

Postcards from Manifesta

REPORT

Thursday 17th July: Part 1



Just got back to my hotel room after attending the opening of Adam Budak's 'Principle of Hope' in Rovereto – one of the four exhibitions that combine to form Manifesta 7, this year being held in Italy's South Tyrol region.

First things first. The four towns in which Manifesta is sited (to be precise, three towns and a fortress) are strung through the Adige valley, which stretches from the Austrian border near Innsbruck down to Lake Garda in the south. We flew to Verona, which is 40 minutes on an extremely comfortable train from Rovereto, and only 20 minutes more from the pretty town of Trento, where we are staying. Trento is the base for Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg's 'The Soul (or, Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls)', which I'm off to see in a few minutes. Tomorrow we're looking forward to the Raqs Media Collective's 'The Rest of Now', in Bolzano, and the collaboratively curated 'Scenarios', in the hilltop fortress of Fortezza. It's possible to buy a ticket for the exhibitions which includes travel between venues on all local rail and bus services.



Back to Budak's exhibition. 'Principle of Hope' occupies a large building around two courtyards that formerly housed a tobacco factory, as well as a smaller warehouse space, 'Ex Peterlini', on the other side of town. The show's title is borrowed from Ernst Bloch, and refers to the optimistic notion of 'critical regionalism', which, as Budak states, is 'a means to resolve tensions between globalization and localism, modernity and tradition' in which local life reaches a state of self-aware criticality. While this is doubtlessly an interesting starting point, the show does little in terms of elucidation. Long, discursive wall texts (in tiny font) accompany each work, dropping references to 'trans-rational spatial categories' or claims that 'the artists penetrate the borderlines of knowledge and science'. Despite this, there are many excellent works (as well as plenty that were the aesthetic equivalent of eating ten cheese crackers with a dry mouth). Highlights for me included Ragnar Kjartansson's performance (in which two suited gentlemen sang German love songs inside a painted depiction of hell), João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva's extraordinary installation of their quasi-archaeological films, and Barbora Klímová's videoed restagings of canonical Czech performance art, accompanied by commentary by the original artists.

Now I'm running off to Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg's contribution, which, from the list of artists, appears to be quite a different proposition.

What a relief! 'The Soul (or, Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls)', which has set up shop in Trento's fascist-built Palazzo della Poste (its former post office, pictured above), provided many more enjoyable surprises than the exhibition in Rovereto. A short bus or train ride up the valley, Trento is the nominal centre of the region. It is also the town that wears a sense of its own history most proudly, something that is embodied in the medieval architecture dotted throughout the largely pedestrianised town centre.

Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg's exhibition focuses on the idea of Europe as a political entity that is beginning to turn in on itself, a continent that regards its own psyche – or multitude of psyches – as the next frontier to be crossed, rather than its bulging geographical borders. Broadly speaking, this is a show about interiority, sharpening its political talons on the proposition that the psyche – or soul, as it was once called – is nothing more than a cultural construct, an idea that the Catholic church of Trento itself significantly contributed to some 500 years ago.



From Luigi Ontani's sexualised holograms of Asian boys, and Bernd Ribbeck's cosmic, lush, abstract ink drawings, it was clear that Franke and Peleg's tastes are quite different to those of Budak. Pietro Roccasalva followed soon afterwards, with an extraordinary series of works over two adjacent rooms, one installation involving snaking neon and a small painting bearing the memorable title *Jockey Full of Bourbon II* (2006). Mostly, however, artists were given just one room each – turgid wall texts notable by their absence. The exhibition was spread principally over the first and second floors, the smallish rooms circling a central courtyard. A high proportion of the show is video- or film-based (I'd guess at around half), which in a hot, close climate does not make for a hugely enjoyable viewing experience. However the quality of the work countered the audience's resentment: strong – and very often new – film and video works from Omer Fast, Karl Holmqvist, Kosalind Nashashibi, Javier Téllez, and Angela Melitopoulos were carefully presented, the last being a particular highlight and an artist previously unknown to me.

The exhibition also stood out for its use of mini-museums to break up the pace of the show. At various corners of the building galleries were given over to invited artists and academics who created displays on themes such as 'The Museum of Projective Personality Testing' (revealing various defunct psychoanalytical evaluation methods) or 'The Museum of the Stealing of Souls' (which explained how the notion that photography was thought by certain peoples to steal the subject's soul is largely a colonial myth propagated by those hoping to extend the impression of these societies as innocent, primitive cultures). A lot to digest. I'll sleep well tonight.

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We caught a bus first thing this morning which took about an hour up the valley to Fortezza, the site of the 1830s' Habsburg hilltop fortress (in the South Tyrol there seems to be a great many hilltop fortresses) in which all six curators collaborated to produce the exhibition 'Scenarios'. The derelict building has clearly had some care lavished upon it in preparation for Manifesta: elevators, cloakrooms, toilets – even a pair of striking elevated walkways over the river are installed sensitively and imaginatively. Following its role as a defensive military outpost, the fortress was put to use by the Nazis during World War II as a depository for stolen gold, and subsequently an ammunition depot (grids of metal lightning conductors are still nervously strapped over all its roofs).

