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On How to Fall With  
Grace—or Fall Flat on  
Your Face

The Manifesta Biennial is not unique; its pitfalls are shared by most similar power-possessing institutions to varying degrees and in relation to their particular structures and aspirations. Although it engenders its own nuances and ambitions, for the purposes of the coming paragraphs, Manifesta simply serves as a testing ground for dissecting the processes of the art world into their different layers to illustrate the pressing need for a new socio-political consciousness in the artistic community, and to address the widespread paralysis of cultural production as a crucial socio-political force. As such, turning to education as the heart of what is to become the Manifesta 6 School represents an attempt to slap a patient out of a coma, and awaken a consciousness that is more far-reaching than individual art practices.

In its customary introversion, the arts community does not let well enough alone, but often extends itself just enough to instrumentalise the world around it as props for its own production. A prime example of this tokenism is the growing range of art projects based on a form of seemingly benevolent social science research. The research results (or works of art) are, more often than not, neither up to scratch academically nor do they imbue the information with any new artistic significance. They are forms of either pop information, inaccessible specialist data or, sadly, sensationalism. In contrast, a genuine form of awareness and constructive involvement necessitates commitment, erudition, confrontation and a recoiling from the superficiality of political correctness.

The Manifesta 6 School is a pretext, an excuse and an opportunity. It is a pretext for questioning and possibly challenging the methods of the institutionalised art world. It is an excuse to bring together inspiring thinkers and cultural producers to invigorate the position of art, and cultural production at large. It is a great opportunity for a wealth of critical endeavours: looking at the role of art institutions as participants in cultural policymaking; questioning the role of artists as defined by the institutional climate in which they practice and produce; revealing the power positions that legitimise the prevailing elitism; looking at culture's entanglement with the pressures and demands of corporate globalisation. And, finally, asking what kind of education do we as art professionals need today in order to play an effective role in the world?

The realisation of Manifesta 6 begins with a few set parameters: the Biennial, the team, the site. Let us start by taking a look at these givens before extrapolating the Manifesta 6 School's potential in depth.

### The Biennial

Manifesta is the biennial of contemporary European art, although its geography-specific character is often underplayed. The general acceptance of this delineation implies that the debate around modes of representation is only crude when it refers to those outside of the West. Is that not just the other side of the same coin? The Venice Biennale, for example, is often branded as outdated because of its emphasis on national representation. But the Manifesta Biennial, similarly, is a project that focuses on a new united Europe and is funded by numerous national and trans-national agencies interested in promoting their own agendas. These agencies structurally reflect the policies of their states, be they conservative, moderate, liberal, right-wing, left-wing or middle-of-the-road. The bulk of the project's capital is provided by the host city, with the expected returns calculated in the form of short- and long-term benefits. The reality of these returns is quite

evident in terms of tourism, new infrastructure, city promotion, salaries for local administrators, etc.

The Biennial is like a parasite landing on a host. It is an authoritative institution in the guise of a civic entity with a benign mandate. The deliberate ambiguity of its position leaves it prey to the doctrines of corporatism as dictated by the variety of interests it encompasses: the art market, funding agencies, sponsors, foreign policies, cultural policies, city governments, etc. And thus, as an institution that refrains from defining a position of its own on the basis of its ideas and institutional history, it is susceptible to the prescriptions of the external agents whose contributions empower its self-serving nature. One illustration of this dynamic is the way artists from the richer end of the European spectrum are often over-represented in biennial shows as a result of the strength of their local funding bodies. This kind of imbalance creates a false impression of the relative vitality of different cultural milieus, as dissemination becomes a reflection of a state's purchasing power. Preferably, concepts and ideas, rather than financing, should determine the role and activities of civic institutions. Therefore, if such institutions were to profess specific agendas or positions, they might suffer economically but they would be far less accepting of, and vulnerable to, exploitation. The prevalent genre of insipid wishy-washiness is symptomatic of the ongoing corporatisation of cultural production.

### The Team

To continue the theme of transparency, we should begin by looking at some history. The International Foundation Manifesta and the host city, Nicosia, began the search for the upcoming edition's curatorial team with a relatively open call for applications. As the dream team of political correctness, we made it through the first round: multi-denominational German-Russian/American-Arab; or North, South and centre; or Frankfurt style, New York glamour and Cairo mystique; or whatever. The first successful sales pitch.

