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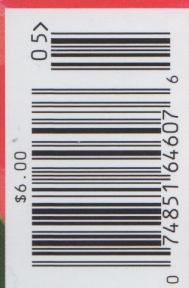
SINCE 1902

THE 2015 VENICE BIENNALE:
OKWUI ENWEZOR'S LAYERED VISION

CÉLESTE BOURSIER-MOUGENOT'S
MOVING GARDEN

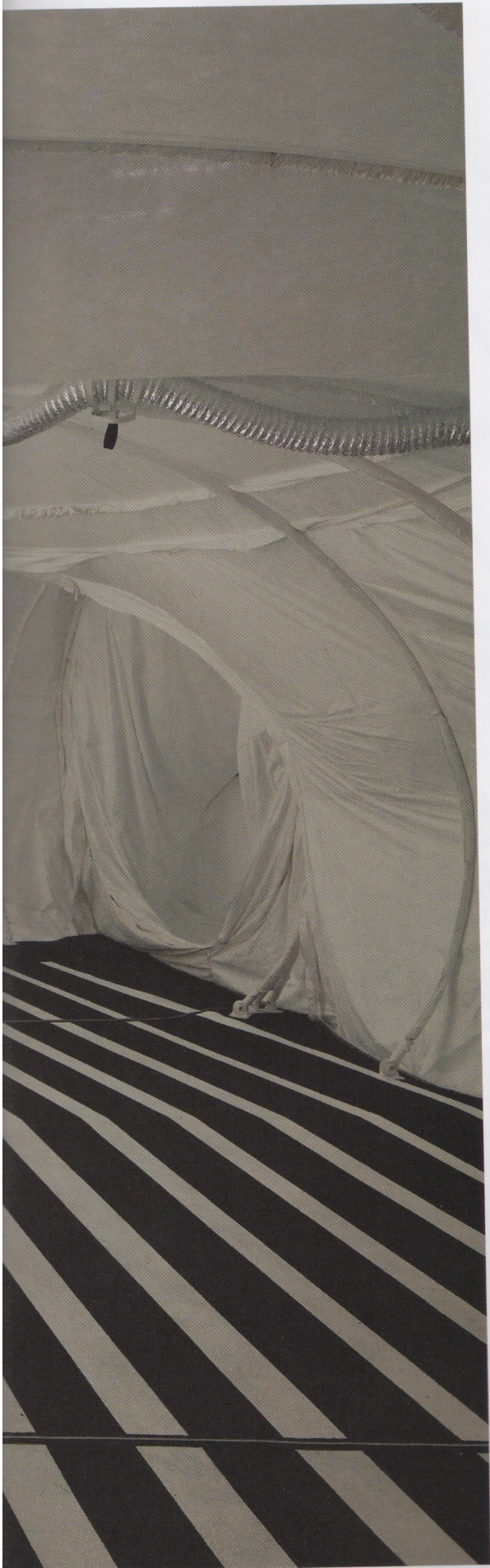
CT JASPER AND JOANNA MALINOWSKA:
POLAND/HAITI/VENICE

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C. T. Jasper and Joanna Malinowska create a cross-cultural universe inspired by *Fitzcarraldo*

BY LILLY WEI

Brooklyn-based, artists C. T. Jasper and Joanna Malinowska are representing Poland at the 56th Venice Biennale. Jasper, who works in a variety of mediums, focuses on video and film and is best known for his investigations of cinematic history laced with sociopolitical issues, as viewed through a skeptical but romantic lens. He is concerned with the role of film, science fiction, and avant-garde utopian discourse in the shaping of the collective consciousness and imagination. *Erased* (2013) and *Sunset of the Pharaohs* (2014) are two such recent projects, based on a meticulous and sophisticated process of intervention, altering existing films that are often of cult status.

Malinowska, too, is adept in multiple disciplines, emphasizing sculpture, video, and performance. Her leanings are anthropological, art historical, and musical, with cultural collisions of particular interest to her. *From the Canyons to the Stars* (2012), a fantasy narrative about indigenous Arctic peoples creating a sculpture that suggests Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* (1914), is one example, shown at the 2012 Whitney Biennial. Other similarly themed works from her 2013 show at Canada, the gallery that represents her in New York, include a large mound of dirt taken from the Yukon Territory, a giant bear reprised for an outdoor sculptural project at Columbus Circle (September 2014–April 2015), and a bust of Surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim wearing a Haitian mud-cake headpiece, foreshadowing the location for their Venice project. Malinowska searches for cultural connections as well as conflicts and, like Jasper, she is intrigued by the concept of the collective consciousness and the simultaneous appearance of ideas in far-flung, unrelated regions of the world.

