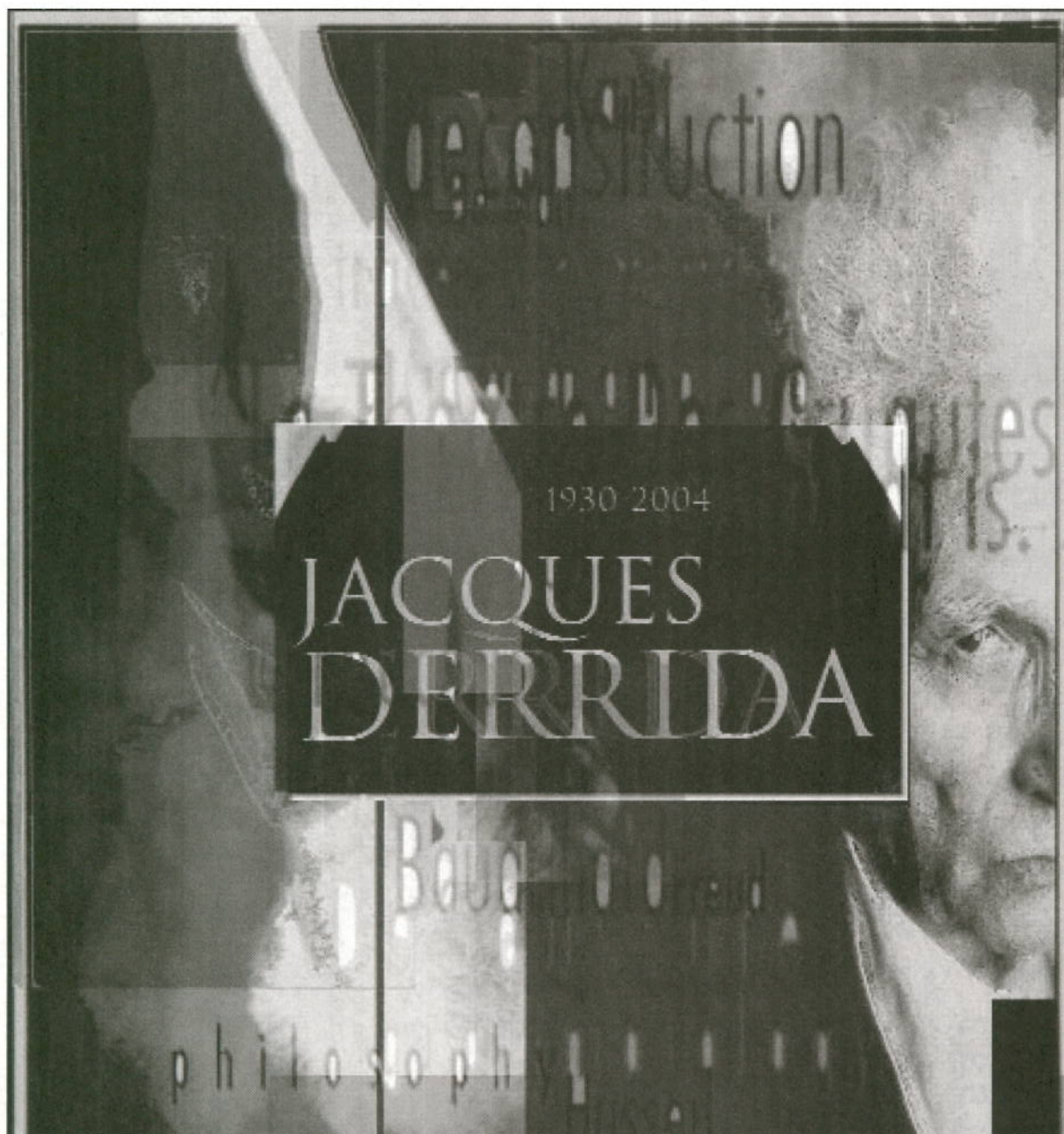


# AFTERIMAGE

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# NOMADS, TOURISTS AND TERRITORIES: MANIFESTA AND THE BASQUE COUNTRY

