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In Spain, Bifurcation at the Biennale

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Murcia, in southeastern Spain, is a region steeped in Arabic culture, past and present. Some of its most emblematic churches and monuments stand on the remains of mosques and fortresses erected during Spain's Moorish occupation. More recently, the area has drawn a large contingent of North African immigrants, many of whom have settled here to work in its fields and orchards.

The organizers of the roving arts biennale Manifesta appeared to have hit upon a good match by pairing two of Murcia's cities — Murcia and Cartagena — with the theme “a dialogue with North Africa,” for the event, which opened Oct. 9 and runs for three months.

But only 7 of the 116 artists officially invited to the Murcia biennale came from North Africa, which has triggered some unease, and even some outrage, among artists, and others, present.

“I certainly don't see what the relationship with North Africa has to do with anything around here,” said Ricardo Nicolau, the deputy director of the Serralves contemporary art museum in Porto, Portugal, as he toured one of Manifesta's 14 venues.

Thierry Geoffroy, who goes by the artistic sobriquet of Colonel, said he had decided not to exhibit his own work. Instead, he was making his allocated exhibition space — inside Cartagena's old prison — available for any uninvited North African artist who wanted to make a last-minute contribution to Manifesta. One Algerian video artist had already responded to his offer and was on her way to Spain, Mr. Geoffroy said.

“We must have more North Africans here to speak to,” he said. “Manifesta claims to thrive on criticism, so I certainly want to express my own criticism loud and clear.”

Even some of Manifesta's organizers were disturbed about the situation. Khalid Ramadan, one of the curators of the biennale, said that, as the exhibition approached, he had unsuccessfully lobbied Manifesta's management to alter the wording of the exhibition's

theme. “It should at least have been called a mutual dialogue,” he said, “because if the strongest party is allowed to dictate the terms of the agenda, it becomes in fact an imposed dialogue.

“Will the dialogue move forward even an inch thanks to this exhibition?” he continued. “I prefer to let you and every other visitor answer this, but it certainly seems to me a worthwhile question.”

Among the handful of North African artists is Khaled Afez, who is Egyptian. He suggested that “perhaps the problem is that when you have three collectives sharing the responsibility for a big event like this one, each one expects the other to take responsibility for the main theme.”

Indeed, two of the three collectives appointed to curate Murcia’s biennale appeared to have made a point of deviating from the proposed North African theme. In its presentation statement, Tranzit, a group of curators who come mainly from Eastern Europe, wrote: “we think that an exhibition is an engaged display of artistic practices that explore the assumptions behind such political or cultural power relations and strives to get to their roots, taking up a position of conflictive thought.”

Echoing that stance, Bassam El Baroni, chief curator of the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum, pointed to the problems linked to using any theme that “basically represents an institutionalized concept of ethnicity.”

Still, some artists did address North African issues. In Cartagena’s Arqua museum, the Canadian artist Jean-Marc Superville Sovak stacked up a pile of bricks, each stamped with the word “Empire.” The bricks are designed to “construct a monument to impermanence,” according to the artist’s explanatory note. His work challenges distinctions made between buildings that might serve different purposes but were made using shared materials or methods. It is also meant, he wrote, to act as a reminder that “in every church in Spain lies a mosque.”

In Murcia’s old post office, Céline Condorelli juxtaposed a slide show about the history of Egypt’s cotton exports with an illustrated narration of a woman’s exodus from Egypt. Among the mirrors and other features of her installation stands one of the final sheets of Egyptian cotton woven in Britain, just before the country’s last Lancashire mill closed.

“I wanted to show how much the history of people has been dependent on the movement of commodities,” said Ms. Condorelli, who holds French and Italian citizenship but whose

grandmother came from Alexandria. “You cannot understand the Egyptian revolution without understanding the rise and fall of Egypt’s cotton industry.”

On the upper floor of the post office, two Dutch graphic designers scattered organic fruit across crates, each bearing a sticker with a drawing and a word like “identity” or “water,” written both in English and Arabic.

“Murcia brands itself the orchard of Europe, so we wanted to explore the relationship between branding and politics,” said Vinca Kruk, one of the two Dutch designers and co-founder of the Metahaven studio for design research. “We also felt that such fruit stickers should carry a message to the place where they are bought rather than just be a label and description of origin.”

For their project, Metahaven’s designers persuaded local producers of organic fruit to use their stickers. The next step, still under discussion, is to get large European retailers like Monoprix in France to sell fruit carrying the stickers, to establish a more permanent dialogue between producers and buyers.

This version of Manifesta has a strong emphasis on video art. “I really feel back in the 1990s with so much video here,” said Mr. Nicolau, the Portuguese museum curator. “The whole video obsession seemed to have stopped for about 10 years, but it’s now clearly making a comeback.”

Among the video projects showing inside Murcia's old water mill is one by Raed Yasir, a Lebanese artist, called “immigration forecast,” which spoofs a traditional weather report by providing updates on the latest attempts by North African migrants to travel to various points on a European map.

The Murcia post office building, which had stood empty for 30 years, is one of a handful of structures that was reopened for the exhibition and is arguably the biennale’s most striking venue. Manifesta’s director, Hedwig Fijen, who is Dutch, remarked that its use was evidence that Manifesta was not “a fly-in, fly-out that leaves nothing behind.”

That the biennale’s venues are in two cities about 50 kilometers, or 30 miles, apart poses a challenge for visitors. But it also presents a chance to combine contemporary art viewing with exploring sights including a spectacular Roman theater in Cartagena.

The next Manifesta will be in the Belgian province of Limburg. Its theme: “a region in transformation.” “We want to showcase that you can turn from a region reliant on industry,

in our case mining, to one reliant on innovation and creativity,” said Gilbert Van Baelen, a Limburg culture officer. “And we want our theme to be very strong.”