Jasper and Malinowska, who show regularly in the United States and abroad, do not usually collaborate on projects, although they are currently in a two-person exhibition, "Relations Disrelations," at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland. They worked together on *Mother Earth Sister Moon* (2009), an enormous inflated version of a white space suit that was both a sci-fi sculptural

installation and a performance space, first exhibited at Performa '09 in New York.

The couple's Venice project, *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05" N 72°23'01" W*, curated by Magdalena Moskalewicz, a post-doctoral fellow at New York's Museum of Modern Art, owes much to Werner Herzog's 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*. A visionary tale of a madman fixated on the idea of bringing opera to the Amazon, the story (as well as Herzog's equally mad directing of the film) fascinated them. "We thought of this almost five years ago when we were applying for a Creative Capital grant," Malinowska said. "It was our starting point; we originally wanted to build a movie theater in the Amazon, a place for community gatherings, maybe like a branch of Anthology Film Archives. But then we came back to the idea of opera and decided to realize Fitzcarraldo's obsession, to succeed where he failed."

When asked why they chose Haiti, Jasper referred to the little-known historical connection between Haiti and Poland. "Polish soldiers were sent by Napoleon to Haiti in 1802 and 1803 to put down the slave rebellion," he

PREVIOUS SPREAD Joanna Malinowska and C. T. Jasper, *Mother Earth Sister Moon*, interior installation view at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland, 2013. OPPOSITE Joanna Malinowska, *From the Canyons to the Stars*, 2012, installation view.





said, "but they joined the rebels. Many of them settled down in Haiti and were given honorary legal status for their contribution to the revolution. In some villages today, over 200 years later, there are Haitians with Slavic features—blond hair, blue eyes—descendants of the soldiers. They look like people from a village in Poland." And, as Malinowska noted, "Some look like people from Greenpoint [Brooklyn] with a tan." Or, Jasper interjected, "like us. Many people we met said we were like them, like family." Pausing, he added that he would love to believe that the Poles fought for Haitian independence, but the reality was more complex and perhaps not quite so noble: pragmatism and desertion also played a part, and their role as heroic liberators was overstated.

POLISH IS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF HAITI, ONE OF TWO "white" languages granted that designation in the Haitian constitution (German was approved later on). A study of surnames in parts of Haiti shows many that were Polish in origin but were Gallicized to sound French, with the final syllable, such as "ski," lopped off. Poland and Haiti also share a religion, and the image of the Black Madonna, a Polish icon, is worshipped on the island, although the Haitians also practice voodoo, an instance of the consequences of cultural import and export, which is a major preoccupation of *Halka/Haiti*.

The story of *Halka* is classic and was first performed in Vilnius in its entirety in 1848. Malinowska called it "a Polish Madame Butterfly." A peasant beauty from the highlands, Halka is seduced by Janusz, a rich landowner who then abandons her. The opera begins with his engagement to a young woman of his own class and proceeds to its tragic denouement. "It lasts over three hours," Jasper said, "but we cut it to its essentials for the performance we staged in Cazale, the village we chose for the production.

"*Halka* is considered to be the national opera of Poland," Jasper continued, "the music written by composer Stanisław Moniuszko and its libretto by socialist poet

OPPOSITE Stills from C. T. Jasper and Joanna Malinowska's multichannel video projection, *Halka/Haiti*. 18°48'05"N 72°23'01"W, 2015 (top two), and soloists from the Poznań Opera House with local audiences during a rehearsal in Cazale (bottom).

Włodzimierz Wolski from Warsaw. Much more than a love story, it's nationalistic, politically progressive, combining folk culture with a critique of Poland's feudal system and the exploitation of the peasants. It's possibly the first operatic libretto written in Polish, another reason we picked it."

The couple filmed the project using four cameras to create a sense of total immersion. "We wanted a 360-degree angle, four-channel work, choosing sequences and putting them together during post-production," explained Malinowska. "It's really important for us that there is nothing behind the camera. At the same time, we want to connect it to historical panoramas, like the painted dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History. We're planning to build semicircular screens for Venice, to project on to create a simulation of the village that is actual-size, so the viewers will feel that they are present."

"The Polish Pavilion is 20 meters long and 8 meters wide," said Jasper, "so we have to play with this. We want to keep it very simple, so the focus is on the screen. We might have revolving doors but we're still planning the installation, so we will see. We might even change the name of the pavilion from Polonia," he added, "since that's the Italian designation."

