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INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Inside-Out: David Rych at Manifesta 8

by [ana vukadin](#) 10/27/10

The eighth edition of Manifesta, the nomadic European biennial of contemporary art, opened this month in Murcia and Cartagena, two small cities in Southern Iberia off of Spain's well-touristed art track, in the spirit of Manifesta's aim to explore alternative locations and test the ever-expanding art network. Manifesta 8 was curated by three curatorial collectives: Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS), based in Copenhagen and the Middle East, and founded by Khaled Ramadan and Alfredo Cramerotti; Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF), based in Alexandria (Egypt) and founded by Bassam El Baroni; and [tranzit.org](#), a network of autonomous art associations, based in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, with curators Vít Havránek, Zbyněk Baladrán, Dóra Hegyi, Boris Ondreička, Georg Schöllhammer. The biennial spread across two cities and various types of buildings, ranging from museums of modern art to prisons, to the old post and telegraph office. Each team commissioned some 30 artists to respond to Manifesta's request of a dialogue with northern Africa, in particular focussing on the boundaries of 21st Century Europe.

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STILL FROM ENCOUNTER, 2010. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Art in America spoke with artist David Rych, whose *Encounter* (2010) answers a question by commissioning curator CPS: could he imagine realizing video workshops with convicts inside a penitentiary? The resulting video installation, displayed in a large dark room in MUBAM, the Museum of Fine Arts in Murcia, is made up of a series of videos playing on two rows of small TV screens, and a central video projected onto the main wall. The piece follows from an encounter between six juveniles from a local juvenile detention center and six inmates serving long-term prison sentences in the Sangonera La Verde prison, in Murcia. The TV screens show "home-videos" recorded by the juveniles themselves, guiding the viewer through a day in their life, while the large projected video shows the meeting of the two sets of men, engaged in an open-ended discussion about the lessons of life. The result is a captivating and moving account: one the one hand, the young men are surprisingly frank (filming his room, one juvenile confesses "I don't like putting photos on the cork board because it winds me up") and to some extent proud to have the opportunity to show their surroundings, (one closes his film with a shot of the "little plants" in the center's greenhouse). The older convicts are hardened and despondent ("This is not liberty, this is total entrapment," one of the inmates declares while he is being filmed by one of the juveniles) but adamant to convince the younger offenders to stay clean.

VUKADIN: Tell me a little bit about *Encounters* and any limitations you might have had with the project?

RYCH: The main task of the project to be developed for Manifesta 8 was clearly given from the start by CPS, so the limitations were not so much due to creative (or curatorial) methodology but rather produced by the disciplinary apparatus and juridical framework. *Encounter* was the proposal I came up with as a reply to the curatorial proposal to work with inmates from Sangonera prison. Bringing into the project the juvenile detention center resulted in even more bureaucracy and a stricter framework to operate within. However I saw a challenge in knowing the limits and then trying to find creative solutions for the realization.

The work follows two lines of reading. One is the basic idea of the group encounter, as established by psychologists from Viktor Frankl to Carl Rogers: an unstructured group meeting with no clear theme. Eventually there is a set of rules where the participants can exchange on an open platform. This was important to me as they share certain knowledge about their particular environment and it would allow them

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to decide about where they want to go. There is no elevated position for the filmmaker or journalist who poses uncomfortable questions.

The same approach permeates the single-channel video works produced by the participants. No voice claims descriptive authority, so we get a multilayered description of reality.



STILL FROM ENCOUNTER, 2010. COURTESY THE ARTIST

The second reading of *Encounter* comes from the re-proposal of a documentary style that was produced several times in the past and is based on the principle "young offenders meet the hard guys, who teach them a life lesson." The narrative was directly inspired by a documentary from the 80s following an experiment in a US prison, a remake of an earlier documentary named *Scared Straight!* (a 1978 US documentary by Arnold Shapiro, where a group of juvenile delinquents is introduced to a group of actual convicts who attempt "scare them straight"). In the case of *Encounter* a theatre is the frame for the meeting. Naturally the question remains: how much what we see is a *mise-en-scène* or a genuine document.

VUKADIN: How did you respond to the idea of working with inmates? Was it something you had ever considered doing?

RYCH: I have little experience working with people under the condition of imprisonment. My previous projects explored questions of visual representation of collective identities. I was interested in how an image from within prison is communicated outside. We are full of stereotypes about prisoners and jail life-it's a classic film genre. Rarely is the gaze directed by inmates, who are of course more informed about codes and hierarchies in this parallel society. The project was set to be an experiment on reality construction and transmission, regardless of what I personally think about prisons.

VUKADIN: How was your own encounter with the two groups of inmates? What was their response to your project? From the videos, it seems like you really managed to win them over, create a strong connection with them.

RYCH: There was a lot of respect and recognition, on all sides. I guess I was really lucky with these guys. But their involvement in the creative process was out of the ordinary, as they do not normally receive this level of attention.

We talked about basic terms and their meaning-like "liberty," what does it mean? Where would you find it and how to depict it with given means? Most of the participants held a camcorder for the first time in their lives and some of them developed an impressive responsiveness to moving images. The videos by the younger inmates certainly turned out more personal and imaginative for various reasons. The younger generation is more tuned into media culture and intuitively familiar with certain visual codes. Then again when it came to the final encounter it was the position of the adult prisoners to speak of experience - as several of them already served decades in penitentiaries.

VUKADIN: How did you observe the organization of the show in which you participated, vis-à-vis Manifesta 8.

RYCH: I have not participated in Manifesta before, but I've been following its evolution as long as from Manifesta 2 and observing the thematic focus moving along with geopolitical transformations within Europe. I think it is important to think of it as a podium for current discourse in culture, beyond the logic of the art market alone, and make them broadly accessible to a public. Due to the lack of interference between the curatorial teams in M8, I prefer to speak mainly about my experience with CPS. Considering that a large part



Butt Johnson, *Untitled Floral Pastiche II (Snapdragon)*, 2009

Butt Johnson's "Untitled Floral Pastiche" series consists of four drawings, each of which is organized around a different flower. Johnsons had long co

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Meredyth Sparks, *Untitled*, 2010

Kirstine Roepstorff, *Rockin Rocks, Version 3*, 2008



of works curated in their slot were newly commissioned projects, the show is more touching on regional issues than biennials normally do. For me this is a convincing course and an interesting step forward - but how important this event really was in a larger context, can only be evaluated in the future.



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