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The fifth installment of *Manifesta*, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, took place this year in the Basque country under the direction of curators Massimiliano Gioni and Marta Kuzma. The exhibition was staged across two very different urban sites, which although linked by a short bus ride are worlds apart in terms of economic and social infrastructure. This duality is mirrored by the fact that each site has two names. In Euskara, the language of the Basques and one of the oldest oldest European languages, these towns are called Donosti and Pasaia but in the more familiar Castilian (Spanish) they are better known as San Sebastian and Pasajes San Pedro. Donostia-San Sebastian and Pasaia-Pasajes San Pedro seem to be among the most geographically visible peripheral sites chosen by *Manifesta*. Basque culture, in spite of its geographical small scale, is in many ways at the heart of contemporary European identity, not least because it contests ex-isting national boundaries by extending from Northern Spain into South Western France. The region's claims for political autonomy, rooted in a strong sense of ethnic and linguistic identity, are by no means unique and Julio Medem's recent documentary *The Basque Ball: Skin Against Stone* proposes parallels with Northern Ireland, while retaining an awareness of the specificity of the Basque conflict.

The Basque setting links *Manifesta 5* to a number of other artistic projects staged in contested territory. From a North American perspective, an obvious parallel could be drawn with *InSite*, the exhibition of public art taking place in San Diego and Tijuana for the fifth time in 2005. *Manifesta*, however, is a nomadic event and since its debut at Rotterdam in 1996, it has traveled to Luxembourg (1998), Ljubljana (2000) and Frankfurt (2002). By constantly shifting site, it has laid claim to a flexible and self-reflexive model of curatorial practice, and has sought to foster exchange between local configurations and external networks. This article examines some of these claims, through reference to the curatorial and artistic strategies employed in the Basque country and recent critical writing about nomadic art practice.

*Manifesta's* status as a nomadic outsider is complicated by the ties that bind it to the art world, and it has sometimes served as a conduit to the mainstream for both artists and curators. The International Foundation Manifesta, permanently based in Amsterdam, includes among its membership several prominent art world figures, such as Francesco Bonami, curator of *Manifesta 3* and subsequently director of the Venice Biennale in 2003. It is perhaps no coincidence that nomadic art practices also found their way into Venice under Bonami's direction, in the shape of the *Utopia Station* project curated by Rirkrit Tiravanija. These art world connections are not hidden and *Manifesta* has continually readjusted its position in relation to centers of power. The third installment in Ljubljana, for example, focused attention on relatively marginalized Eastern European art practices while the fourth took place much closer to the art market. Staged in Frankfurt in 2002 in partnership with *Documenta 11*, it sought to explore relationships with a newer generation of institutionally-based curators. This strategy was not uniformly well received, however, and some critics suggested that *Manifesta 4* was overshadowed by *Documenta 11*, the more established event (see Tamsin Dillon's review in *Art Monthly* 258, July-August 2002: 46). In fact *Documenta 11* was marked by a particular thematic emphasis on the politics of place and identity. In addition to new installations by Chantal Akerman and

Isaac Julien, it incorporated a number of influential film and video documentaries from the 1980s (such as the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, 1986).

The curators of *Manifesta 5* have, in turn, revisited some of the formal and thematic territory covered in *Documenta 11*. The exhibition includes a considerable number of video documentaries, exploring overtly political themes such as the globalization of labor and the history of territorial conflict along the Israeli-Palestinian border. *Manifesta 5* seems less assured, however, in locating historical precedents for this type of practice and the exhibition features very few works produced prior to the 1990s. Among the most important are Marcel Broodthaers's 1973 slide piece *Bateau Tableau*, a journey through the fragments of a maritime painting, and several films by Bas Jan Ader, screened in Donosti and in Pasaia. Given the quasi-mythical status he acquired since his disappearance at sea in 1975, Ader would seem to be a key figure for contemporary artistic and curatorial negotiations of nomadism. The evident contrast between his work and Broodthaers's is also intriguing because of the way in which it foreshadows subsequent developments in art practice.

James Meyer has documented the emergence of nomadism as a focus for contemporary art in the 1990s in "Nomads: Figures of Travel in Contemporary Art" (see *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000:10-26). Meyer suggests that artistic negotiations of travel fall into two categories. He opposes the "lyrical" nomadism exemplified by Rirkrit Tiravanija to a

These distinctions are highlighted by Gregory Sholette in a critique of what he terms a "revisionist" history of site-specific art, developed by Miwon Kwon among others. In "News from Nowhere: Activist Art and After, Report from New York City" (*Third Text* 45, Winter 1999: 45-56) Sholette examines the political contexts that shaped the emergence of site-based art in the 1970s. He notes that the designation of this work as mere institutional critique, in which site is transformed into "content", involves a denial of the various ways history may function to structure the physical and conceptual specificity of public space. Kwon has argued, however, that 1970s site-specific art and contemporary site-oriented practices are equally "symptomatic of the dynamics of deterritorialization" (*One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, 2004: 157). She proposes that both respond to a perceived flattening of differences between places, by exploiting or re-imagining the uniqueness of places through recourse to "authenticity of meaning, memory, history and identity".

