

Art in America



APRIL 2005

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REPORTS FROM
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\$5.00 USA
\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK

REPORT FROM POLAND I

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

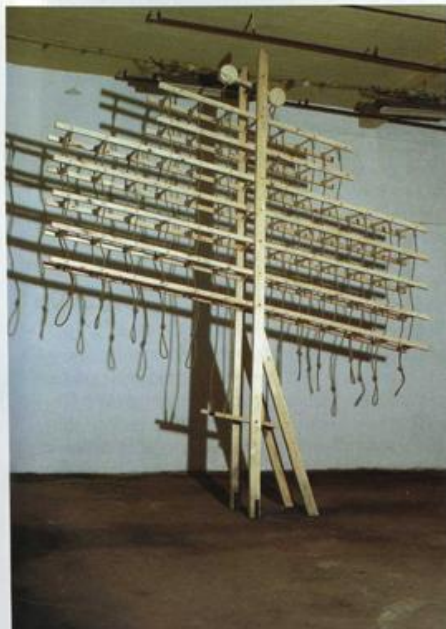


Sam Kuncce: 3:30ish, mixed-medium installation. Photo Christopher Lyon.

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 Arrakumov: Ladder-Gallows, mixed mediums.



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Two Biennials, Two Models:

GwangJu and Lodz
by Robert C. Morgan
November 2004



Grace Jungwook Rim, "One of Three Goodnesses" (2004).

P from print edition

W web exclusive

Some will say that a biennial is a biennial, that no matter who you pick or what you choose, they are all the same. You go for the holiday, not because you are going to see anything different or anything special—these claims are often true. Where the market presides over the selection of artists (whether or not curators are aware), and where dealers play a preeminent role in influencing curatorial decisions, and where critics are called "journalists" in order to avoid a confrontation with local sponsors, how can this not be the case? And yet there are exceptions. As a critic in GwangJu, South Korea and a critic/curator in Lodz, Poland this September, I saw something in these two places that viewers would not expect to find in Venice, Sao Paolo, Kassel, Sydney, Lyon, or Shanghai.

What was happening in GwangJu and Lodz were attempts to avert market pressures and to put forth two models of what a biennial could be. Could a biennial be something other than a survey or a display to accompany art fairs, such as Basel or Chicago? Could it be something other than a game of hide-and-seek where ambitious curators hand over sites or pavilions to retentive artists in order to prove that cultural exclusion is not merely a national conceit but the cynical basis of art? Could it be something other than a political diatribe from the position of privileged artists living in exile from underdeveloped nations? What I found in GwangJu and Lodz is that all of these are possibilities.

This was my fourth visit to GwangJu since I first attended the

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The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice--Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts*--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free

spectators. The pursuit of a successful biennial should be to transform spectators from the everyday world into viewers who become actively engaged in art—and this is as political as it is aesthetic. The concept of the “viewer-participant” instigated by Young Woo Lee as a means to facilitate the quality of communication between artist and viewer offers a model for thinking about the purpose of biennials in general, since without critical tension, art does not achieve cultural importance. And this is what I think this year’s GwangJu Biennial attempted.

The history of Lodz constitutes one of the richest and most tragic histories in Eastern Europe. Lodz was a leading center of music, theater, and art for the first half of the twentieth century, largely due to the textile industry, operated by Russian-Jewish immigrants and their descendants, who supported and encouraged the arts. This ended abruptly when the Nazis invaded Poland, and the second largest Jewish population in Europe was virtually annihilated. Yet over the past fifteen years, since the fall of the Berlin wall, a flickering light of the former grandeur of Lodz has begun to re-appear.

Ryszard Wasko and Adam Klimszak—the two primary organizers of this Biennial (and artists themselves)—should be recognized for their focused commitment and their unfaltering efforts in making this event happen. Wasko dreamed of a Biennial in Poland since he began his series of “Construction in Process” exhibitions in 1981. Shortly after, Wasko was forced to live in exile during “martial law” until 1990 when he was finally able to return to Poland. In organizing the first Polish Biennial in Lodz, Wasko’s intentions were far removed from the art market associated with Western Europe. To accomplish his goal, Wasko invited a team of international curators to choose a selection of artists, including Richard Long, Polly Apfelbaum, Kim Sooja, Christopher Williams, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Karin Sander, Shane Cullen, Grace Jungwook Rim, Hong-wen Lim, Tadaaki Kuwayama, Helene Aylon, Gerda Meyer Bernstein, Samm Kunce, Mimmo Roselli, Angiola Churchill, Alain Arias-Misson, and Marjetica Potic.

The exhibition was housed in a series of former textile warehouses and spaciouly deserted factories. The results were stunning. Instead of the normal competitive and trendy atmosphere that pervades most biennials, the activity in Lodz was one of cooperation fostering a sense of cognitive and sensory well-being. Instead of artists isolating



Alain-Arias Misson, "Demonmobile" (2004).