Espace Sculpture

Robert Mason & Vessna Perunovich
The Fourth Cetinje Biennial, Yugoslavia

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So what if, pointing specifically to this pressing issue, one were to devise a work of public art, as a paradigmatic object, that would flow down a river, crossing the boundaries of states? What if someone were to propel an aesthetic object into space, to traverse layers of atmosphere, to orbit the Earth, drifting over oceans and continents? This idea is not as far-fetched as it seems; artists are waiting in the wings to examine the overall significance of our expansion into space. Indeed, the European Space Agency (ESA) will soon drive into the cosmos a painting by Damian Hirst, on the space ship Beagle 2, destined to Mars in 2003. Aside from its aesthetic qualities (the work consists of a number of coloured dots located at the nodes of an invisible grid), the painting will be used to calibrate the cameras and set the spectrometers on the Mars Express rover. Beagle 2 will therefore act as the first intergalactic public art display site, images of its content and surroundings presumably sent electronically for all Earthlings to see on the six o’clock news. The experimental context framing the art object will then deliver its own set of contingencies, some of them unpredictable, and allow various lay and specialized publics to reflect on the work and on the unusual site for aesthetic inquiry. At first glance, ESA’s interest in art seems somewhat gimmicky. It reveals, however, that space exploration is not simply driven by technology. Indeed, while the liberal arts and fine arts communities are overwhelmingly skeptical towards the need for space expansion, anthropologist BenFinney and space psychologist Philip Harris, among others, say that space exploration corresponds more to deep-seated social needs than the scientific and military imperatives that serve to justify the budgets. It has also already had irrevocable effects on how humans view their world; Harris explains that, even in the short term, space exploration has awakened humans to a new environmental ethos, largely as a result of seeing our small planet suspended in the apparently lifeless vacuum of space. As a result of arousing cultural and philosophical interest, the ESA will surely not be the only organization sending cultural production into space as public art.

Canadian public artist John Noesthenen hopes to be one of the first to take advantage of the International Space Station (ISS)’s plan to generate revenues through their Commercial Utilization Program, creating opportunities for space tourism and space experimentation for a fee (the Canadian Space Agency (CSA) plans to dedicate 50% of its share of the orbital laboratory to commercial experiments, along the criteria outlined in their brochure Space for Rent). Noesthenen has fashioned into a sculptural prototype entitled Spacepiece (2002) an object that embodies humanity’s age-old fascination with heavenly bodies and the pragmatic considerations linked to building art destined for public use. He hopes that his hand-crafted three-dimensional polyhedron, made of shimmering T-6 aluminium and protected with high impact rubber bumpers, will be taken on board the ISS, and placed into orbit by the Station’s robotic arm or thrown toward the moon by an astronaut during a space walk. The highly polished, obsessively regular geometrical object (its exact form, dimensions and mass will be defined in relation to the guidelines and parameters set forth by the CSA, if it accepts the art experiment) will then exist among space debris as an intentionally aesthetic object. Living out its unpredictable life expectancy as a satellite, it will eventually deliver a fraction of a second of light as a shooting star when it is wrangled out of orbit by collision with other debris or by natural forces. The ephemeral work of public art will then disappear into infinity, most likely without encountering any accidental audiences.

At the moment of writing, Noesthenen is in the initial stages of the Spacepiece project and, because of the overwhelming bureaucratic nature of such a venture, its outcome might remain purely conceptual. But whether or not astronauts take the polyhedron along for a space walk, the work already provocatively interrogates the colonization of (public) space by the human imagination. —

Robert MASON & Vessna PERUNOVICH:
The Fourth Cetinje Biennial, Yugoslavia
VIRGINIA M. EICHHORN

The Fourth Cetinje Biennial took place this past summer in the Kingdom of Montenegro’s old capital. The artists involved were asked to produce work that examines the role of artistic participation in the process of social and economic consolidation. Cetinje, a tiny city of 15,000 inhabitants, seems to be an unusual place to examine this question. Like the host republic of Montenegro, Cetinje finds itself the first in the process of breaking away from the Yugoslav Federation. This year’s Biennial was entitled Reconstruction, adopting a local saying, MOZE, MOZE (it’s possible, it can happen), as its slogan. By doing so the organizers have reflected the local community’s strong desire for change in a positive direction.

The curators of the fourth Cetinje biennial, Andrei Erofeev, Ira Boubnova, Katarina Koskina and Svetlana Racanovic, invited a wide mix of artists from Western and Eastern Europe to reflect upon the concepts of reconstruction and architecture. Among the 80 artists involved, two Canadians, Vessna Perunovich and Robert Mason, presented works revolving around this Biennial’s main theme: Housing Sculpture. I had the opportunity to speak with Perunovich and Mason about their thoughts and experiences in having participated in this event. In 1991, when Tito’s Yugoslavia collapsed into a bloody war, Prince Nikolaos Petrovich Njegos, the Paris-based architect and heir to the Montenegrin dynasty, initiated the first Biennial of Cetinje as a way of fighting isolationism and ensuring a new internationalist cultural space. The purpose of the biennial remains true to this theme. Mason and Perunovich describe the organizer, Prince Nikolaos, as a man of exceptional dedication and high principles. For a member of royalty he is remarkably unpretentious, and a real “hands on” organizer. But he seems to recognize that democracy and social justice come only with hard work and a broad sense of inclusion. All the work taken together and all the artists coming together to one place at one time created such a positive effect, that any residual effect of the Balkan conflict/war/shame/remembrance disappeared in a wash of sunlight.

