

Vivid visions

Pe Okx's video installations illuminate Kingston art scene



Pe Okx.

by Lynn Woods

Kingston's archaic infrastructure has on occasion served as the site for installation art. The latest examples are two video installations by Dutch multi-media artist Pe Okx, one of nine artists from the Netherlands who participated in Ulster County's artists-in-residency program. On Sept. 19 and 20, he presented his piece *Vallicht* (Dutch for "falling light") in a dusty brick garage at the former Kosco site on the Rondout Creek, and last Saturday, Oct. 3, he staged *Sung Glass*, a video image of a singing man projected onto hanging shards of glass, in a raw loft space in the cavernous Shirt Factory. (Another video, *Bosomland*, was included in the group exhibition of the Dutch artists' work at SUNY Ulster last month.) These visionary installations constituted one of the region's most exciting art events, bringing the Hudson Quadricentennial celebration of the region's Dutch roots to a climactic close.

Okx exhibits his work all over Europe and has participated in numerous international art festivals. The site often inspires and informs his pieces - be it an abandoned water tower, graveyard, or medieval church - so Okx, who arrived on Sept. 8, spent his first days here searching for spaces with a certain poetic resonance. His work could roughly be described as an interweaving of projected images, in some cases incorporating dance and live performance, with a carefully composed soundscape (prior to becoming an artist, Okx was a musician) - though each piece deploys his media in a different way. His disjointed narratives have a strange, elegiac force; one is moved, though one doesn't quite know why. It's as if the purifying fire of Okx's imagination had distilled and reordered sensory experience into a transfixed realm of deconstructed space-time, which eludes rational thought and instead incites our deepest emotion. (Until I saw Okx's work, I never thought a cauliflower could make me cry.) Movement takes on the cadence of ritual, objects levitate and are imbued with magical properties, and anonymous performers sing and move as if in a trance, out of time. The intrinsic intimacy of the video medium - already a kind of mental space - adds to the sense of deep, interior experience. "I'm not satisfied with the way we see reality," Okx says. "Many more things exist. I want to surprise and mystify myself."

On Saturday night, in a second-floor loft of the Shirt Factory, the mesmeric, theatrical atmosphere of *Sung Glass*, a 10-minute piece that was played continuously for several hours, attracted clusters of lounging, enraptured visitors. A large image of a muscular, bald singer in a black undershirt, his face alternately still and contorting as he launched into the series of notes, was projected through hanging shards of glass onto a black screen hung midway across the darkened space. Crystalline fragments of his face swung across the walls, reflected by the glass, which also acted as prisms, tinting the images pink and green. His mouth moving out of sync with the soundtrack of a soprano singing Bach's St. John's Passion, the man, despite his aura of powerful physicality, was a disembodied image, a ghostly presence, in stark contrast to the sound, which became a palpable, physical thing: one could feel it vibrating in the sheet of glass placed on a tall table beneath the hanging shards. Connected by a thin rod to a speaker on the floor, the glass sheet literally emitted the sound, creating subtle, warped undertones. It was both a sound sculpture and reflective surface, on which the shards seemed to float, as if in a deep well. The experience was cathartic, a subtle orchestration of sound and vision ingeniously crafted from the simplest of means.

'Sinister, desolate, exuberant'

Vallicht consisted of four projections, each centered on an interior wall of the garage, the covered, barred windows of which functioned as set pieces. The orchestration of sounds - resonant plunks, loud clangings, high-pitched, screeching clinks, magnified drips, an ominous basso continuum of thrums - interspersed with a haunting melody played on low-pitched, cello-like instruments (actually a tampered fragment of a jazz composition) and ending with a choral piece by Poulenc created a sense of immediate, operatic presence which was alternately sinister, desolate and exuberant.

