

The Highlights - Interview with Metahaven

THE HIGHLIGHTS: Metahaven is known for working in ways that aren't necessarily aligned with the conventional modes of graphic design practice. How do you choose your projects and how does your methodology or approach affect the types of content you choose to deal with?



Metahaven, *Signal (Murcia)*, 2010. Distribution of Murcia-produced fruits, and design of fruit labels. In collaboration with Ecoagricultoras de Murcia (EDEMUR) and others. Installation in collaboration with Paul Kuipers. Images courtesy Metahaven and *Manifesta 8*.

METAHAVEN: Why even bother defining the "conventional modes of design practice," as what is a convention is always - if slowly - changing by habit and custom, and no two people would even agree on what such a convention would be for "graphic design," at any given point in time, anyway. What is more, no practice can be entirely unconventional. Every

practice which, for example, relies on technical protocol or standardization, either for digital production or for print, already is living by conventions. There is a huge amount of conventions and agreements that we have to take for granted before there even can be any disagreement, or unconventional behavior.

No designer is completely free in determining who he works for and what that work is. Many who you'd think subscribe to convention have not made the conscious choice to do so, but have somehow come to work at a particular place where they do the very best they can do. What you sketch out here is in fact a very large group of trained professionals doing the best they can. Occasionally we've taken the liberty to regard our work as a gift or favor, given to a particular agent or actor, portraying or representing that actor. Design can be an intervention. The gift is one of design's most powerful intervention strategies, yet it is the one that is forgotten about easiest and quickest.

THE HIGHLIGHTS: Was there a particular brief for this project? How did you come to participate in *Manifesta 8*?

METAHAVEN: We were invited to participate nominally as artists. The only curatorial brief we got consisted of a text written by ACAF's curators, Bassam el Baroni and Jeremy Beaudry.



Metahaven, *Signal (Murcia)*, 2010. Installation view at former post office, Murcia. Courtesy Metahaven and *Manifesta 8*. Photo by Ilya Rabinovich.

The particular exhibition, titled *Overscore*, took place in the former post office in Murcia - a place that had been closed to the public for 30 years and was re-opened for the occasion. That said, this issue of *Manifesta* was suggestively titled to be "in dialogue with Northern Africa." This gave a political air to the whole project that journalists were keen to take issue with. Such a dialogue surely did exist sometimes, but it did not mean, for example, an equal participation of African artists in all the exhibitions.

A number of curators and artists based in Egypt participated in *Manifesta 8*. For example, ACAF (Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum), Lina Attalah (of *Take to the Sea*), Mahmoud Khaled, Khaled Hafez and Sherif El-Azma. Now, months later, Egypt is seeing a popular movement that involves many of the same people we've been spending time with in Murcia, some of whom became good friends. We are interested for our work at an event like *Manifesta 8* to voluntarily approach the constraints of commissioned design, while operating in an art context which on the face of it promises complete freedom - which, of course, there isn't. The fruit stickers we designed all had "Manifesta" and "Murcia" printed on them. We always thought of them as an alternative campaign for the biennial.



Installation view. Photo by Wolfgang Traeger.

THE HIGHLIGHTS: An introduction to *Manifesta 8* describes Murcia as an "authentic melting pot" filled with "Roman architecture...Visigoth cities, Arab medinas, Baroque churches and Modernist architecture." Beyond its built environment, in what ways does Murcia represent this idea of the cultural crossroads?

METAHAVEN: Although it may be tempting to see it that way, Murcia is not, at first glance, that much of a cultural melting pot. It has historically, like other parts of Spain, been under different rulers and different religions, and its population is a hybrid one. Like all regions that are at a crossroads of continents there is not this clear line where one culture becomes the other, but things are mixed. In Murcia and Cartagena a lot of street signs are in Arabic. And the agricultural irrigation system is in some areas still identical to the one the Moorish settlers brought there centuries ago. One of the best impressions we had in Murcia was a street festival. On this street festival in the Botanical Garden, the subdivisions and separations that still exist in this society (as in any other society) were suspended, and everyone danced with everyone. Normally though the street sellers, and other social groups, are pretty much sticking to their own network. But the networks are friendly to each other.

THE HIGHLIGHTS: Of course, Murcia's nickname ("Europe's orchard") must have been a starting point for your work. Is the city still as essential to the European agricultural landscape as it was when that moniker was first applied? What challenges do regional farmers face today that they didn't fifty years ago?