As a curatorial project deeply invested in the specificity of particular urban sites, *Manifesta 5* seems to fall within the terms of Kwon's critique. Yet although the curators are certainly sensitive to the "uniqueness" of place, the choice of location seems to suggest an awareness of the complexities of global deterritorialization. The Basque country is also a site in which the historical forces shaping the physical and conceptual specificity of

place are particularly difficult to ignore. On the eve of the 2004 general election, just months before the exhibition opened, a number of bombs were detonated in Madrid's Atocha railway station. The Basque separatist group ETA was initially held to be responsible, prompting public protest as well as of condemnation from the right wing government. But when the bombings were revealed as the work of Islamist terrorists, the political landscape altered dramatically. A newly installed socialist government withdrew their cooperation in the war against Iraq, and sought to rebuild a damaged political relationship with the Basque regional authority. These events serve to underscore the extent to which even ostensibly local or regional struggles over territory are shaped by, and in turn shape, the global balance of power.

One further issue concerning the logic of deterritorialization, and its opposite, must be addressed before turning to the exhibition itself. *Manifesta 5* takes place in the shadow of Bilbao, a city that has become one of the most prominent symbols of art world globalization and urban reinvention. A lavish exhibition detailing the city's transformation from industrial shell to tourist site is currently touring several European capitals. In my own home-town of Dublin the show was located in the Guinness Storehouse, a tourist attraction in the heartland of a industrial zone that has been designated for redevelopment. The Gehry-designed Guggenheim, built on the bank of the River Nervion in 1997, is both the flagship of the new Bilbao and an illustration of the often unequal dynamics of local-global exchange. The Gehry building may have put Bilbao on the international art world map but the Guggenheim Foundation was one of the major beneficiaries of this transaction. Even before it opened, critics of the project (such as the Basque architectural theorist Joseba Zulaika) were quick to realize that it would be little more than a franchise, subsidized by the tax contributions of Basque citizens. Guggenheim Bilbao is primarily a prominent showcase for an international brand name, collection and curatorial team, and its blockbuster exhibitions are devised primarily to appeal to tourists. *Manifesta 5* takes place at a critical distance from the city and the kind of local-global partnership it has come to represent, even though it undoubtedly benefits from passing internation-



Video still from *Avifauna* by Külli Katts (Estonia).



Film still from *In Diarios* by Markus Schinwald (Austria).

more overtly critical model, represented by artists such as Renee Green and Christian Philipp Muller. While lyrical nomadism brings a certain arbitrariness to its exploration of the everyday, the critical current tends to locate travel within historical and institutional frameworks. As a consequence, Green and Muller seem to share something of the political engagement with place that is documented by Lucy Lippard in *The Lure of the Local* (New Press, 1997), a semi-autobiographical account of site-oriented art since the 1960s. Yet even critical nomadic practice often tends to lack the activist, and collectivist dimensions foregrounded by Lippard.

al traffic arriving via Bilbao Airport (another architectural showpiece). The siting of the exhibition in the disparate urban spaces of Donosti and in Pasaia provides a means of exploring the relationship between touristic and industrial urban identities, and an opportunity for reflection on the dynamics of gentrification. Donosti is a prosperous and elegant seaside town, favored by Spanish and French tourists, and it has escaped much of the aggressive development that has blighted the resorts of the Costa del Sol. The stereotypical resident is wealthy and retired and property values are very high, apparently surpassed only by Barcelona and Madrid.

*Manifesta 5*, running throughout the high season from June to September, is not easily ignored by tourists or residents. The 19th century seafronts and shopping areas are festooned with banners bearing the pink exhibition logo and a considerable number of prestigious architectural and cultural venues have been annexed for the duration of the show, blurring the already fuzzy distinction between art tourism and other forms of cultural consumption. A series of installations and ephemeral events are dispersed across landmark leisure spaces, such as a boathouse below the Aquarium, the summit of Monte Urgull and the Plaza Bilboa. The launch was also followed by a public parade, led by artist Jeremy Deller and intended to feature a deliberately eclectic array of participants, from the familiar (street musicians and clowns) to the bizarre (such as, for example, "single mothers" and "blood donors").

