

Robert Mason & Vessna Perunovich
The Fourth Cetinje Biennial, Yugoslavia

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Robert MASON & Vessna PERUNOVICH: The Fourth Cetinje Biennial, Yugoslavia

VIRGINIA M. EICHHORN

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 examine 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 sceptical towards the need for space expansion, anthropologist Ben Finney and space psychologist Philip Harris, among others, say that space exploration corresponds more to deep-seated philosophical, psychological and 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 Noestheden 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*). Noestheden 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, Noestheden 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. ←



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 90 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

VESSNA PERUNOVICH, *Wounding*, 2002. Nylon, plastic hose, hangers. 2,7 x 6 x 12,1 m. Photo: Boja Vasic, courtesy of the artist.

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 Nikolas Petrovich Njegosh, 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 Nikolas, 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, *(W)hole*, 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 *Desjardin 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 Tillsonburg and Toronto. Mason's multifaceted oeuvre includes painting, photo-based work, and installation. He describes the link between his varied media as *examinations 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 aesthetically 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 exhibition, *(W)hole* was exhibited in the Blue Palace. Perunovich contributed a second work to the Biennial, the sculptural installation *Wounding*. It was shown at the BILJARDA, 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 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 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 excited about their work being installed, and sec-

ondly 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. Natasa Djurovic from Montenegro and Atanasia Kyriakakos from Greece addressed the issue by doing a performance on 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 Blancart from France enveloped a life-size truck with scotch tape (how convincing a reconstruction is that?). Arnaud Labelle Rojoux, also from France, enlarged a doghouse so as to accommodate a person. Atelier Van Lieshout, from Holland, presented a mini-capsule, sleep/study unit, a claustrophobic construction that looks like a minuscule alien space 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 summed 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.

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 a big international gathering of artists from such diverse 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 affect. In Europe art is presented, reviewed and discussed 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 Mason's installation; and, for the opening, a Gypsy brass band, led by Prince Nikolas 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 whole town, "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 seriously.

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, every thing else went faster than — 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 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 an 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. ←

◆ The Fourth *Cetinje Biennial*, Yugoslavia July 21–Sept. 15, 2002

VESSNA PERUNOVICH, *(W)hole*, 2002. Elastic, hardware, video and audio installation. 3.9 x 5.1 x 7.3 m. Photo: Boja Vasic, courtesy of the artist.