Perunovich’s and Mason’s installations both use the unlimited regenerative and rejuvenating potential of nature as a metaphor for the reconstruction of a social landscape. Perunovich’s video installation, Whole, portrays an emotional journey through landscapes by positioning a video of lush and potent
images of nature as a window in a
cage-like house made out of elastic.
The work blurs the foreign and the
familiar in its intentional play with
boundaries and limitations. Mason's
landscape intervention Desardin
Floatant juxtaposes tension and light-
heartedness in a visually stunning
installation of oversized yellow and
pink balloons. Floating buoyantly on
the river's surface in the semi-deserted
village of Rijeka Crnojevica, the work
simultaneously evokes fragility and
potential, eloquently expressing the
mood of this year's Biennial.

Robert Perunovich, a Hamilton-based
artist, was born and raised in
Tillsonburg and Toronto. Mason's
multifaceted oeuvre includes
painting, photo-based work, and
installation. He describes the link
between his varied media as exami-
nations of the relationship between
nature and human presence. Mason
had twice visited artists' "colonies" in
Serbia in 1996 and 1997. Djuro
Lubarda, a Serb artist who now lives
in Hamilton, had invited him. It was
on his second visit that the Cultural
Attaché at the Canadian Embassy
suggested to Mason that he see the
current (1997) Biennial. At the
Biennial he met Prince Nicolas, who
invited him to participate in an
upcoming Biennial there.

Mason's installation consisted of
doghouse so as to accommodate a
piece they said that they recognized
Montenegro, both in imagery and in
the sounds of nature. But when Bob
Mason saw the piece he said it made
him homesick, recognizing the
sounds from the Canadian wilderness.
Perunovich describes the experi-
ence of participating in the Biennial
along with ninety other artists as an
"awakening experience." Her partici-
pation gave her an opportunity to
present her work to the new audi-
ence, as well as to find out first-hand
about the European and local art
scene. Besides creating the work and
viewing the other installations, the
Biennial allowed the artist to discuss
professional strategies, share experi-
ences in the art world, and consider
similarities and differences between
European and Canadian art scenes.
There was also much dialogue about
their immediate shared environment,
the struggles and problems experi-
enced during the installation, deal-
ings with the technical people, and all
of the day to day staff. This created a
good sense of camaraderie between
the participants. There was also a
certain amount of tension, firstly
because everyone was exited about
their work being installed, and sec-
ondly because this Biennal was
lacking in funding, staff and equip-
ment, so the artists found themselves
dealing with some kind of problem on
a daily basis. Perunovich credits the
successful completion of many of the
installations to the concerted effort of
the technical crew and the organ-
izers, the general public, and the
media. Some of the highlights
included: a party thrown in their
honour at the Canadian Embassy;
being literally chased by media for
interviews; the dinner party that
Prince Nikolaus held for the opening
of the Biennial; and, for the
opening, a gypsy brass band, led by
Prince Nikolaus himself, that played
music in the main street from the
Blue Palace to the main square and
to which everyone, including the
Prince, curators, artists and the
general public, "went crazy" (dancing,
cheering, and just having a good
time).

Perunovich said that this made her
realize that in Europe an art event is
more about life than it is about art,
even though art is taken very seri-
ously.

When asked what he felt was the
most unique aspect of the Biennial,
Mason had difficulty answering.
While his own piece evolved in slow
motion with a definite performative
aspect, everything else went faster
— as he describes it — the speed of light. He stated that just being in a culture different than his own and connecting on a very sudden
direct personal level with organi-
zers, artists and curators created an
intensity that was a bit over-
whelming, yet enjoyable. There was a
definite feeling that there was a
historical social and cultural happen-
ing. That left little time to absorb
anything but immediate human con-
tact.

Mason believes that Europeans
generally include art and artists in
daily life more than Canadians do.
Montenegro is no exception. Their
culture being so much older, and art
having been seen to express the
depth of their culture for so long a
time, they hold on to the "hope" of a
future in difficult times through con-
tinued encouragement of creative
activity. While he doesn't like to think
that it takes hard times to create
good art, there is clearly something in
the notion that extreme intensity fos-
sters a kind of spiritual survival mech-
anism.

Where Canada is still inventing
itself, Eastern Europe is having to re-
invent itself. The Fourth Cetinje Biennial was a part of that. —

The Fourth Cetinje Biennial, Yugoslavia
July 21—Sept. 15, 2002

Vesna Perunovich,
(W)hole, 2002.
Elastic, hardware,
video and audio
installation.
3.9 x 5.1 x 7.3 m.
Photo: Boja Vaski,
courtesy of the artist.