Many of the installations at the 16th century Musee San Telmo, a former convent converted into an ethnographic museum, deal with issues of national identity and history. Entry to the main exhibition is via a courtyard, that houses *Algeria-France*: Images (1998), a series of 27 framed posters by Marc Quer. The images on the posters are from a collection of 19th century ethnographic photographs taken by Felix Moulin, featuring native Algerians posed against a studio backdrop, ostensibly displaying their authentic costumes and customs. Quer added speech bubbles and posted the images throughout the Belsunce district of Marseille (a point of reception for many immigrants) in order to solicit comments and responses. These irreverent, often explicit, additions underscore the extent to which the images remain provocative, and the project as a whole derives much of its impact from its invocation of another context of reception.

The exploration of image and identity in Hito Steyerl's film *November* (2004) fuses an even broader range of cultural reference points, from martial arts and Russ Meyer movies to news footage and home videos of political protests. It is structured around Super 8 fragments of a feminist movie begun in 1983 but never finished, featuring the artist's friend Andrea Wolf as the glamorous leather-clad leader of a biker gang. Steyerl interweaves this material with later images of Wolf, a Kurdish activist who disappeared in 1998. Oscillating between humor, political passion and melancholy, *November* charts the complex temporality of popular political struggle, whereby the revolutionary fervor of *October* gives way to a more nostalgic investment in icons of resistance. *Nostalgia* (2002) is the theme, and the title, of another video work in San Telmo, this time a pseudo-autobiographical document of colonial Mozambique by Maria Lusitano. It too is assembled from an array of found sources, including postcards and home movie fragments, with a soundtrack punctuated by snippets of 60s pop hits. The film's confessional narration is delivered by a young girl, and instead of engaging with the realities of colonial life from the perspective of the colonized, its account of faraway places moves fluidly between memory and fantasy.

Many of the works sited in the 19th century Koldo Mitxelena (Library and Cultural Center) are also concerned with temporal fragmentation and dislocation. These themes are foregrounded in two documentary video works by Sven Augustij, entitled *Johan* (2002) and *Francois* (2003). Portraying patients suffering from aphasia, they document a progressive loss of linguistic memory and coherency. The sculptural and photographic installations in this site, most notably, Daniel Roth's *Glaswaldsee* (2003-4) are similarly disjunctive. Recalling Mike Nelson's labyrinthine narratives, Roth's surreal maps and dioramas chart an evolving apocalyptic landscape that is home to nature-loving survivalists, freedom-fighters and terrorists. The exhibition in the Kubo Kutxa Kursaal (arts center, and waterfront landmark) is perhaps the most cohesive, featuring a number of projects that explore the social function of architecture. Vangelis Vlahos constructed models inspired by skyscrapers in various cities, including Atocha Tower in San Sebastian. Many of these structures are no longer standing yet they remain a powerful focus of urban identity, explored through news clippings and transcripts of online discussions with residents of each city.

The Kursaal is also the site of two powerful documentary projects, both characterized by duality. In *Route 181* (2003) the Israeli-Palestinian duo Eyal Sivan and Michel Khleifi travel the length of the virtual border created by a 1947 United Nations partition plan, exploring the local strategies employed by residents on each side of the conflict and relying primarily on interviews. Documentary strategies articulate, rather than obscure, the complexities of history and context in this film and in Laura Horelli's paired videos *Helsinki Shipyard* and *Port San Juan* (both 2002). As in the case of other works in *Manifesta 5*, Horelli's project derives much of its resonance from its evolution as a public project. Through a series of interviews, Horelli documents the globalization of labor in the cruise ship business, focusing on the design and construction of the ships in Helsinki and on the conditions of employment endured by the international crews that embark and disembark at Port San Juan, Puerto Rico. These mammoth vessels are home to workers from up to 70 countries at any one time and boast all of the facilities of a "floating city" except, as one shipbuilder notes, a parliament.

