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By Cathryn Drake

Italian Hours

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Left: My Barbarian performing *Post Paradise Never Say Sorry Again* at Piazza Cesare Battisti, Trento. (Photo: Hugo Munoz) Right: Manifesta director Hedwig Fijen and artist Nedko Solakov. (Except where noted, all photos: Cathryn Drake)

The title of this year's Manifesta, "100 Miles in 100 Days," seemed more logistical caveat than curatorial mandate. The impressive exhibition, including more than four hundred artists, is a veritable endurance marathon. This is the first time the roving biennial is based in more than one city: the Italian towns of Rovereto, Trento, and Bolzano-Bozen. Perhaps the director, Hedwig Fijen, wanted to make up for the cancellation of the 2006 edition, scheduled for Nicosia, Cyprus, which was abandoned because of political discord among the curators and local organizers. But although the Alpine region of Trentino-Alto Adige looks picturesque and idyllic—lederhosen and hiking boots seemed practically de rigueur—it has also seen its share of political turbulence, with relations between the ethnic Germans and Italians still tense. The schizophrenic province, also referred to as Südtirol (South Tyrol), was part of Austria-Hungary until its annexation by Italy in 1919, and roughly half the population still speaks German in spite of an intensive relocation and "Italianization" program carried out by Mussolini with the help of Hitler, which was cut short by World War II.

Arriving in Trento last Wednesday night on the train from Rome, I headed straight for the local art-world hangout, the Green Tower restaurant, where I dined with Los Angeles collective My Barbarian, in town for their performance at the Galleria Civica di Trento. They described trying to organize a workshop with local volunteers around the theme of the left-wing extremist Red Brigades, which had been founded by local university student Renato Curcio; they were told it was not allowed. Barbarian Alexandro Segade said that when they tried to discuss regional politics in a workshop, they were shocked at the passionately divisive reactions. The unveiling earlier that evening of the bronze *Family Monument*—portraying the typical Trentino family as chosen in a contest during Gillian Wearing's eponymous 2007 exhibition—was attended by protesters in white masks claiming to represent the

“invisible families” who had been statistically disregarded by the competition. Barbarian Jade Gordon commented that the posture of the family, with the wife kneeling next to the husband, was tellingly sexist.



Left: Manifesta curator Adam Budak (on right). Right: The unveiling of Gillian Wearing's *Family Monument*. (Photo: Hugo Munoz)

Coming from notoriously chaotic southern Italy, I expected impeccable organization up north. But the reality was perhaps the biennial's most striking (or at least frustrating) lesson. When I finally arrived in Rovereto the next morning—after narrowly missing the train and being rescued by Manifesta employee Roberto Lunelli—the press representative explained, “There are twice as many people here as we anticipated.” In the courtyard of the sprawling Manifattura Tabacchi—a recently decommissioned tobacco factory and one of two sites of curator Adam Budak's exhibition “Principle Hope”—I fortified myself with a gelato from artist Tim Etchells's *Art Flavours* cart. A TV crew interviewed Budak beneath giant black balloons, part of an outdoor lounge installation. At the back was a spectacular facade of vivid flames, the entrance to Ragnar Kjartansson's *Schumann Machine*, in which the Icelandic artist donned a tux and sang an ironic rendition of the composer's *Dichterliebe*.

On the ground floor, at *Copy-Right No Copy-Right*, by Italian collective Alterazioni Video, a long queue led to a computer station where participants could make copies of music and films of their choice as an act of protest against intellectual property laws. In the mazelike exhibition upstairs, I came across *The Caregivers*, by Libia Castro and Olafur Eliasson, a compelling video-opera about Eastern European female domestic workers in Italy, which effectively depicted the pressing issue of immigration in Europe.

Daunted by the logistics of moving around Rovereto alone, I considered jumping aboard Christian Philipp Müller's surreal *Space Rendezvous* float, which passed by seemingly unmanned near the train station as I headed toward the former cocoa factory ex-Peterlini. Here the centerpiece was Knut Asdam's *Oblique*, a masterful video in which passengers travel together on a train through a meditative urban landscape. Exhausted by a visit to the must-see exhibitions at nearby MART—the surveys “Eurasia” and “Contemporary Germany,” with paintings by Germans Tim Eitel, David Schnell, and Matthias Weischer—I hitched a ride back to Trento with two people getting into their car. (They turned out to be Greek curator Daphne Vitali and her father, Carlo.)

After a much needed prosecco pit stop in the packed courtyard of the Palazzo delle Poste, I braved “The Soul (or, Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls),” yet another labyrinthine exhibition. The standout here was *Following Room*, by American artist **Beth Campbell**: an arrangement of identically furnished cubicles with glass dividers. Less effective comments on collective identity were five mock

didactic “museums,” such as the “Museum of European Normality.” Pausing on the staircase, 303 Gallery’s Mari Spirito, on sabbatical in Europe for the summer, stopped and sighed, “I think there should be a law limiting the percentage of video allowed in a show.”

The best demonstration of the problems surrounding European integration was simply getting around. On the Manifesta shuttle to Bolzano on Friday, a row ensued when the Italian driver stubbornly insisted on following a written itinerary that was contrary to the official press schedule. The scene devolved into a comedy of the absurd when, to everyone’s bemusement, he stopped the bus in the middle of a roundabout to ask road workers for directions. We all agreed that this was evidence of the worst characteristics of the two local cultures: Teutonic rigidity and Italian disorganization.

The cavernous ex-Alumix, on the outskirts of Bolzano, showcased “The Rest of Now,” an evocative, lively exhibition curated by Raqs Media Collective dedicated to the beauty and artifacts of obsolescence. Zilvinas Kempinas’s *Skylight Tower* embodying projected light in negative with shimmering videotape strips hanging from the central skylight, while Jorge Otero-Pailos’s *The Ethics of Dust* transferred the accumulations of pollution on the windows to a facade of latex casts, preserving the residue of time as archaeological artifact.

By the time we reached the ghostly Fortezza/Franzensfeste, the Habsburg defense structure on the Austrian-Italian border where Hitler and Mussolini sealed their pact, I was wandering like a zombie from room to room, in no state to appreciate the ephemeral sound texts emanating in three different languages from the empty spaces. At that moment, the ominous, isolated fort itself seemed the most eloquent physical symbol of the randomness of political borders and national identity.



Left: Artist Ragnar Kjartansson. Right: 303 Gallery director Mari Spirito, curator Konstantinos Dagritzikos, and artist **Beth Campbell**.