



Shane Cullen: *Courage to Refuse*, banners and video projection. Photo Christopher Lyon. Works this article 2004.



Marjetica Potrc: *Duncan Village*, mixed-medium installation. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Ryszard Wasko.



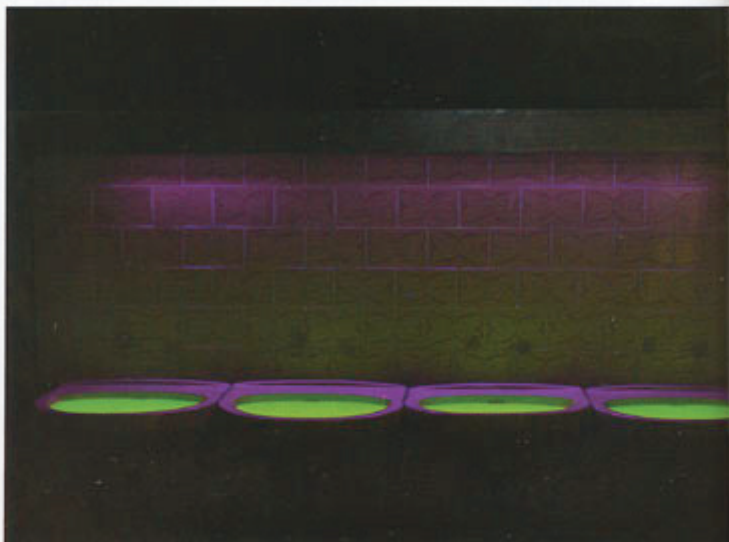
Alain Arias-Misson: *The Demon Poemobile*, automobile and mixed mediums.



Victor Kegli: *Pathos vs. Puff Daddy* (center), mixed mediums.



Charles Ginnever: *Zip*, three 20-foot lengths of 6-inch pipe.



Claudia Schmacker: *The Green Zone*, water, black light, fluorescent pigment and mixed mediums.

Constructing a Biennial

Sixty-two international artists took part in last fall's first-ever Lodz Biennale, launching the manufacturing city's unconventional Artists' Museum.

BY CHRISTOPHER LYON

Visitors last fall to the gritty Polish industrial center of Lodz, 80 miles southwest of Warsaw, had the opportunity to see not only the country's first international biennial exhibition, but the new permanent home of the International Artists' Museum [see "Front Page," Apr. '04]. Several days before the opening on Oct. 2, Ryszard Wasko, chairman of the Biennale and the museum's executive director, received a letter from the mayor of Lodz, Jerzy Kropiwnicki, a Solidarity-era comrade jailed during the martial law period of the 1980s, which Wasko spent in exile. The letter granted the Artists' Museum the sprawling brick complex, a former textile manufacturing site idled by the disappearance of captive socialist markets. The Lodz Biennale occupied an area of approximately 100,000 square feet, including double-height, beautifully proportioned ground-level spaces and upper-story lofts. The earliest buildings, dating from the 19th century, feature uneven wooden floors and small, deep-set windows that create the air of a monastery refectory. Among the more recent structures is a splendid Jugendstil powerhouse, a cathedral for turbines, where several events related to the Biennale were held. Three other shows, devoted exclusively to Polish artists, were held concurrently elsewhere in the city [see p. 63].

Mayor Kropiwnicki opened the Lodz Biennale with an exuberant official greeting, just as he had opened

the first of Wasko's seven itinerant Construction in Process exhibitions in Lodz in 1981, at the time of the brief Solidarity upsurge that preceded the martial-law crackdown later that year. During a 12-day working period before the Biennale's opening, many of the artists reprised the on-site work experience of the earlier shows, spending at least several days enduring the "process" of locating materials, tools, assistants—maybe even an electrician—but also participating in a warm collegial atmosphere of communal dinners and performances. The latter included one by Fluxus veterans Emmet Williams and Ben Patterson as Mr. and Mrs. Rat expounding an animal-based philosophy ("The first ox, Socrates, said . . ."), as well as a lovely improvisational Japanese dance with a tattered umbrella by Kazuko Miyamoto, accompanied vocally by artist Malcolm Green.

The selection committee for the event consisted of three artists (Lawrence Weiner, Emmet Williams and the late Leon Golub) and six critics (Zdenka Badovinac, Robert C. Morgan, Anda Rottenberg, Won Il-Rhee, Gregory Volk and Lilly Wei), each of whom chose seven artists. Sixty-two artists were shown, one having dropped out. Participants were given explicit guidelines, which included the opportunity to select specific spaces in the exhibition complex and a budget to have installation elements fabricated ahead of time, in Poland if possible.

