Espace Sculpture

Robert Mason & Vessna Perunovich

*The Fourth Cetinje Biennial, Yugoslavia*

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Citer ce compte rendu

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 sceptic towards the space programme, the ESA appears to believe otherwise. Noesthéden 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). Noesthéden 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 polygon, 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 wrenched 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, Noesthéden 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 polygon 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 last 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, Iara 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 50 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 Nikola Petrovic 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 Nikola, 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 art 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/resentment 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 Flotant 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 Mason, a Hamilton-based artist, was born and raised in Tiltonsburg and Toronto. Mason’s multifaceted oeuvre includes painting, photo-based work, and installation. He describes the link between his varied media as explorations 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 12 or so yellow balloons with a pink balloon at the centre of a cluster. He chose a river site where an historically and architecturally significant architectural feature existed—a stone bridge. The scale of balloons relative to features of the surrounding landscape was important to him. The balloons were 6 feet in diameter and were meant to reflect marine buoys, or fishing floats, ordinary yet unexpectedly oversized floatation devices. One could also view them as reminders of parties, anniversaries, celebrations, and other happy events.

Perunovich, who left Yugoslavia for Canada with her husband and daughter 14 years ago, found out about the Biennial through Olga Marinkovic, Cultural Attaché at the Canadian Embassy in Belgrade. Perunovich was looking for a good opportunity to reconnect with the art scene in her country of origin. She proposed a video installation entitled (W)hole for the Housing Sculpture exhibition, and it was accepted.

Created specifically for the exhibit, (W)hole was exhibited in the Blue Palace. Perunovich and Nickolas visited a second work to the Biennial, the sculptural installation Wounding. It was shown at the BILLJARDA, and was previously exhibited at Third Avenue Gallery in Vancouver and at Contemporary Art Forum in Kitchener. (W)hole was initially conceived of by Perunovich a couple of years ago, while revisiting her father’s birth place in Montenegro. The Biennial provided the stimulus for her to finally realize the work. Participation in the Biennial allowed the artist to deal simultaneously with her childhood memories about her ancestral home in Montenegro, and with her current home and life as an immigrant in Canada. The video and audio component, especially, reflected both environments and became a powerful metaphor for her experiences of growing up in Yugoslavia and settling in Canada. Perunovich says that when the local people commented on the 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 experience of participating in the Biennial along with ninety other artists as an “awakening experience.” Her participation gave her an opportunity to present her work to the new audience, as well as to find 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 experiences 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 experienced during the installation, dealings with the technical people, and all of the day to day staff. This created a great 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 secondly because this Biennial was lacking in funding, staff and equipment, so the artists found themselves dealing with some kind of problem on a daily basis. Perunovich credits the successful completion of the many installations to the concerted effort of the technical crew and the organizers.

Perunovich felt that the artists showing at the Biennial approached the reconstruction theme with a certain amount of irony and positive humor in their work. Natala Djurovic from Montenegro and Atanasia Kyriakakos from Greece addressed the subject by creating a fortune telling from emptied cups of coffee (a favorite custom in the region), as if to say that ordinary people believe in miracles more than in taking things into their own hands. Olivier Blanckart from France developed a life-size truck enveloped a life-size truck with Scotch tape (how convincing a reconstruction is?), Arnaud Labelle Rojoux, also from France, enlarged a doghouse so as to accommodate a person. Atelier Van Lieshout, from Holland, presented a mini-capsule, a claustrophobic construction that looks like an miniature alien ship. A very lonely vision indeed. Perunovich felt that the artists were pointing out the improbability of an easy and smooth ride towards improvement and change without a real commitment from the society itself. A performance piece by local artist Anka Buric summered it all up. She simply led the viewers through a pitch-dark tunnel located up in the hills. After 15 to 20 minutes stumbling through the dark, everyone was happy to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

A society such as that of Montenegro, which is small and relatively isolated, is by its nature resistant to difference of opinion and has difficulty accepting anything unfamiliar and new. Mason is convinced that having been seen to express the diversity of cultural backgrounds is essential to introduce tolerance and stimulate change. One or two biennials might not change much, but in the long run, having a local community exposed to something different and unfamiliar will open up the possibility of looking at things differently and will change people’s attitudes towards issues.

When art is marginalized and pushed aside, it loses importance and its power to effect. In Europe art is presented, reviewed and discusses daily in the media, on TV, and it is very much a part of everyday life. People take pride in their knowledge about art and artists. Artists also take much more pride in themselves, because they feel appreciated and important. Perunovich and Mason concurred that if artists feel empowered, they can also translate that power much more effectively into their work, which only then can make a lasting effect.

Both artists were particularly impressed by the exceptional treatment they received from the organizers, 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 Nikolas held for the opening of the Biennial. He stated that just being in a culture different than his own and connecting on a very sudden and direct personal level with organizers, artists and curators created an intensity that was a bit overwhelming, yet enjoyable. There was a definite feeling that this was a historic social and cultural happening, but that it left little time to absorb anything but immediate human contact.

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 continued 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 fosters a kind of spiritual survival mechanism.

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