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ROMAN PORTRAITS REPORT FROM POLAND

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Woodstock on the Brda

A camp near Bydgoszcz was the unlikely venue for Construction in Process 2000, a two-week summer gathering of 146 international artists and critics.

BY RICHARD VINE

Omens

Mar. 23, 2000

Receipt today of an official invitation from Ryszard Wasko, the Polish artist and political activist who in 1990 founded the International Artists' Museum in Lodz. This alternative space began, 10 years earlier, as little more than a stack of stationery on his apartment desk and now boasts a collection of about 3,000 contemporary works, all of them donated by artists (such as Richard Nonas, Daniel Spoerri and Pat Steir) whom he has invited to exhibit in Poland and elsewhere over the years. The all-volunteer "museum" currently has many pieces on loan to several institutions with better facilities than its own, and networks with eight affiliated artist-run art centers worldwide.

I last saw Wasko (as he is generally known, even to his wife) in early February at a crowded SoHo benefit for the Artists' Museum, which is now in danger of losing its 6,000-square-foot building to developers unless he can outbid them or convince government authorities to give his cultural organization another venue. Some 90 artists—including Nam June Paik, Sol LeWitt and Dennis Oppenheim—donated small works to be auctioned off for the cause in the gallerylike basement studio of Israeli-American painter Michal Sedaka.

In the midst of the din, cigar in one hand and drink in the other, Wasko urged me to come to Poland in June to participate in his other pet project: Construction in Process, an erratically scheduled invitational event that brings together scores of international artists and a handful of (fool)hardy critics in some off-the-beaten-track locale (e.g., Lodz, Melbourne, the Negev Desert) for two weeks of communal living and on-site art-making [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '91]. Organized seven times since its inception in 1981, the residency-cum-exhibition pointedly places as much emphasis on the formative process as on the finished works, seeking to involve artists directly with the local community and with each other.

Back in February, such is the hectic tenor of the Manhattan art scene (and the mollifying effect of Polish vodka), the proposed trip actually sounded relaxing. Now, however, a slight apprehension arrives along with Wasko's travel instructions: "Fly to Warsaw, take a train 250 kilometers north to Bydgoszcz; a bus will bring you the remaining 50 kilometers to the camp near Ostrówce."

View of the Old Town section of Bydgoszcz, host city for Construction in Process VII—"This Earth Is a Flower." Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Richard Vine.

I e-mail Wasko, thanking him for the enclosed photo of himself in conversation with the prime minister of Poland, and inquiring as to the exact nature of my "participation" in the upcoming event. Wasko says not to worry and refers me to the independent curator and *A.i.A.* contributor Gregory Volk. Electronically, Gregory explains that the undertaking is "organized by artists for other artists" and is thus "unorthodox, unusual, sometimes ridiculous, but very often inspiring." It proceeds, he says, "unencumbered by ceremony, officialness, restraint"—an approach that "historically has had a profound impact on the lives of its participants." There is much more in his lengthy e-mail about things like "communion," "family" and "the human interaction that is encouraged (sometimes idiotically, sometimes wonderfully)."

Gregory's account, I suspect, like the improbably sappy subtitle of this year's event, "This Earth Is a Flower," is subtly calculated—all part of a cunning psychological scheme that I am beginning to think of as the "Bydgoszcz process." Construction in Process clearly embodies an improvisational Solidarity-style communalism. (Wasko, who spent six years in self-imposed political exile after being warned of impending arrest, was deeply involved with Poland's 1980s labor movement before and after his return to the country in 1989.) Thus the program has, to use Gregory's term, a certain "freewheeling" appeal—one that strikes nostalgic resonances for any veteran of the '60s. The question is: can it produce decent art?

Arrival

June 23

Bydgoszcz (pronounced *bid´gosh*) is an industrial town about halfway between Warsaw and the port city of Gdansk, in the "Border of Kings" region where the Polish nation was born 1,000 years ago. The 1999 *Rough Guide* to Poland says little about the place, except to specify its most salient 20th-century woe: "by the end of World War II over fifty thousand people—a quarter of the population—had been murdered, with many of the rest deported to labour and concentration camps."

I arrive after an all-night transatlantic flight followed by a five-hour train ride, the rail journey spent looking out at the countryside while sharing a worn and faded red-velvet compartment with Michal. She, like many Jewish participants in Construction in Process, speaks darkly of a vague, free-floating anxiety that intensifies as we move deeper into the heartland of what I soon mentally call "the sadness that is Poland"—verdant fields punctuated by shoddy Soviet-era construction, factories rusted and half disused, shops stocked with drab second-rate merchandise. If this is the state of affairs after the country's fervent embrace of capitalism in 1989, one can only imagine the grimness that prevailed under Soviet rule.

