

MANIFESTA 9

A Brief Summary

Manifesta 9 Coffee Break

Casino Modern, Genk, Limburg, Belgium
December 9 and 10, 2011



Foundation
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The Contemporary at the Service of the Past

Organised by Manifesta Foundation in collaboration with Manifesta 9, Manifesta Coffee Break is a recurring public meeting that works as an active tool to discuss the Manifesta concept, generously supported by the European Commission.

The relationship between the past, the present and the future was explored at the Manifesta 9 Coffee Break through debates, lectures and artistic presentations, with specific references to the staging of Manifesta 9 in 2012.

This event was the sixth edition of our Manifesta Coffee Breaks, initiated 10 years ago by Manifesta 1 curator Hans Ulrich Obrist as a valid attempt to test some curatorial concepts prior to executing them in an exhibition format. This enables the curators and the whole Manifesta team to install a self-reflective and critical mindset, in order to learn from our own past and present.

What follows is a brief chronological summary of the discussions and presentations by Cuauhtémoc Medina, Jeremy Deller, Viktor Misiano, Ekaterina Degot and Phil Collins and many more completed during the two-day Coffee Break in Genk, which involved 120 participants.

Hedwig Fijen, Director Manifesta, from her introduction to the Coffee Break.

“The paradox of how we relate to the present and how best to deal with the past is the topic of this Manifesta 9 Coffee Break. The participating artists, curators and invited theoreticians look at the role of industrialisation as a driving force in our society today, and the outcomes and effects that modernism has had on our daily lives, as individuals existing in a changing globalised structure.

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Although many of us would prefer it not to be the case, we can no longer look at the worlds of culture and finance as having segregated ideologies. Witnessing the current devastation of monetary and cultural Europe, the governmental woes of several nations in the European Union and the lack of any vision towards solving this upcoming dissolution of Europe, British historian Norman Davies – a man specialised in stories of vanished kingdoms – recently wrote an article in the *Financial Times* under the title: “How historians will look back on Europe’s demise”. In his essay, Davies describes the vanished Europe from an historical perspective, although the event itself is yet to take place.

Our relationship with history is dubious and antagonistic. We fear that the past might happen once again and we mythologise the past as though it is the perfect example of what it should be like today. But it has always been a case of history repeating.”

Cuahtémoc Medina, Manifesta 9 curator, opened the Coffee Break, outlining that its function was to provide a parallel focus, specifically looking at research-based practices and documentary and archival projects in the field of contemporary art. “Alongside from the actual process of work, the Manifesta 9 Coffee Break sets out to interrupt the exhibition machine.”

Medina proposed that art is becoming more literal and documentary, with videos, photos and installations “bursting with information, autonomous, saturated and boiled down to essences.” Many artists were “contemporary sphinxes, with riddles taken from larger archives.” Quoting LeWitt: “Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.” Covering the work of Mexican photographer Rubén Ortiz Torres, Medina discussed images of fake archaeological sites, revivalism and cheap tourist attractions mimicking the Tower of Pisa, the Egyptian pyramids and Mayan temples to show how “Antiquity and heritage have been domesticated and multiplied, with safe copies adjusted to consumerism.” In specific reference to the forthcoming Manifesta 9, Medina stressed that the exhibition would respect the past, and that “the past still has a great future.” However as with many of the participants in this Coffee Break, he noted a bleak vision of historical consciousness, a sense of “amnesia of history” in younger generations and a “fear of nostalgia”.

“The past is less attractive than it used to be. Historical knowledge is in decay and social memory is becoming history.” Manifesta 9 will present “an analysis of the current contradictions of contemporary art using history-based research (...) keeping alive the task of memory in the industry of coal-mining and various social commentaries.”

Jeremy Deller, London-based artist, presented a screening of his new film *So Many Ways to Hurt You, the Life and Times of Adrian Street*, his documentary about a man who left the mines to become a flamboyant wrestler and the European Middle-weight Champion. With his hair dyed blond and his fancy costumes, Street becomes an epic character of mythological proportions.

Dawn Ades, Associate Curator of Manifesta 9 discussed this sense of unlikely exuberance as represented by the larger-than-life personality of Street. With Deller, Ades paid attention to the structural tensions in the life of a coal-miner facing complex social pressures, particularly the desire to escape from the hardship and drudgery of his father’s life, and as featured in Deller’s film, Street’s triumphal return.

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Vincent Meessen, Brussels-based artist made a presentation based on *Vita Nova*, his intellectual diagram mapping different post-colonial links, "vessels of communication" and aspects of myth and genealogy in the work of Roland Barthes. Meessen noted and embraced the "amateur" challenge an artist can make in the field of historical research.

Johan de Boose, Ghent-based author and historian, read from his 2011 novel *Bloedgetuigen (Martyrs)*, in which one of the four main characters is the 20th Century itself, dressed in the guise of a 100-year-old woman. She is a protagonist with no moral feeling, conscience nor sense of right and wrong. She is a talkative old lady with a perfect memory, a suitable metaphor for "the futility and fear of time and history", according to De Boose.