METAHAVEN: We find the idea of the orchard very inspiring - think of *The Apple Orchard* by Rainer Maria Rilke. The idea to create fruit labels came up very early, before we had even been in Murcia or met with the curators. Fruit has an origin. From that origin it travels in a network, between nodes of distribution, until it ends up at the place where it is eaten. We were, after arrival, also intrigued by the wild orchards that exist pretty much in every leftover piece of wasteland. The region of Murcia is still really important for the European fruit and vegetable market, but some of the production - of lemons, for example - has moved to Northern Africa and Turkey. In Murcia the heat is scorching, and in recent years the region's water resources have come under increasing pressure by newly built villa estates and golf courses, many of which are now ghost cities after the Spanish real estate crash. There is an enormous shortage of water. Without water, the whole area is a desert.

A local activist group, Murcia No Se Vende, protests these villa developments which they assert are part of the neoliberal regime (very unpopular among the Spanish Left). They were also very critical of Manifesta arriving in Murcia. Initially, the project had the ambition to work with large fruit distributors, but Manifesta did not manage to get these companies on board. Instead someone introduced us to EDEMUR, a cooperative of organic farmers who run a self-managed business, exporting throughout Spain and to some other European countries, being the most important organic farming organization in the region. They became the partner. This has meant the world to us. EDEMUR has not just provided the exhibition installation with fresh fruit, it has also sold all of its own products with our labels.



Stickered fruit sold at a market by the EDEMUR collective.

THE HIGHLIGHTS: *Signal (Murcia)* proposes an alternate labeling system, one that highlights the political and ecological situation surrounding food, not just the characteristics of the food itself. How did you arrive at an approach for visualizing such a complex story? What are the advantages of using printed labels to display such information?

METAHAVEN: We love fruit labels as devices that contain information, ideas, and dreams. We do not like fruit that is packaged. The natural packaging of fruit is its skin. Unlike packaging, fruit labels do not overshadow the product. Often, all they do is convey the origin or name of the fruit, as well as a certain atmosphere. That is already enough; there is no room for a lot of narrative. So one could argue whether this is a project about information, or

a project trying out a set of different moods and ideas around fruit. It tries to make you think, but it can only present the beginning of that thought. We've also worked with some of our ideas about currency, gifts, and favors.



THE HIGHLIGHTS: The ubiquitous Michael Pollan once claimed that "94% percent of [American] ad budgets for food go to processed food" and that "broccoli growers don't have money for ad budgets." Do you think Murcian growers have an interest in paying for

improved food marketing?

METAHAVEN: They certainly have. The question is whether they have the money. You realize that the ethics of food production should change the way the product is marketed, instead of the other way around. Like if you have this organic product and you over-package and over-brand it - that runs contrary to the way the fruit is grown, harvested, and sold. We really dislike the recent celebration of authenticity and purity in organic food branding, or the appeal to urban liberal guilt ("This coffee was grown by female Nicaraguan farmers"). Food is an adventure. Organic is Sci-Fi.

THE HIGHLIGHTS: In relatively short order, the debate surrounding food production and delivery has gone from marginal concern to major force in the global zeitgeist. What do you think makes food so personal for so many people? Are you local/organic food enthusiasts yourselves? Has your perspective changed at all as a result of doing this work?

METAHAVEN: Food is personal because you eat it! It has a very basic relationship with life itself. We try to buy everything organic, as far as we can, and we are enthusiastic about that while muddling through the different attempts at branding. The best food comes unpackaged. The wild and unplanned are much more interesting than the designedly quasi-familiar and politically correct. The project has definitely changed our perspective on food, mostly by working with EDEMUR - a collaboration we hope to continue in the future.

THE HIGHLIGHTS: There is also an undeniable economical and social class distinction that's associated with the consumption of food, especially in America. Does design perpetuate this disparity or can it be utilized to somehow remedy it?

METAHAVEN: Ironically, the irregularly shaped food as it naturally comes from the land got replaced by food that looks like an industrial product. That original food is now very much en vogue and perceived as the most expensive and elite of all foods. But looking at EDEMUR, we can see that there is a basic relation between where and how people live and what they eat. For them, organic food is not a matter of class, but a matter of culture. The remedy is already in the product itself - and design is merely there to make use of it. In general it seems that having less design on food will be better, like having the apple be carried in its natural packaging: the skin.