Jasper and Malinowska visited Haiti several times, first to determine the viability of the project and the location, choosing Cazale, which is situated in a mountainous region about 28 miles from Port-au-Prince. They selected it because it was the center for the Poloné, the descendants of the Napoleonic troops; its name is believed to be a mash-up of Haitian Creole for "home" and the Polish surname "Zaleski." They returned to make preparations and finally to film, which they did this past December in an intense, two-week session. The cast and crew were a mix of Poles and Haitians, with the soloists from the Poznań Opera House, the musicians from the Holy Trinity Philharmonic Orchestra of Port-au-Prince, and the dancers from Cazale.

The logistics were difficult, more complicated than they anticipated, and it took a great deal of time to figure out how to do things and negotiate the details. The costs were unexpectedly high for such a poor country, but it also made sense, they said, since there was no real infrastructure.

Haiti is still in ruins from the massive earthquake that struck it in 2010. Port-au-Prince is worse off than Cazale, its Edenic landscape cloaking the devastation, which can almost be forgotten. Malinowska described the river in the mountains where everyone, including the artists, bathed in the morning.

They also wanted to build a relationship with the people in the village, which is another reason for making multiple visits. "We couldn't start without involving the community and explaining to them what we were planning to do—not always easy. Our translator didn't even know the term 'opera' in Creole. We also didn't want to use our cameras without permission, since many are reluctant to be photographed," Jasper explained. And the Haitians were suspicious at first. "Even when I wanted to film a villager's goats and pay him for it, he didn't trust me; he thought I would harm them." Moskalewicz, who accompanied them on their first research trip to Cazale, said that at one point they even considered not staging the opera if the community objected.

The artists had many stories about their interaction with the villagers, recalling how Malinowska attempted to communicate with the Cazaleans, at times in "broken French." Once, at a large community meeting in the high school, where they went to invite people to be dancers in their production, the headmaster asked the couple to prove they were artists—could they sing, dance? Not knowing what else to do, they danced a polonaise, the traditional dance graduating Polish high-school students perform at the start of the *studniówka* (the dance that takes place 100 days before final exams). The kids watching them clapped and laughed at the auditioners becoming the auditioned.

Jasper and Malinowska were joined by several other collaborators, with whom they worked from the beginning. As Jasper described it, the "starting point was fine but later on, when the project was taking shape and final decisions were being made, it became a little tricky." Nevertheless, Malinowska said, "When we didn't agree, we would all talk as long as necessary to reach a solution—since everyone had an opinion." And when it came time to list credits for the project, they included everyone who had worked on it. "Why should anyone remain anonymous?" Jasper asked.

Halka/Haiti represents the exporting of a foreign culture, an exercise in cultural colonization or cultural connection that is complex, fraught, and in flux. The

choice of Cazale was deliberate—it had already been Polonized (or the Poles there had been creolized) at the beginning of the 19th century. In questioning the export of culture through their project, the artists wanted to discover what other bonds the two countries, with their histories of exploitation, partition, and marginalization, might share. They wondered what other, perhaps more nuanced, significance the exchange might reveal, and what conversation their modest, cobbled-together, outdoor staging of an obscure opera that originated in Poland, journeyed to Haiti, and then to Venice might initiate, translated from live performance to film.

Moskalewicz, when asked what she thought, responded that, coming from a very homogenous country—culturally, ethnically, linguistically—where national identity remains an urgent discussion, she has found it fascinating to take *Halka* to "such a different context and see what it can tell us about Polish national identity today, how we still define our national identity through 19th-century artistic forms, and how this influences our self-image."

WHILE DRAWN TO AND TOUCHED BY FITZCARRALDO and his obsession with bringing European culture to the Amazon, Jasper and Malinowska acknowledge the madness and arrogance of his romanticism. They force Fitzcarraldo's consuming, essentially narcissistic passion into another context, one that is less epic and overblown, underscoring contemporary issues that are grounded in particular geographic, historical, and sociopolitical realities.

Malinowska believes that there was something hopeful about the creation of this project and the bringing together of different cultures and geographies. "I'm having a fantasy of going back there, to continue our relationship with the villagers." Jasper admitted that obsession has always interested him and that he is a romantic at heart, however much he might want to deny it. "I definitely believe in art, but I question the artistic ego and want it to disappear a little. It's not an existential position," he said, "but maybe it is, a little." ■

OPPOSITE Performer from the Poznań Opera House with local audience in Cazale.

Lilly Wei is a critic and independent curator and a contributing editor of ARTnews.