Although Donosti is the administrative center of *Manifesta 5*, nearby Pasaia is home to the largest single exhibition, as well as an ambitious waterfront installation and several off-site interventions. This small port lacks an accessible beach, and its economy has traditionally depended on the fishing industry, rather than tourism. Pasaia clearly lacks Donosti's exclusive boutiques, expensive hotels and stylish bars but, although the contrast is pronounced, it is perhaps slightly over-determined by certain curatorial decisions. Many of the works displayed in the Casa Ciriza, a former fishing warehouse, suggest a nostalgia for urban industrial space, whether as a site of employment, artistic innovation or social interaction. Two kinetic sculptural works, Paolo Pivi's *E* (2001) and Conrad Shawcross's *Circadium* (*Loop System 3*) (2004), are located on the ground floor, along with a film installation by Iliya Chichkan and Kyrill Protzenko, composed from fragments of Soviet documentary film. The accompanying soundtrack fills the space, competing for attention with several other video works exploring urban music cultures. Mark Leckey's complex video collage, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999) hints at the social and economic structures that gave rise to disco and rave culture in the North of England. In Inaki Garmendia's video installation *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger* (2004) the emphasis is on punk rock, the missing link between disco and rave. By inter-cutting shots of a contemporary punk audience with images of disaffected Mayday protesters, Garmendi recasts urban anarchy as nostalgia for an earlier moment in youth culture.

The Casa Ciriza exhibition also features a number of collaborative, research-based projects that are more specifically concerned with the development of Basque art and society. *Operacion H* (Nestor Basterretxea, 1963) originated as a sponsored film about Spanish industry. Documentary modes of representation were rejected, however, in favor of a collage of abstract and sculptural forms, and fleeting shots of factory-workers and architectural models. The film is represented in *Manifesta 5* by a contemporary Basque collective, Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak, as the focal point of their ongoing research into the history of collaborative practice. The other collaborative work is an interactive database produced by The Office of Alternative Urban Planning (TOOAP). This ongoing project developed out of a partnership between *Manifesta* and the Amsterdam-based Berlage Institute, a postgraduate laboratory research in architecture, urban planning and landscape design. The region's complex structures of decision-making and financing would seem to have limited the scope of the project and this might explain the form taken by the

database. Instead of standard menus or search tools, a series of opaque "dataclouds" are presented, perhaps replicating the complexity of the planning process. Ultimately it is difficult to discern many details of the planning proposals, except that they seem to involve the development of a beach at Pasaia. It is too soon to judge the final outcome of this collaboration but a different mode of presentation would perhaps have served the exhibition audience better.

In terms of its direct engagement with urban development the work in Pasaia seems to signal a curatorial shift away from performative nomadism and towards a more explicitly site-based engagement with local constituencies. This is particularly apparent in several projects in exterior sites. Huseyin Alptekin has produced a number of works that seem deliberately intended to elude any visitor unfamiliar with the town. The only one that might be easily spotted by the outsider is a sign for the "Hotel Panama", located outside the main exhibition that is evidently out of place in a site bypassed by tourism. Jan de Cock's architectural installation at a former shipbuilding warehouse in Ondartxo, also proves difficult to locate without assistance from bemused local residents. Ondartxo is a space in transition, the site of a proposed museum/conservation project that is now mired in bureaucracy, and de Cock has responded by creating a structure that fuses formal excess with an absence of function. During the course of the exhibition, however, parts of the structure have acquired a function, as shelter for the security staff, giving rise to the kind of domestic clutter that (again) recalls installations by Mike Nelson. For certain visitors these projects might be just as opaque as TOOAP's "dataclouds" but, by making the familiar strange, they seem to invite a more organic exploration of Pasaia's possible futures.



Photograph by Boris Mikhailov (Russia).

There may be an intrinsic contradiction between self-reflexive curatorial practice and the biennial exhibition's characteristic emphasis on internationalism and novelty, yet *Manifesta 5* derives much of its significance and complexity from the exploration of these contradictions. In her contribution to the exhibition catalogue, curator Marta Kuzma describes the exhibition as "an abstract temporal structure [...] embracing a conflicting plurality of projects, relational points and possible futures" (39) and she contrasts this strategy with that employed by General Potemkin, famous for building makeshift pasteboard villages for the delectation of Catherine the Great's touring courtiers. Contemporary tourists are, however, more likely to seek out the 'real' behind the paste-

board, and the installations at Donosti and Pasaia are at their best when sensitive to the shifting dynamics of consumption, which continue to structure the experience of place.

*Manifesta 5* took place at Donostia-San Sebastian and Pasaia-Pasajes San Pedro in Spain, from June 11 to September 30, 2004. For further information see <http://www.manifesta.es/>

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