

# JOURNAL OF CURATORIAL STUDIES



## **FOKUS ŁÓDŹ BIENNALE 2010: FROM THE LIBERTY SQUARE TO THE INDEPENDENCE SQUARE**

Organized by Ryszard Waśko (artistic director) and an international selection committee (Mirosław Bałka, Gabriele Horn, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Angelika Stepken, Jarosław Suchan, Richard Vine, Gregory Volk and Ryszard Waśko), Łódź, Poland, 11 September–10 October 2010

*Reviewed by Joanna Szupinska*

Strong, unison voices weave their song through the halls of the Old Philharmonic, a building dating from the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) era and abandoned by the municipal orchestra as soon as their current home was completed in 2004. The many layers of paint on the walls, unassuming shades of brown and tan, are peeling. I follow computer-printed arrows to installations in once-bustling dressing rooms, offices, coat check, and – powerfully confronted by an auditorium of empty seats – out onto the orchestral stage itself. Having just walked the length of Piotrkowska Street in a scavenger hunt-like search for artworks, map in hand, I find myself in the most compelling grouping of works of the *Łódź Biennale*. The 'Old Philharmonic', as it has come to be known, is hardly mentioned in official histories of the orchestra – two decades not worth remembering; the art event reactivates this otherwise unappreciated space.

The folk voices, similarly conjuring a tradition deeply affected by the doctrines of the People's Republic, belong to the choral group Jarzębina from the village Kocudza, one of the most recognized regional folk ensembles in Poland. The audio emanates from *Placzki/Weepers* (2010), a paradocumentary by Anna Molska, installed in its own room. The video depicts a rehearsal of Jarzębina in a collaboration with Molska, staged and recorded in the Polish Sculpture Center in Orońsko. Bundled in their winter parkas, the singers gather in the one-time orangery and artist atelier of this readapted nineteenth-century Italian neo-renaissance manor house. They are surrounded by a snowy landscape just outside the glass panels of the gallery as they rehearse for a funeral, focusing their professional mourning skills on a makeshift corpse they construct from a sheet. Here, their song succinctly serves as lament for a multitude of disparate concepts – from gentry, village life and early capitalism, to comrades, minimalist sculpture and the PRL. In this layering of rich references, Molska's contribution – while not produced especially for the *Biennale* – stands out as a most successful response to the organizers' charge for site-specific works.

Several other works also take up this task seriously. Tacita Dean's *The Postcard Project* (2010) resonates with considerable honesty; the artist sent a postcard to every address on Piotrkowska Street, in a simple gesture acknowledging complexities of tourism such as the inclination towards collecting such souvenirs, and the ability to only partially understand a place or culture. Karin Sander engages the histories of earthworks and minimalism, and offers a concise critique of the massive French-funded factory-complex-turned-commercial-Mecca 'Manufaktura' in her work



Karin Sander, *Darń/Pieces of Turf* (1997–2010), installation view. Photo: Tomasz Matuszak, courtesy of the Łódź Biennale, Łódź.

*Darń/Pieces of Turf* (1997–2010). Just at the façade of the main shopping mall, a two square-metre piece of artificial grass replaces a corresponding piece of natural turf removed from a pristinely manicured lawn. Often placed on Soviet-era bloc housing balconies to simulate nature, here – among and in place of a portion of its referent – it is purely synthetic. Meanwhile Grzegorz Klaman’s contribution, *Giving In* (2010), can be sighted at the textile museum and elsewhere in the city. The white flags at once symbolize surrender – what are we surrendering from, and to? – and refer to the raw product that built this city, the one-time textile capital of the Russian Empire.

These artists successfully negotiated the remit of the *Biennale*, but others contributed works less accurately responding to the call for site-specificity. Cao Fei’s videos *The Birth of RMB City* and *Opera RMB City* (both 2009), based on the online world of *Second Life* that take as their subject China’s relationship with the outside world, is decidedly site-less. Other artists took the assignment too literally. Marek Wasilewski’s video *Adam* (2010) documents the nude artist walking the length of Piotrkowska Street and into the city cathedral in an interrogation of nakedness. O Zhang’s interactive project, *The Dove of Łódź* (2010), was certainly specific to local history, but predictable in that it only referenced the Holocaust, too often the lone subject that comes to mind when one hears the word ‘Poland’. The inconsistency of works is due to the open-call nature of the exhibition. One step towards a more cohesive show might be to categorically enable

an authorial position, appointing a (group of) curator(s) and reframing the role of the selection committee to that of an advisory group. Until some movement is made in this direction, it is doubtful that the *Biennale* will ever outgrow the feeling of a juried show, no matter how good the individual works may be.

The focus on site-specificity of the *Łódź Biennale*, made explicit in the promotional materials, is largely the result of the organizers' retroactive honing of their motives of the first iteration of its predecessor, *Construction in Process*, in 1981. *Construction in Process* brought together work by 54 international artists in an abandoned nineteenth-century textile factory, and some works were indeed created on site and in reaction to the factory space, the city, and the particular political situation in Poland. As the many anecdotes recount, artists created work with the help of students and Solidarity union members, stayed up long nights talking and drinking, and in a show of support sat in on workers' protests. The experience of that exhibition is clearly irreproducible, but the *Biennale* persists in an attempt to relive the charge of 1981 Poland.

The 2010 *Łódź Biennale* was organized along the central Piotrkowska Street. The brochure map directed viewers to listen for sound works installed on the street by Kamil Kuskowski, enjoy videos by Zuzanna Janin in beer gardens, find publically-displayed posters by Clemens von Wedemeyer and Arthur Zalewski, and pass through brick gates to a mural by the collective Grupa Twożywo, thereby revealing magnificent views of factory ruins otherwise hidden from the street. *Łódź* does provide a fascinating site for an exhibition. It was once a thriving, diverse capitalist city. Many of the factories built during the industrial revolution still stand and have accumulated new layers of historical significance. They were looted during the World Wars, repurposed for modern use in Communist Poland, and are presently empty, too expensive to demolish. Alternately, some have been transformed into hybrid commercial-cultural complexes like 'Manufaktura'.

As far as embracing a fully articulated and compelling curatorial model, the *Łódź Biennale* hovers in a state of partial development for its faithfulness to replicating the site-specificity of *Construction in Process*. The attempt to recapture the original moment of 1981 is complicated by a wholly new historical circumstance – artists are jet-set into *Łódź* for the duration of the *Biennale* 'workshop days', or finished works are simply shipped in, so the exchange among local and foreign artists cannot be what it once was at that radically different historical moment preceding the instatement of Martial Law. As such, the current situation does not allow for works to actively interrogate the fascinating past and capitalist present of this historically rich place.

E-mail: j.szupinska@gmail.com