Architecturally, Bydgoszcz turns out to have a certain bleak charm. The city center boasts a number of deteriorated Art Deco buildings, an ornate pink hotel for high-end clientele and an Old Town along the River Brda. This historic core features a cobbled square, cafes with umbrella tables, old houses facing a small island in the river and several brick-and-timber warehouse structures—one of which, a disused granary widely (though inaccurately) known as "the Mill," provides rough-hewn and dramatically cross-lit exhibition space for about half the Construction in Process artists. The other major venue, the Municipal Art Museum, is a three-story pile with an 18th-century confectionary facade, serving as the event's communication center and unofficial daytime hang-out.

An electric streetcar passes in front of the museum, continually threatening to lessen, through accident, the international glut of distracted artists and art critics. In the square across the river, where a high-decibel rock performance

Tory Fair: Perennial Ball Game, *packing material, altered soccer balls, tape; at the Mill.*

Partial view of Piotr Kurka's installation in a brick tower near Bydgoszcz, shirts, wall text, floor lamp, stuffed dog.

Jon Torry: Crossing, *coiled rope, stones; at the Mill.*

At Lubostron Palace, a former royal residence, works are installed thoughout the building and landscaped grounds. The confined basement spaces hold, among many other pieces, the American Lynn Yamamoto's paper-cutout "meadow" of endangered Polish flowers; a suspended stone swinging over a lighted candle by Poland's Zygmunt Rytka; and Wasko's collection of old family photos displayed under a bare light bulb at the end of a narrow, leaf-strewn passageway in the wine cellar.

Upstairs, Cynthia Cox (USA) has scattered dried flower petals in a round alcove to create a setting for a vial of floral essence, reportedly gathered in moonlight. But the most conceptually elegant piece is Russian artist Vladimir Biritski's miracle-evoking installation: a video of swimming fish on a monitor at one end of the dining room and, at the other, two loaves of bread on the twin terminuses of an impossibly long U-shaped table.

Highlights out on the grounds include Polish participant Grzegorz Klaman's groups of taxidermic specimens (squirrels, pheasants, smaller birds) in long clear plastic tubes hung in the trees; the chairs and prominently keyholed door of *What the Butler Saw* by Sweden's Jens Fänge and Andreas Roth; and Australian Phillip Watson's *Reflections on the Water*, featuring a cluster of bamboo poles afloat on the pond in front of a crown-shaped gazebo.

Marcin Berdyszak's installation of steel, steel-mesh, audio, moveable apple-shaped balls, central element approx. 4 feet high; at the Municipal Art Museum.

Grzegorz Plesynski's installation, monochrome painting, steaming teapot; at the Mill.

As the day wanes, our buses lumber into Bydgoszcz, where, of the two main Construction in Process venues, the Mill, with its high beamed ceilings, huge windows and timbered floors, provides the more dramatic setting. Inside, the raking light lends additional effect to Australian Jon Tarry's *Crossing*, a Zenlike grouping of stones on coiled ropes. American artist Tory Fair offers a transhistorical meditation on sport—a pre-Columbian-type wall ring made out of packing material, old soccer balls slit and resewn in new forms, cryptic red boundary lines on the floor. Germany's Karin Sander has installed a total of nine green self-portrait figurines, set on pedestals at an intentionally awkward height, not only here but in the museum and at the Lubostron Palace as well. Grzegorz Pleszynski (Poland) comments on the "inviolateness" of art with a steaming teakettle set against a large blue monochrome painting.

Outside, Sora Kim (Korea) has attached clusters of colorful plastic garbage pails to the upper reaches of lampposts. Australia's Katherine Armstrong, meanwhile, evokes perpetual cycles of life and death by partially burying her nude female assistant near the entrance steps, then turning the soon-vacated grave into a flower bed.

Though most Eastern European artists have been relegated to the Mill's basement, they manage to steal much of the show. Their pieces range from the formal cunning of *The Cause and the Effect* by Lithuania's Algis Lankelis, a whirring electric fan with its cord arranged in a fanlike pattern, to the aggressive materiality of what look like furry sleeping bags mounted on the wall by Alicja Lewicka (Poland) to *Mirabilis II*, Polish artist Slawomir Brzoska's room-filling arrangement of taut threads under black light that is at once hull-like and vaginal.

A wider technological range prevails at the Municipal Art Museum. Here static works like German artist Harmut Böhm's minimalist arrangement of floor-hugging I-beams are counterpointed by flashy new-media pieces like a video composed of floating white dots and pounding techno music by Poland's Józef Robakowski. Hany Musallam's black-and-white photos of a small apartment and fellow Palestinian friends seem to come from a historical era long prior to that of Canadian artist Wieslaw Michalak's five-terminal Internet Gallery. Other works combine sculptural and electronic,