For the next stage of the selection, a proposition about art education was presented by the team. The pros were immediately self-evident: a concrete idea that leaves behind the predictable pseudo-political reductive North versus South or centre/periphery jargon. Instead, the proposal put forth a precise and coherent idea about initiating a seemingly neutral entity with a charitable and highly popular motive and mandate—the Manifesta 6 School. Criticism from militant anti-education activists seemed rather unlikely. Coincidentally, the buzzword in the art world happens to be education. (Whether coincidence or copycat is irrelevant, as the Biennial has wider outreach, a bigger budget and an early press release to protect the concept's ownership). Sales pitch number two.

So the selection was made. Unfortunately, one cannot point to a conspiracy; we, the curators, are just compliantly savvy to the requirements of the industry. However, we are guilty of complacently marketing ourselves according to strategic geographical quotas to cater to the expectations of institutions that ironically thrive on (and appropriate funds by) claiming a philosophy of openness. In fact, such openness runs essentially counter to the demands of the standardisation machine and cannot be tolerated. The incongruity of the world's neo-liberal face is exemplified by these seemingly progressive cultural institutions that espouse an 'openness to all' without ideological predilections. Yet position yourself in

relation to this openness and—lo and behold!—you are swiftly absorbed into it and reinforcing its inbuilt consumerist values. Same old, same old. This dynamic is bred by the economic system's aversion to any change that may disrupt its assembly-line production, in this instance production of ideas. On this assembly line, production has to self-perpetuate, legitimise and replicate itself, or the structure inexorably breaks down. Everything that is interesting happens on the margins, and no one is to know exactly where that is.

*Of course, one question comes up again and again: Can you claim you are anti-institutional, and yet work for one of the pillars of the system? A little hypocritical perhaps? And here we can try to slip in some innocence: 'You can only change the system from within—participate and have your say, and gradually you can have some impact.' Or, 'The system is all-powerful, all-engulfing, and there is no room to manoeuvre.' Mere excuses used to protect one's position on the assembly line. A mask for laziness or apathy or, more often than not, for self-serving motives that cumulatively paralyse the endeavours of culture and strip them of their predisposition to question, influence and change.*

I acknowledge that we are complicit, but the real issue is how we proceed from this point.

### The Site

The divided capital of Nicosia is the location chosen for this European event: part European and part not, part Christian and part Muslim, part rich and part poor. A conflict that is metaphorically, or perhaps practically, a microcosm of the supposed East/West divide fed to us 24/7 by the world's free media. The choice of this location leaves the outsider wondering whether Cyprus is supposed to be a window on the fallacies of Eurocentrism or a wall to show where Europe ends—as the question of Turkish inclusion in the European Union surfaces on a daily basis. Moreover, the project is formulated as having a bi-communal character, a naive problem-solving strategy that ignores similar contrived attempts that have always fallen short as they repeatedly underestimate the complexity of this longstanding reality. Whatever the assumptions and implications, the answer depends on how we proceed from here.

Nicosia is not a capital of contemporary art, but this is certainly not to be regarded as an affliction to be remedied by Manifesta. Rather than stripping the Biennial of meaning, this reality simply indicates that the Biennial requires its own method and configuration if it is to be of significance to the local community with which it will cohabit. Here lies the most demanding aspect of the project: What kind of meanings that are vital, dynamic and requisite for Nicosia can the Biennial generate in this context? The difficulty in striking a balance between the needs of the Biennial and those of the city lies in the dichotomy between the immediate inclination to replicate existing models and the ability to have and generate confidence in the power of the local situation and constituency to breed their own valid frameworks.

In order to initiate meaningful interactions and relationships in Nicosia, Manifesta should communicate a climate desiring of active engagement in congruence with its place and time. Manifesting this desire concretely in the formation of the School is the only function the Biennial can profess as a humble guest rather than an arrogant intruder on the island. Otherwise, what will remain is patronage and ignorance cloaked in a pretence of inaccessible sophistication.

Fortunately, in the aforementioned general atmosphere of indifference, Cyprus has the advantages of location, scale, provincialism and—regrettably—firsthand experience of living with conflict. In these circumstances, an empowering and influential event is possible.

### The School

Regardless of the particulars, the fact now is that Manifesta has committed to forgoing the glamour of the conventional large-scale show and opening itself to transformation. Allowing the project to try sowing some fresh seeds, rather than just using generic vacuum-packed merchandise in conformity with the apparatus of corporate sustainability. Consequently, for this Biennial to be of any substance, we need to be able, as curators, organisers and institutions, to stop censoring ourselves, to give up our decorum, to dismiss our elitism, and perhaps even to undermine ourselves.

