all the total control their employees seem to wield over the destiny of others. As more reversals take place and the sense of imprisonment heightens, the speak seems to adopt the identity of persecuted and persecutor by turns. Frightening in its sheer ordinariness, the installation confirms the importance of the right to cross boundaries.

The theme of identity is also inescapable. From Bucharest, subREAL present *Data Corridor*, based on an archive which began in 1935 and was continued through the Ceaucescu regime. For Manifesta, the *Corridor* became a room with thousands of loose photographs, a bell and an introduction by name for each imaginary visitor, a grave and calling-card combined. On a similar theme, 'Want to Live Like Common People' at the Chabot Museum presents photographic portraits. Metta Tronvall's women and daughters evince openness and its opposite: the older the women, the more suspicious of cameras they become. Jitka Hanslova's cour scenes are wholesome, celebratory: washing on a line; skis stuck into snow; meat roasting. In contrast, Esko Männikö's bumpkins wear paper hats in what resembled a workroom/lounge/loft. Or, indeed, a bedroom or living-room; the space of confirmed bachelorhood, where a broken fishing-rod is as liable to be

ng about as a group of friends clutching bottles and wearing red paper
its. The kitsch frames are the last straw, but disliking them is futile;
ome' is not a place but rather a pact with yourself. Only Dickens or
uysmans rival Mannikö's sets, and his characters who do not need to
understood, hence their mixture of complete nonchalance and utter
lf-absorption.

'Home' is also one of the themes chosen by the curators, the others
ing 'Two Breeding Flowers Will Never Breed the Same', on the subject
nature and culture; 'Declining and Becoming', ('The idea of "rising
id falling", "declining and becoming" is a metaphor for the
appearance of logocentric thought as described by Gilles Deleuze',
e six-page handout guide explains, 'Now replaced in the West by the
tion of "experience", a non-fixed condition of intensity which is subject
change'); 'Grounded' (cities without centres); 'I Want to Live like
ommon People' (ideas of normality); 'In Every Dream Home a
eartache' (the symbolism of the house); 'Oij' (the role of the museum);
he Laboratory for Comparative Studies' (the task of translation); 'The
stitute for the Unstable Media' (the role of art); 'Migrations'
avelling); 'Time Share' (the perception of objects)... The plethora of
les suggests a network of subjects which defines everyday life,
rticularly its links with the mundane – laws, habits, ways of surviving,
ther than (say) religion, beauty, truth. There are also connections
etween travel, communication and translation, changing borders and
e new perception of the alignment of world powers; in other words, the
uth' we perceive will have arisen from reading between the lines,



ie Tenger Cross Section 1996
allation view

tween facts and fixity.

Collaboration is one model for the future provided by Manifesta. For
ample, building homes for visitors is the business of the group
e(s)tnetwork, with a project called *My House/Your Home*. Local artists
nstruct special rooms, all different, for visiting artists. For the duration
their stay they exchange information, hold discussions, show films
d attend parties and meetings. As if intent on doing the opposite,
esbeth Bik, Peter Fillingham and Jos van de Pol's *Bookshop Piece* at the
useum Boijmans consists of listing the books available in the ICA
okshop in London, adding titles, then turning it into a shop. And, the
ists add, 'a sculpture': a working system, designed to reply to *The
chen Piece*, a mirror image of Jos van de Pol's kitchen shown in
ndon last year. In Rotterdam, however, questions of hierarchy,
ailability, temporality, copying and use are raised. The *Bookshop Piece* is
st described as a homage.

In the Museum Boijmans itself, Dimitri Gutov acts as a guide,
plaining the relevance of Breughel and van Eyck before proceeding to
e Bruce Nauman rooms which, he explains, are not modern at all.

Background: Didier Ternet *Équilibre thermostatique des motivations* 1996
l plants, vegetables and yellow hosepipe

Meanwhile, Vadim Fishkin sends his heartbeat around the world or
relays it in the form of a pulsing bulb on a wall on the outside of the
museum. In the small garden of the museum, Didier Ternet shows his
Équilibre thermostatique des motivations, in which a bright yellow
hosepipe twists and curls elegantly around the bronze statue of a
voluptuous nude – Ternet's 'mistress' – and douses her regularly with
water which slithers down her body, accompanied by erotic poetry.
Meanwhile, Koo Jeung displays her *Beautiful Waste Bin*, which she sees
as a summary of the constant action of gathering and dispersal. René
Kool uses surveillance techniques to record a man in his underwear
conducting to unheard music on one floor of a building and a girl
dancing alone on another, a reference to an alleged bribery scandal in the
Rotterdam news. Much of this work seems slight, particularly in the
formal context of a famous museum.

But not all the exhibits are so flimsy. Deaf from an early age, Joseph
Grigely sits in a sunny room, prepared to talk to anyone. The result is
communication problematised in an inspiring way. Like a journey in the
course of which the traveller has to change different modes of transport,
the talk is punctuated by spells of writing, mime and drawing. An
enthusiastic interlocutor, Grigely engages directly with his talking
partners and requires a high degree of attention from them. Sometimes
Manifesta warranted this attention. After seeing his video installation it
was hard not to want to hug Jaan Toomik from Estonia, unhappy
because he was sailing home. 'Everything seemed so depressing but
then after a time I felt the sound of the motor of the boat. It seemed like



subREAL Datacorridor 1996
Original photographs on the wall of a wooden construction

a heartbeat... I began to dance to the sound and all my depressing
feelings disappeared...' Or Nedko Solakov from Bulgaria in a video made
with his wife and children, in which he turns into a snowflake, not an
easy role for a large, bearded man. Or Uri Tzaig's painting of the words
Nothing is Wrong, hung next to Hendrik Plenge Jacobson's painting of
the words *Everything is Wrong*. Impossible too not to wonder about the
role of the Police Gallery, which seemed to be exhibiting a sculpture
consisting of a police van with a broken window. Or, indeed, about that
naked Russian, campaigning for animal rights. But perhaps there were
just too many puzzles. Manifesta lacked clarity; had a confusing
catalogue; included too many interventions and abused the museum
setting. Nevertheless, on the level of sheer personal exchange, it may
have succeeded well enough to make its rivals reconsider their own
tactics.

1. Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau *S,M,L,XL* New York: Monacelli Press 1995, 969, quoted by
Martin Beck in *Offer*, a poster he designed for Manifesta.