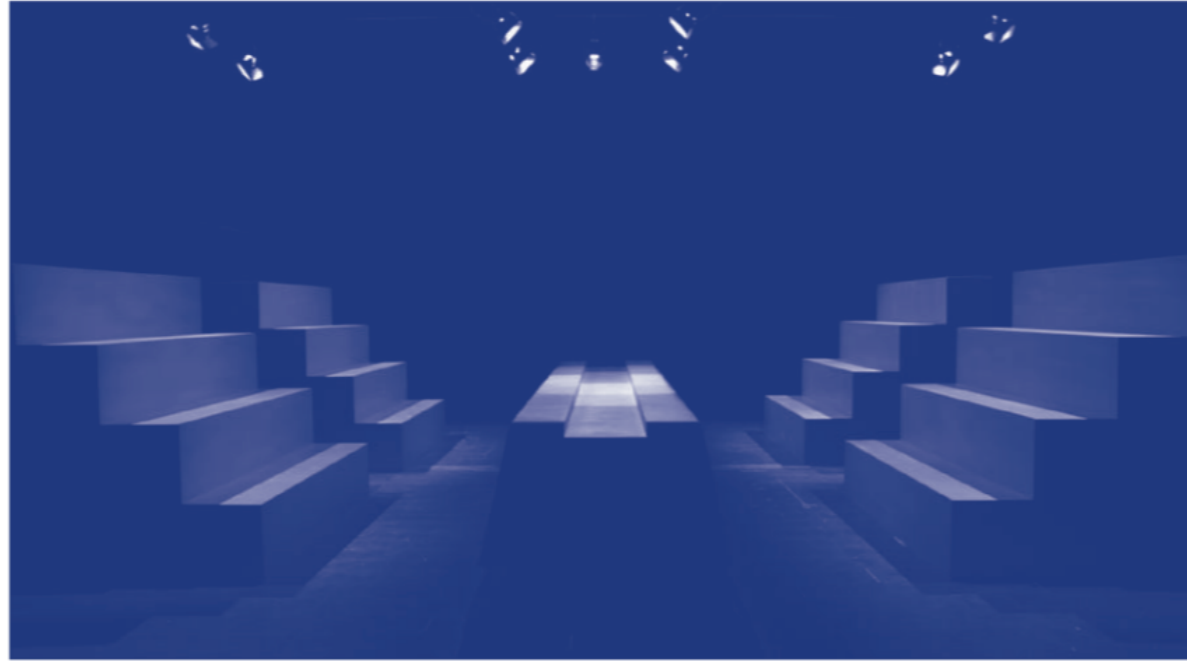


The Battle of the Backbench

The politics of debate at Manifesta8

■ NEGOTIATIONS

Just how narrow is the liberal consensus when artists' collectives are locked up in an architecture designed to evoke conflict? In the aftermath of Manifesta8, participants and curators look back at the Backbench, which took place in Spain in June 2010.