*In order to be successful, this project must fail by the existing standards of the exhibition industry.* It should propose a new articulation of the ways of assessment and not fall prey to the trap of proposing innovation yet using the same old criteria for its evaluation. These obsolete standards not only stifle creativity but also endorse a corporate paradigm of cultural production: How many tickets sold? How many new works produced? How many reviews? How many international guests? These questions are measures for a very superficial ‘return-on-investment’ logic, and are standard tools for promoting the Biennial to applicant cities. This is the logic and language of bureaucrats, marketers and advertising executives, certainly not cultural producers. *Cultural production must maintain and defend its autonomy as a space where the freedom to experiment, to negotiate ideological positions and to fail are not only accepted, but defining.*

The Manifesta 6 School can be about creating conditions with a modesty and a desire to accept the possibility of failure. This is not referring to the relativist failure of the laboratory model, but a vocal acknowledgement that certain formulae do not work and should be refuted and new ones tested. One case in point is the proponents of superficial cultural exchange relentlessly orchestrating patronising situations where the didactics of their monologues deafen the audience. Not only are the discussions redundant, the repercussions are damaging as entire cultures and issues are packaged with labels of exchange endorsing the entire futile exercise. For example, museums seize the opportunity of easy public funding for a certain ‘topic of the season’ and package a complex and influential debate into one exhibition to boost their finances through a false show of engagement. These exhibitions reduce significant issues to consumable products, and strip them of their urgency by presenting them as yet another of many options of display. Such irresponsible methods should be rejected.

The Manifesta 6 School should not reiterate generic references. It should demonstrate its uncompromising eagerness to encounter and delve into conditions and realities as lived, and not simply exploit them as ‘content’ for production. This transcending of abstraction and stripping naked of convictions is not a painless exercise, but it is a gratifying one. Searching through diverse disciplines for new directions, whether academic or practical, along with meticulousness, indulgence and a readiness to admit shortcomings may prove to be the necessary approaches. Pursuing new questions requires unorthodox means

and exploration in unexpected places. Learning-by-doing, be it reading, walking, filming, discussing, painting, etc., should be privileged over reproduction or didactic pedagogies. Repetition and re-investigation of exhausted theories whose inadequacies have been repeatedly exposed would be a tedious redundancy.

Moving beyond the current production-on-demand modus operandi of the art world, the School can advance site-specificity as a cerebral exercise rather than a delightful gimmick. This can be possible if great labour combined with flexibility in expectations becomes its dominant strategy. The structure of the School would be demanding, and involve over-information and in-depth analysis. A mind-expanding form of education can only become possible if different paradigms are allowed to confront our own, challenge them and maybe invade our confined and limiting hierarchy of knowledge. Moreover, alternative discourses need to be imposed on the mainstream, and new ideas embraced and voiced on their own terms.

All institutions represent an ideology, whether explicitly or by default. The Manifesta 6 School should be overt and confrontational about its position as a hub for a proactive, politically engaged community of cultural producers. The School should escape from the model of harvesting innate artistic talent, instead affording an environment of intellectual scholarship—this atmosphere being not merely an accumulation of individualist endeavours but rather a direct function of the institution. It should advocate the development of ideas as an ongoing process of investigation. Research should be encouraged as a route towards discovery and knowledge production in fierce opposition to product design and display. This framework should be carefully constructed and communicated, and the participants left with the independence to find and formulate their own methodologies, spaces and languages within it.

This project must be a call for the politicisation of art production, not for political art. It can make us dust off our Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Antonio Negri, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek and listen, or even act. The politicians, the corporations and their professionals are steadfast in their motives, purposes and aspirations. The community of cultural producers is not. But in the face of current global conditions, for anything meaningful or effectual to be expressed or produced, positions must be articulated within the cultural sphere, their multitude explicitly representing a belief in the validity of multiple worldviews and positions, and rejecting monological indoctrinations.

The bipolarity of world affairs, as sanctioned by the media, necessitates urgent resistance. Horrific terrorism manifested in the form of a confused nineteen-year-old girl in her US army uniform in Iraq, and on the other hand, dogmatic ideologues empowered by this terror to manipulate a demoralised and terrified teenager into strapping explosives to his own chest. In the midst of this tragic reality, the detached silence of the cultural industry becomes a form of collaboration. Art and culture professionals and institutions must become the third voice with their creativity, inspiration and intellect. It is not a romanticism to be shunned by cynics, but a genuine alternative, when we assert an indiscriminate bias to compassion, and choose to become involved.

In the profound and irate words of Arundhati Roy (in *The Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*): 'Our strategy should be not only to confront Empire but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art,

our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories.’

The Manifesta 6 School is a chance to fall gracefully, and then stand up and walk a new path. Perhaps this is in itself the education we need.