



IDEALISM AND IRONY: POLITICAL PUBLIC ART IN EUROPE

On a sunny day in Copenhagen, a mysterious figure sneaks up behind a man eating lunch on a restaurant patio, takes out a pair of scissors, snips off some of his hair, and bolts down an adjacent alley. Together with cuttings taken from other prominent Danish bankers and real estate speculators, this lock of hair will become an ingredient in cookie batter, eventually ending up in a giant candy dispenser across the street from the Royal Danish Theater. For 20 kroner, the public can sample individually wrapped, bite-sized *Bonus Balls*. Part revenge fantasy, part power appropriation through cannibalism, this project—created by the Danish art collective Wooloo for the Copenhagen Arts Festival last fall—is just one example of a rising trend in European public art.

In the wake of the economic crisis, artists have become increasingly politicized, creating projects that question the distribution of power and imagining alternatives to the inequities of capitalism. Some works, like *Bonus Balls*, are humorously vengeful, while more idealistic approaches seek to introduce a new kind of collective power through the fostering of close-knit communities. The E.U., national governments, and local administrations have all lined up behind the idea of power through community in terms of the projects that they choose to fund and support.

Prague-based CULBUB, one particularly intriguing public art organization to have emerged from this enthusiasm for cooperation, commissions what it calls “acupuncture interventions” in the suburbs of major central European cities. Its temporary projects are unpretentious, interactive, and designed to engage local communities. More often than not, they also address the multicultural reality of the contemporary European metropolis.

Last fall, CULBUB invited Croatian artist Darko Fritz to create a horticultural project at the border of Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary. Down the road from an abandoned customs office and empty flagpoles, flanked by signs marking the territory as *Slavensko* (Slovakia), Fritz planted various types of mint in an area shaped like an Internet browser search box and “search” button. Appropriately titled *Search*, this garden of edible herbs is part of an ongoing project called “Migrant Navigator,” through which Fritz explores the concepts of home, migration, and identity in the digital age, seeking to “translate digital contents into the analogue realm.” Referencing traditional modes of community gardening and the beginnings of the Internet—Fritz likes to use the template of the now defunct Netscape Navigator—*Search* gives off a certain air of nostalgia. In this context, the sensibility is reworked into a somewhat utopian ideal in relation to a Europe without borders.



Left and detail: Wooloo, *Bonus Balls*, 2012. Plexiglas, laminate wood, Beaver coin drop mechanism, plastic, cookies, and targeted banker hair, 2.75 x 1 x 1 meters. Above: Wooloo, *Avfyrringsrampe*, 2012. Welded bronze and concrete, 200 x 75 x 50 cm.

Another of CULBUB’s projects, this one in the Viennese suburb of Ottakring, involved building a small hut and community space from locally collected materials. Led by New Zealand artist Paul Woodruffe, Austrian architect Walter Klasz, and Slovak designer Veronika Kotradyova, *Baetsch in the City* brought the New Zealand tradition of the bach to Austria. Short for “bachelor,” the bach is a small holiday or beach house made from repurposed materials. According to Woodruffe, the bach is “defined by what it is not; it is not the everyday, but a sanctuary from the everyday.” In Austria, the artists installed their bach-become-*Baetsch* in a neighborhood park, building and furnishing it with materials contributed by local residents.

Ottakring (Vienna’s old socialist district) contains both longtime Austrian residents and many newly arrived Bosnians, Serbs, and Turks. Woodruffe, Klasz, and Kotradyova describe their project as a form of Process Art: everyone in the neighborhood comes together to collect materials and build the *Baetsch* before using it as a community gathering and events space. Constructed of old beds, doors, shutters, and

Right: Paul Woodruffe, Walter Klasz, and Veronika Kotradyova, *Baetsch in the City*, 2012. Collected materials, 384 x 264 x 264 cm. Below: Darko Fritz, *Search*, 2012. Mint plants and paving stones, 2.2 x 20 meters.

the like, the *Baetsch* hosted concerts, movies, slideshows, and discussions. Throughout the month of September, local children played together and even had an impromptu dance competition, while the adults got to know each other over bowls of goulash and some mulled wine. The *Baetsch* served as a forum for intercultural exchange, and when it came time to abandon the structure for the winter, neighborhood children orchestrated a sit-in to protest.

Multiculturalism comes up frequently in European public art, though not always so idealistically. Last year, the Danish Embassy in Sweden hired Wooloo—the same artist collective that baked bankers’ hair into cookies—to create a project for Stockholm’s immigrant-populated suburb of Tensta. Widely perceived as a slum, the area is dominated by public housing projects and rampant unemployment. Wooloo sought to exploit the common perception that “the media only come to Tensta if something is on fire” and built a launch ramp for residents to shoot fireworks in the direction of the city center. Although the fireworks will never reach their “target” or cause any real damage to their surroundings, *Avfyringsrampe* offers a symbolic gesture of power to an otherwise disenfranchised community. Controversy swirled around the project for a while, but *Avfyringsrampe* remains in the neighborhood and so far has only been used for holiday and graduation celebrations.

Once set in motion, CULBURB’s idealistic projects and Wooloo’s ironic pieces take on a life of their own. To instill a new sense of power in participating communities, the artists who create such open-ended works are willing to cede control and let their interventions develop organically over time. Fritz’s mint plants could have been torn out, run over, or roasted by the sun; without the



children’s enthusiasm, the *Baetsch* might have failed; *Avfyringsrampe* could be used to launch things never imagined by Wooloo; and some unsuspecting persons could have sued over the hair in their cookies. In a time of uncertainty, European artists are calling into question not only the powers that be, but also their own power as masters of their creations.

—Elena Goukassian



Juries are convened each month to select works for Commissions. Information on recently completed commissions, along with high-resolution digital images (300 dpi at 4 x 5 in. minimum), should be sent to: Commissions, Sculpture, 1633 Connecticut Avenue NW, 4th Floor, Washington, DC 20009. E-mail <elena@sculpture.org>.