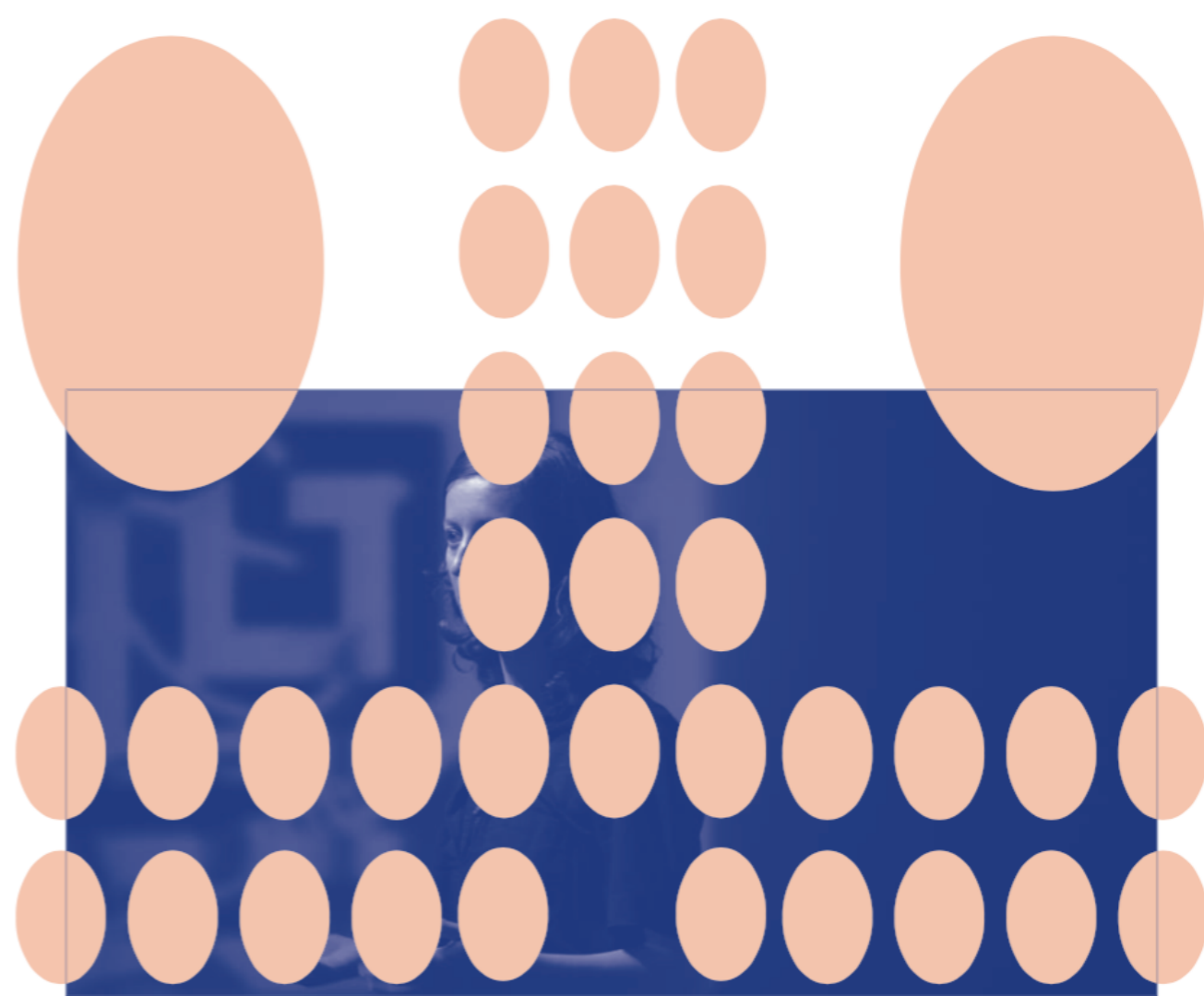
Manifesta8, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, took place in Murcia and Cartagena, Spain, and opened in October 2010. As part of the exhibition project curated by Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (Bassam el Baroni and Jeremy Beaudry), four collectives engaged in a debate in the summer. The collectives were Red76 from Portland, The Action Mill from Philadelphia, Take to the Sea based in Cairo, Sardinia and Mumbai, and Metahaven from Amsterdam. The event was filmed by visual artist Ergin Çavusoglu, and resulted in a multi-screen video installation exhibited at the former post office in Murcia, which was reopened for the occasion of Manifesta. ACAF's exhibition in the post office was titled *Overscore*.

The debate took place in a gun metal gray painted structure designed by nOffice, which provided for a rudimentary form of parliament. Stretched over three consecutive days, the event derailed into an art world version of the Jerry Springer Show. There was not much the collectives and their moderators – Suhail Malik of Goldsmiths, and Nav Haq of Arnolfini – seemed to have in common. What was supposed to become an engaged debate about art and politics, became a fight about the presuppositions behind that debate and the positions held by its participants.

Opening the *Exorcist's* theme issue on negotiation, are stills from Ergin Çavusoglu's piece, and in addition, three written afterthoughts. Two are by members of Take to the Sea, the other is by Action Mill associate and *Manifesta8* curator Jeremy Beaudry. By no means an "objective" registration of what happened, here's a memory of an unsettling debate, caught on camera and transformed into images of beauty.

At the *Backbench*, people didn't hold back. They brought the kind of things to the table that are better left unsaid if things are to remain smooth and artsy. There was no synergy. No collaborative project emerged. Negotiation was a last resort.

