

DIARY

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

August 01, 2012 • Donetsk, Ukraine • Cathryn Drake



Left: Ivan Michailov former director of Izolyatsia factory. Right: Dealer Maria Baró, artist Daniel Buren, and collector Luba Michailova. (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

A SMALL BUT DIVERSE ART CROWD representing nearly every continent recently invaded the obscure city of Donetsk, Ukraine, on the tails of European football fans, for the opening of “What Is the Time?” at the Izolyatsia Art Centre. Undeterred by the political boycott and charges of national racism that plagued the Euro Cup 2012 matches here, this particularly unlikely incursion of the Ukrainian frontier was led by Italians, namely the intrepid principals of San Gimignano’s Gallery Continua, who invited six artists to create site-specific installations at the former communist insulation factory. From the plane a strip of haze on the horizon demarked the city, the hub of the country’s steel and mining industries, on the green-and-gold patchwork of the never-ending steppe. We were welcomed by a brand spanking new terminal at the Sergey Prokofiev International Airport, surreal in its emptiness, and immigration officers who spoke just enough English for a cheerful welcome.

Dinner guests were greeted that evening with a pagan ritual at the village-style restaurant Deryovnya: Costumed ladies proffered bread to be dipped in salt and eaten as protection from the evil eye. Then a feast of smoked fish and piles of pork, served at long wooden tables and washed down with a perpetual supply of vodka, went on for hours. We were entertained by a group of young women with halo-like headdresses singing in tiny, high-pitched voices. “This place is full of contradictions,” Galleria Continua’s Silvia Pichini observed. “It is run by women, who rebuilt it after the war.” Shiny car dealerships and small shopping malls alternate with crumbling communist apartment blocks in various shades of gray. Newly built gated communities with mansion copies of the old-style houses across the street recall the eerily empty set of *The Truman Show*. The owners of the gigantic McDonald’s were forced to preserve the mosaic *Bird Woman*, created for the building by activist artist Alla Horska, whose sudden death in 1970 is widely believed to have been at the hands of the authorities. For all that, the sleepy city on the plains resembles nothing so much as a midwestern American town.



Left: Pinchuk curator Björn Geldhof and dealer Mario Cristiani. Right: Critics Santa Nastro and Cloe Piccoli with Galleria Continua's Silvia Pichini.

The press conference took place the next morning, in four languages, at a building in the Izolyatsia complex. “This is the happiest day of my life,” founder Luba Michailova began. “Two years ago today we established the foundation here, and nobody understood why.” Halfway across the vast country from capital city, Kiev, Donetsk has no art scene to speak of. The locals have been reticent, only slowly trickling in to Izolyatsia, which hosts themed artist residencies and site-specific art installations, as well as educational workshops and conferences. “If it is not about making money, they don’t think it is worthwhile,” explained

Michailova, herself an industrialist. “This place was a utopian ideal of communism, and my father worked here every day for forty years.” Ivan Michailov was the Soviet-era director of the factory until it closed, so Luba bought the place to preserve its legacy. Hans Op de Beeck’s film *Sea of Tranquility* was being screened upstairs in the former apparatchik meeting room, still furnished with vintage theater seating, red velvet curtains, and an upright piano. Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr described the first visit the artists made, in February: “It was a shock; I have never been so cold in my life. So I discovered the importance of vodka.”

We strolled the grounds outside, encountering the first of many brightly colored doors framed in black and white, Daniel Buren’s attempt to infuse life onto disused facades. “There is still the feeling of the hard labor the people did here,” he said. The former factory is stark and splendid, with gigantic chutes and tracks crisscrossing overhead; an old slag heap, topped with an iron deer sculpture made by a former worker, has transformed naturally into a verdant hill. When we got to Leandro Erlich’s *Bank*, a giant building facade with a mirror suspended perilously above and reflecting all the people lying on top, the Argentinean artist was waving his arms: “I love telling stories!” he said. “Our perception of reality extends as far as our imagination will allow.” At the other end of the complex was Pascale Marthine Tayou’s sexy tribute to the Ukrainian women, a towering smokestack turned into a gigantic lipstick. Taken together, all of the installations were pitch-perfect, matching the surreal tone of the place.



Left: Galleria Continua's Maurizio Rigillo. Right: Dealer Lorenzo Fiaschi.

Eventually everyone headed to a long warehouse next to the hillside, slated to become an exhibition hall, for the dinner party, where the women were given traditional flower headbands and the men red sashes. The place smelled like the countryside; crickets were

chirping. A bonfire had been set up outside. Little did we know we would be participating in a pagan mating ritual in celebration of Midsummer. Continua's Pichini alerted me: "They jump over the fire and then into the water, and then they go off and make love in the forest." Over dinner, the discussion about the power of Ukrainian women continued. "Nearly all of my employees are female," PinchukArtCentre curator Björn Geldhof said. "It is true: The Ukrainian women are simply superior to the men."

We had barely finished eating when a group of women dressed in white gowns started dancing around a man with a drum. Shortly everyone got up and joined in, moving outside and circling the fire while others leapt over it in pairs. After a while the guests started diving enthusiastically into the small pool, and then Erlich hit his head and starting bleeding profusely, requiring stitches on-site. Later a DJ moved from Russian pop songs to disco classics. By that time everyone was well lubricated, and following some pretty wild dancing, a spontaneous karaoke session began, with shirtless dealer Mario Cristiani, always the star of the dance floor, belting out "Volare." That was not all: A giant cake of the factory decorated with the artworks as cookies arrived. "We are very communist; we love to do things together and share," Luba announced. "It's like a wedding," exclaimed Michelle Kasprzak, director of the Dutch Electronic Art Festival. "Next they will throw the bouquet, and whoever catches it will open an arts center."

— Cathryn Drake



Left: Artist Moataz Nasr. Right: Dancing around a fire.

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