Wasko intended to create by this approach a very different kind of Biennale from the commodity-oriented exhibitions proliferating around the globe. "What was always important for Construction in Process," he explained, "was this . . . gathering of people from all over the world—coming, seeking, talking, fighting for space, whatever. So our aim here is to create an energy, a dialogue among artists" [see A.I.A., Mar. '91 and Mar. '01].

The notion of artists crossing paths, appearing, disappearing, coming together, agreeing, disagreeing, was captured elegantly by the Florentine artist Mimmo Roselli, whose *Round Lodz* consisted of three sets of five taut ropes, like threads of fabric shuttling through space, which seemed to emerge from the floor, sail into and out of walls and past pillars, creating a perspective effect as they disappeared once more into the floor. Another veteran artist, Charles Ginnever, reprised a piece from the early days of SoHo, which this event brought to mind, creating a *Zip* of three connected 20-foot lengths of 6-inch pipe, each suspended from its center, zigzagging through the pillars of the space, and making a pleasant gong as visitors jostled it.

Other artists dealt more directly with the exhibition site and the larger environment of Lodz. When the Taiwanese artist Hong-wen Lin first saw the alcove in which he would install a hanging cylinder of bound bamboo—perhaps 10 feet long and 2 feet in diameter, tapering to 1 foot at the top—he insisted



Sam Kune: 3:30ish, mixed-medium installation. Photo Christopher Lyon.

that the rear wall not be patched or painted: its crumbling surface revealed, beneath the plaster, wattle of century-old reeds closely resembling the bamboo in his work. Nearby, an almost impenetrable thicket, perhaps 30 feet across and rising above head height, was made by Korean-born New York artist Sook Jin Jo from lumber scraps and branches she had found on the factory grounds. The artist uses abandoned materials in her work to evoke the traces of people and events that have touched them. Here the charred and broken wood suggested a history of neglect and destruction, yet that past seemed to be subsumed by ungainly but unstoppable new growth recalling the interconnectedness and cyclical nature of life.

A more sinister sort of recycling was seen in Claudia Schmacke's *Green Zone*, an elegant and disturbing variation on the German artist's recent use of water and circulation systems. Choosing as her site several worker changing rooms, in each of which she found four small washbasins, Schmacke had the plumbing redone and installed a hidden and nearly silent pump, together with an inconspicuous black light source above the sinks. The basins repeatedly filled with water, spiked with fluorescent pigment, which glowed a toxic green under the black light, then emptied, in a slow, inexorable rhythm. Her aim, she said in interview, was to reference "things that are happening elsewhere, alien, but connected with us"—like the

Yuri Arvakumov: Ladder-Gallows, mixed mediums.





Debra Pearlman: *House of Children*, glass, salt and mixed mediums.



Sook Jin Jo: *Wishing in Construction: May We All Be in Peace*, found wood, paint.

"safe" Green Zone of Baghdad, one could not help thinking.

Works that attempted to address current political events or charged historical subjects (like the Holocaust) less obliquely were mostly flat-footed or reductive, with the exception of Dublin artist Shane Cullen's stirring banners in the powerhouse. These pieces render in Gaelic and Polish the text signed by the Israeli soldiers who have refused to fight in the Occupied Territories. The names and units of the signers, who approved Cullen's effort on their behalf, were projected in Hebrew on a darkened wall, accompanied by a rumbling sound component designed by the U.K.'s David Crawforth. More playful but still purposeful is Polly Apfelbaum's flower-power series "Flags of Revolt and Defiance," in which banners associated with political movements in places ranging from Cuba to Poland and beyond ("BUCK FUSH" is the last in the series) are cropped by or confined within schematic flower shapes, either turning revolution into decoration or vice-versa.

The playground became an ironic metaphor for endangered children in two ambitious works installed in adjacent galleries. The Russian artist and architect Yuri Avvakumov's blackly humorous *Ladders-Gallows*, a seven-layered tree-shaped construction of horizontal ladders, could be moved up and down like an immense teeter-totter. Ten nooses were tied to the lowest ladder, at a height suitable only for hanging a child. *House of Children*, an installation by Debra Pearlman (U.S.) of a dozen

swings with oversize glass seats, evoked a precarious balance between sleep and death. The work took its title from a ruined orphanage in Lodz that the artist (married to this writer) had learned about. Sandwiched between the surfaces of the glass swings' seats were acetate images of sleeping children. A lamp suspended above each swing projected a soft image of the children onto salt spread beneath the seat.

In a nearby room, which appeared to be a former manager's office, American artist Bethany Izard created and installed on the walls doll-size cutouts derived from celebrity magazines, in homage to a Polish folk art of paper cutouts (*wycinanki*) associated with the Lowicz region near Lodz. Hollywood and the home-grown met around an appropriately cracked mirror, which sprouted faceless glamour girls.