▲ *Ergin Çavusoglu*
Backbench (2010)
Five channel synchronised
(1920x1080) HD video
installation, sound
Duration: 47:05 min
Production still
Set design by nOffice
Video installation courtesy
the artist and Manifesta8
Region of Murcia
Set design courtesy nOffice
and Manifesta8 Region of
Murcia
Copyright Emre Erkmen



▲ *Ergin Çavusoglu*
Backbench (2010)
Five channel synchronised
(1920x1080) HD video
installation, sound
Duration: 47:05 min
Video stills on page 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
Courtesy the Artist and Mani-
festas8 Region of Murcia
Copyright Ergin Çavusoglu

From the Backbench to Tahrir and backwards

Lina Attalah, Laura Cugusi

■ LETTERS

We were invited to participate in *Backbench*, part of the eighth *Manifesta*, the European Contemporary Art Biennial. During the *Backbench* sessions conditions of contemporary art production were to be critically discussed by practitioners from different realms. Those sitting through *Backbench* would be digging into their unconscious, which clings to certain notions of art making.

The choice of our collectives to be part of the project comes from the fact that we're relatively new to contemporary art practice. Our unconscious is not so deep, so it would therefore make for more genuine moments of reflection.

While we knew that this freshness was being used to inject a certain novel dimension into the exchange, we were also curious of entering what had been an opaque world for us. It was an adventure where, as we say in Arabic, you know and see the wall but not knowing if it will tick, and then what will be. We therefore embraced this as an exercise in negotiation, to investigate why we choose contemporary art as a way of pursuing our research practice today.

From the outset, we assumed that through a debate we would attempt to uncover determined stances in contemporary art practice. We assumed there would be a conversation around self-positioning, especially with regards to our work at 'Take to the Sea.' We



assumed we would discuss the intersections between research and art practice, art and activism, but also the tensions between those notions when venturing into the intricate process of representation.

From its subtitle, we thought that *Manifesta8* would supposedly be 'in dialogue with Northern Africa.' *Manifesta*, the catalogue states, 'is entering a new phase, shifting from its previous East-West dialogue to focus on notions of North-South' – and we decided to play with it, in it, surfing on its inherent contradictions. For even if we were new in this particular context of the biennial, the broader post-Cold War shift from an East-West paradigm to a North-South one is certainly not new to us.

When the *Backbench* conversation started however, this potential of shift, of negotiation, disappeared. Our American counterparts forcefully navigated the conversation into the framework of 'socially responsible art'. Here answers were predetermined and curiosities were exterminated. For us, the art perished.

Our "fellow artists" at *Backbench* presented as urgent issues the conditions of production, the corruption of biennials and the pleas of the host communities and our apparent distance to these concerns disappointed them. We, however, could not escape remembering Luc Boltanski's *Distant Suffering* (2002) in which he makes clear that feeling guilty won't make you change the world. We got visions of those neoliberal paradoxes as eco-friendly cars and CRS programmes by corporations that employ children; a socially responsible biennial felt to be by default an extension to those paradoxes.

Our failure to engage in a conversation around how art practice can be socially responsible and conducive to justice and equality emanates from a more basic fallout. Just as the 'dialogue with North Africa' was framed by Europe, so our conversation was framed by a set of pre-determined rules set by the American artists/activists. In this setting the emancipatory potential of negotiation was silenced. The moment was colonised by one



language, one mindset, and one notion. It had ended before it even began.

We look back and ponder over how it turned into an ethnographic encounter. It stimulated frantic note-exchanging among us (in languages and character types that are obscure to encounter, i.e. Italian and Arabic), endless observations and myriad comments over dinner. The polarised setting of *Backbench* forced us to take a position. And the biggest challenge was not taking the right side, but rather, the possibility of a categoric, liberating withdrawal.

Looking back we wonder even if negotiation was necessary to start with. This urge to define the parameters of activism as/opposed to art is obsolete. We saw a new logic articulating itself. We're not burdened by responsibility. In fact, we enjoy erring irresponsibly through the curious renditions that eventually create possibility.

Like a revolution, a crisis produces a state of instability that ends when a new status quo is installed. In other words, a crisis cannot be permanent; it always calls for a solution, a decision.

Alain Badiou speaks of the revolution in Egypt as a moment where not only one new reality is born, but a myriad of new possibilities as well. We're afraid that no new possibilities were born in the moment of the *Backbench* "debate". It seemed only to reassure us of how an "instrumentalised" art production operates; and how curiosity and possibility are fed by revolutionary acts that unpack pre-determined notions of *Realpolitik*.

Reinhardt Koselleck once noted that the concept of "critique", as opposed to crisis, emerged during the Enlightenment. It was then that critical thought became the authority licensed to judge, separate, categorise and make rules. Criticism got irremediably disconnected from responsibility and, this, in the end, leads to the nullification of the substantial difference between claiming to be doing, and doing.