Katerina Gregos, Associate curator of Manifesta 9 introduced a discussion about what she variously referred to as "the Pandora's Box of 20th Century history", "repressed narratives" and "the questioning of historical certainties". Gregos asked: Is history pre-empting the future? How do we teach people to think historically? History reveals that facts need a cohesive plot, but Gregos, Meessen and De Boose proposed several truisms, in that the regime of History often versus the regime of Narrative. "History is condemned to be rewritten". "History is a way to rationalise uncertainty". Addressing the specific conditions of Genk, Gregos recognised that Manifesta 9 was "seeking to mine suppressed histories, through projects of artistic research from the grass-roots upward."

Ibro Hasanović, Rouen-based Bosnian artist, presented his film *The Short Story*, in which a man tells a violent tale of war to a group of children, in which a terrible past is drawn into a worse future. Reflecting the oral narrative traditions of Hasanović's Bosnian family, the "prophet" demonstrates how myths and legends can become world history. He talks of heroic battles and martyrdom. Hasanović's film stylistically echoes the aesthetics of propaganda.

Three workshops were organised in which three artists collaborated with the audience in order to approach the theme of *The Contemporary at the Service of the Past*.

Eva Gronbach, Cologne-based German fashion designer who has created clothes inspired by the fabrics and styles of miners' uniforms, proposed a workshop to discuss what the clothes of various audience members revealed about their personalities and backgrounds.

Yan Tomaszewski, Paris-based Polish artist, linked alpinism to contemporary art in his field trip in which he led a troop of participants to the top of a nearby coal slag-heap. After using mountain-climbing ropes and tools, he planted a flag at the summit. This was recorded in photographs and video.

Phil Collins, Berlin-based British artist, presented his seminar called *Marxism Today*, in which he showed short films about marginalised history and loss, including interviews with a retired teacher of political ideology in the former East Germany, and a boy from Kosovo who had lost family members to war.

Viktor Misiano, Moscow-based curator of Manifesta 1, and Chairman of the Manifesta Foundation, presented *Progressive Nostalgia*, based on his series of four exhibitions in European museums, organised in 2007, reviewing the art producing during the early days of post-Soviet Russia. "Revealing a will to forget, oblivion is a solution at a time of terrible or enormous change." Misiano discussed

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the human tendency to negate or refuse the recent past. "Memory becomes senseless or weak at a moment of traumatic historical rupture (...) Stability in instability is the status of the post-Soviet space in the first decade of the 21st Century."

Ekaterina Degot, Moscow-based art historian, critic and independent curator, presented a case-study of the 1st Ural Industrial Biennial, in which she highlighted the fact that many of the works exhibited were copies of existing paintings and sculptures, or manufactured according to written instructions from the artists, taking away the fetishist attitude many people have towards original objects of art, and the hand of creative genius. "We are not nostalgic of the past. We are nostalgic of a past when there was a future."

Hedwig Fijen, Director of Manifesta mentioned the legacy that Manifesta leaves behind after each edition, including those venues restored especially for the exhibition which then become permanent cultural sites, plus the importance of the vast knowledge and professional expertise gained within different sectors of the regional community.

Edgar Hermans, Cultural Heritage Co-Ordinator of Manifesta 9, mentioned the proposed series of 17 projects as part of the main exhibition, focussing on collections of different objects specifically or obliquely connected to the history of coal-mining in the region. These projects are organised in collaboration with regional museums, social communities and historians.

Jan Boelen, Vice-Chair of Manifesta 9 Board mentioned the reasons why Genk and the Region of Belgian Limburg actively sought to host Manifesta 9 in 2012, as part of a broader policy to strengthen the role of contemporary art in the region, and place new focus on historical factors.

In conclusion, in a conversation moderated by **Christopher Fraga, New York-based scholar** (and co-ordinating editor of the forthcoming *Manifesta 9 Encyclopaedia*), **Katerina Gregos** talked about amnesia as an enemy, and the desire of Manifesta 9 to excavate the past. This involves tracing the legacy of coal-mining in terms of labour and environmental issues, and connecting this to art practice. It also includes current shifts within the discourse of industrial capitalism. **Cuauhtémoc Medina** talked about the end of an industry which produced a society and a social model, which in turn has created a form of social resistance in the region, or a fear of being identified. The Manifesta 9 exhibition will tackle many of these issues. "How did coal as a fuel, a fossil, a significant element, affect the production of visibility? How did painting change after the smoke of industry started filling the air?"

Medina summed-up the Manifesta 9 Coffee Break. "We see the trauma of industrialisation and what it has left in its wake. Manifesta – in its temporaneity as a roving biennial – deals a lot with what is left behind."

The **live-streaming** of this Coffee Break, and a screen showing comments sent via the tool **twitter**, enabled those people who were not able to attend the event in Genk to be interactive participants.

Coordination – Diana Hillesheim, in collaboration with Mieke Mels, Inge Schiepers (Hospitality), Patrizio Lo Forte (Technical Support).
The City of Genk - Fanny Blokken (Technical Support)

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