The unlikely coupling of California with Poland was a theme of two other installations. Los Angeles-based artist Christopher Williams brought with him a five-hour-long video of a TV cooking show recorded in real time, like a Warhol film with production values. He also photographed the still-operating textile works on the site, a future contribution, one hopes, to his ongoing conceptual investigations of representation and the rituals of work. Kim Schoenstadt's *There was a building, then*

another, then another, then . . . literally superimposed her native Southern California onto Lodz via opaque projections of line drawings created from two photos of buildings in Lodz (a 19th-century factory and a Communist-era housing block, weirdly called by locals the "Manhattan") and two in Palm Springs (a bank building and Richard Neutra's 1946 Kauffman House). An impressive 7-foot-wide painting brought all the images together in lines carved into a graphite-coated wall with green gouache highlights.

Rebecca Quaytman, from the U.S., used formal juxtaposition to bridge a distance in time rather than geography. *Chapter 2: Lodz Poem*, an implicitly narrative sequence of paintings, begins by evoking the golden period of Polish Constructivism with an image of Katarzyna Kobro's 1928 *Spatial Composition (2)*, a freestanding steel slab that seems to anticipate Minimalism. At the end of the sequence this slab is echoed by the image of a gravestone in an overgrown cemetery. European formalism was given an ironic spin by the German sculptor Victor Kegli, whose sullenly

During a 12-day period before the Biennale's opening, many artists reprised the on-site work experience and communalism of director Ryszard Wasko's earlier "process" exhibitions.

imposing metal-clad monolithic sculpture turned out to have an inconspicuous little handle, which, when turned, played the "Internationale" as a lullaby.

Outside, on the grounds of the exhibition site, two artists performed imaginary excavations, hinting at what might lie beneath the present surface. Micha Ullman, the Israeli artist perhaps best known for his below-ground memorial on the site of the 1933 Nazi book burning in Berlin's Bebelplatz, created shallow incisions in the concrete near a pedestrian bridge connecting the upper floors of two exhibition buildings. The imagined projections of light from the bridge's gridded windows were rendered, in negative, as asphalt

Fred Holland: *The Regenerative Jolt of Memory, Cities, Bees and Vegetables*, wax, coins, self-portrait bust and mixed mediums.



Rebecca Quaytman: *Lodz Poem*, mixed mediums.



rectangles in the pavement—inconspicuous but permanent shadows “beneath” the ephemeral light. New York-based Samm Kuncie similarly responded to light, in her case via the shadow cast by the afternoon sun in a shallow pool below an immense filtering tower, not far from the turbine hall. With a crew provided by the Biennale, and bright orange-yellow fire bricks discovered nearby, she performed a work of reverse archeology, creating a curving wall that rises up out of the water like a memory of a more primitive—and a more attractive—type of construction.

Clashes of traditional and new technology are also a concern of Marjetica Potrc, the Slovenian “urban anthropologist,” who created for the exhibition



Bethany Izard: *The Luckiest Girls in the World*, mirror and mixed mediums. Photo Amy Hall.

bition one of her improvised-looking hybrid houses, here bristling with up-to-date technology: a tree of satellite dishes, with solar panels for heating water and other uses.

Travel, and the disorientation associated with it, informed a great range of work. Richard Long's recycled wall piece was one of the show's few examples of someone “phoning it in.” Much more engaging was American Fred Holland's poetic installation *The Regenerative Jolt of Memory, Cities, Bees, and Vegetables*, whose many elements include wax, Polish coins and a stylized self-portrait bust turned toward the wall, as if about to bang its head. U.S. artist Kirsten Weiner's ode to deracination, *Bottom's Dream (Disculture)*, is a disjointed mural of snapshots, like stills from a road movie with no destination. A cartoon journey was suggested by Paris-based Alain Arias-Misson's transformation of an actual Communist-era Polish sedan into a jitney for jolly glow-in-the-dark skeletons—labeled as Stalin and Hitler in the back seat, with George W. Bush driving and Osama Bin Laden beside him. Malcolm Green helped lift spirits with five humorous posterlike panels from his ongoing series “Some Questions of Our Time,” satirizing the rhetoric of objectivity in which science and government cloak attempts to analyze and control.

One left gray Lodz with a warm feeling, and not only from the Zubrowka—vodka flavored with aromatic grass of the sort nibbled by European bison, of whose existence I was surprised to learn. The anarchistic idealism of Ryszard Wasko and his collaborators, perhaps equally endangered as these creatures, nevertheless appears to be surviving in

Flags of Revolt and Defiance

Polly Apfelbaum / Lodz Biennale / 2004



Poster illustrating Polly Apfelbaum's banner series “Flags of Revolt and Defiance.”

the era of incipient Polish capitalism. Indeed, the presence at the opening of some brash and enthusiastic young Polish entrepreneurs, who helped underwrite the proceedings, was cause for optimism. □

The Lodz Biennale was on view at the International Artists' Museum, Oct. 2-30, 2004.

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