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By MARIANA SCHROEDER



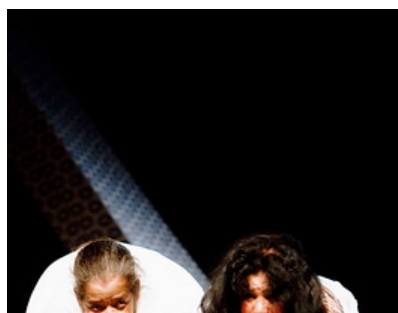
Laurent Grasso

Laurent Grasso's 'The Batteria Project' (2010);

Manifesta 8, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, is monstrous in size, stunning in its scope and uncompromisingly experimental in its approach. It opened Oct. 9 in the two southern Spanish cities of Murcia and Cartagena, which are about 50 kilometers apart. The art, most of it commissioned for Manifesta 8, fills 15 exhibition venues ranging from an abandoned post office slated for demolition to a pavilion used in the 18th century to perform autopsies. If you walked it you would clock more kilometers than a marathon runner.

But aching feet and lack of taxis are nothing compared to the variety and excitement produced by the 150 artists who are exhibiting their works at Manifesta 8. Three curatorial teams (Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum, Chamber of Public Secrets and tranzit.org) put together a show that leaves no taboo untouched. Art is life and life is integration or the lack of it in a Europe of increasing cultural conflict—a continent stretching its aesthetic boundaries.

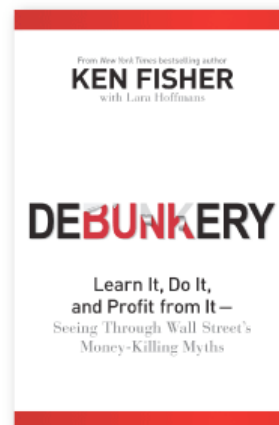
Murcia's former Central Post Office (Antigua Oficina de Correos y Telégrafos) has been abandoned since the 1980s. Now, its crumbling walls and soaring skylight form a perfect setting for some of Manifesta's most exciting installations. In "For J&L" (1997-2010) Ann Veronica Janssens uses bright pink light and artificial fog in a sensorial environment reminiscent of James Turrell's Ganzfeld pieces. The intense color and dense fog are disorienting, resulting in sensory deprivation that changes the viewer's perception.



A few rooms away, Norwegian filmmaker and artist Lene Berg pays homage to Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp in her video installation "Shaving the Baroness" (2010). The black-and-white video shows a startlingly white nude woman in her forties. A barber with slicked-back blond hair is shaving her pubic hair. The subject, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927) was the Dada artist and poet who starred in the original film made by Man

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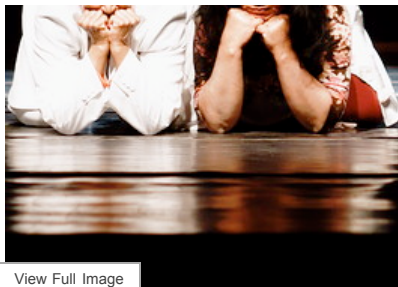
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Bouchra Ouizguen

Bouchra Ouizguen 'Madame Plaza' (2009)

Ray and Marcel Duchamp in 1921. Only two stills remain. In Berg's video she reconstructs the legendary film. The Baroness stares impassively over the head of the barber, far less manic than the woman who originally inspired Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp.

Willie Doherty from Derry, Northern Ireland, shot "Segura" (2010) in one day and one night in Murcia. The video follows the lyric ebb and flow of the Segura River. Poetic shots of foliage and water are intercut with scenes of a motorway bridge crossing the

river, a place of refuge for the homeless. The two-time Turner Prize nominee manages to create a poetic film noire that embraces Manifesta's social and geographic concerns.

Underlying the choice of this year's Manifesta locations is the geopolitical positioning of southern Spain as an interface for cross-cultural influences. "The sub-title of the exhibition is in dialogue with northern Africa," says Manifesta founding director Hedwig Fijen. "Maybe we can learn a little bit from the coexistence which exists in Murcia. There are 800 years of Islamic presence here and this is interesting because the political situation is Europe is now changing."

Andalucía has assimilated Islamic, Judaic and Christian cultural influences, a source of inspiration that Manifesta 8 explores through the art commissioned for the Biennial. Moroccan choreographer Bouchra Ouizguen uses Aïta singers from Morocco in "Madame Plaza," (2009) her dance installation at Centro Párraga in Murcia. The traditional wailing songs are usually sung at weddings and feasts.

U.S. artist Michael Takeo Magruder takes up the theme of terrorism in his mixed media installation "11-M" (2010). He uses three minutes of closed circuit security video from Madrid's Atocha Station where terrorist bombings on March 11, 2004, killed 191 people and wounded 1,800. Magruder deconstructs the film changing its speed and color to create an abstract work of immense power.

French artist Laurent Grasso's "The Batteria Project" (2010) is the only work shown in Cartagena's Autopsy Pavilion. The 25-minute film examines the role Cartagena has played as a strategic harbor in the Mediterranean. Its archaic defense system is an iconic symbol of the centuries of conflict between Europe and North Africa.

Several artists focus on the mediated reality of life in Europe's prisons. In fact one venue is the former San Antón Prison in Cartagena. "We work with the prison system as a site of production and a site of change," explains Alfredo Camerotti, member of the curatorial team Chamber of Public Secrets. "The prison system is a place of mediation. If you are inside you mediate the reality which is outside. This is parallel to the media world – how information is generated and how it is received." At MUBAM—Museum of Fine Arts of Murcia Austrian artist David Rych takes up the theme in "Encounter" (2010), a complex video installation in which six young men from a youth custody center meet six inmates serving long-term prison sentences.

Mediated violence is the subject of Boris Charmatz dance installation which premiered at Manifesta 8. In the work entitled "Levée des Conflicts" (2010) (Suspension of Conflict) 24 dancers perform a repertoire of gestures which the French choreographer calls "motionless choreography." It is motionless, he explains, because everybody is in motion and the dancers form a huge oscillating, hypnotic round.

Manifesta 8 is a feast for the mind but it's not fast food. It takes time to savor the many different works and locations. Bring a huge appetite for art and comfortable shoes.

Write to Mariana Schroeder at wsje.weekend@wsj.com

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