The piece opened with an image of a still life arranged on a wooden table against a black backdrop, stark and dramatic as a Caravaggio painting. On the opposite wall, a chair floated, and glimpses of the sea, framed by a small, barred window, appeared on the remaining walls, drifting off to the side, as if one were passing by in a ship. Mysterious, unseen forces animated the proceedings: a hand stirred a spoon in a teacup, the accompanying clinking sound building in volume, before cup, saucer, and orange pitcher levitated into black space, like the slow, orbiting spaceships in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Subtle disruptions in time changed one's perception of the objects. For example, when a stream of water poured horizontally from the spout of the upside-down pitcher, there was a second's delay, as if the water was materializing from a void. The water then streamed out in slow motion, suggesting the pitcher was actually a fathomless well. The feet of a figure on the beach moved forwards, then backwards in the frothy surf, in a kind of silent, ritualistic dance, while another unidentified figure carefully placed a cauliflower on the wet, gleaming beach, as if it were a precious, newborn world. Rows of suspended, twirling mackerel, rising and falling like the tide, were accompanied by a high-pitched keening sound, which faded out, replaced by loud, percussive drips, as if from a single dead, hanging piscine.

The piece climaxed with projections of cauliflowers swaying on long, thin stems to the strains of Poulenc's *Quatre Motets Pour une Temps de Penitence*, performed by the English choir The Sixteen. A luminous seascape at dusk appeared in the background on one wall, while on another, a wind-blown figure performed a slow, existential dance on a row of poles extending into the sea. Bathed in an afterglow, signifying the last light of a fading empire, the cauliflowers were choral penitents, their brainlike, tight white clusters of florets signifying a poignant vulnerability, their brackets of leaves like weirdly delicate, veined hair.

Playing with time

The Poulenc piece "had nothing to do with cauliflowers," Okx said. "The contrast was so absurd I immediately decided to use it." Juxtaposing unlike genres and categories of experience - still life and landscape, the vacuum of space and the windblown sea, the singular and the multiple - is one way Okx translates the mundane into the language of the sublime. Another is his playing with time: "I slow it down, stretch it out. I do this with my sounds also," he said.

The superior production values of *Vallicht* would suggest that Okx had a crew of set designers and musicians at his disposal. But in fact most of the piece was fabricated by himself alone in the studio. His approach is decidedly low-tech: his sounds are created from the simplest of occurrences - a finger sliding along a nylon string, for instance - as well as from an array of invented instruments, such as a violin bow played on a piece of glass or a thin copper sheet, which are recorded and sampled in a computer. He always seeks the unexpected: "Very strange instruments appear all of a sudden, with their own rhythmic structure," he said. "They have their own charm and their own possibilities for making sounds."

For the images, he set up his camera at unusual angles and developed inventive staging schemes. He covered his studio walls in black wool for the still-life backdrop. The abstract flowing water image was derived from footage of a spouting garden hose. For the fish sequence, he hung 60 mackerel from the ceiling on tiny nylon strings and twirled them. ("Afterward I baked them and put them in vinegar and gave them to all my friends.") Okx also frequently recycles footage from other pieces: the panning shots of the long, stockade-like rows of sticks in the tidal flats also appeared in *Bosomland*.

Okx made his debut as an artist in the early 1990s with a series of pieces in abandoned water towers. Compositions based on sampled sounds from the structures were played back as small groups toured the towers, and the walls became sculptural elements, with sanded areas indicating the places where the sunlight fell throughout the day. In 1994, Okx staged one of his most ambitious pieces, *Opus Bagger*, in an old dredging machine, which included musicians dressed in work clothes playing brass instruments, recordings of bird calls, and the playback of a composition generated from the rusty, creaky machine. In a feat that would have been at home in a Werner Herzog film, the massive, floating machine was conveyed from town to town by tugboats. Okx's multi-media pieces have also been performed in churches, out in the dunes, and at an outdoor bar at night, with the images projected on screens suspended from trees.

In one recent project, he projected Super 8 films of photographs of people who were deceased onto thin sheets of slowly melting ice erected in the graveyard where the person was buried. The projectors were hidden in suspended bird houses. "It got a lot of attention," Okx says. "You never know how people will react. I had one movie of a baby seven months old and another of a girl who was 20. The mother of the girl said the piece was a great gift to her."

The artist, who has lived for the past 30 years on a 1903 flat-bottomed sailing boat in Alkmaar, returned to his home town on Oct. 7, where a number of ambitious projects awaited him. Okx has been hired by the prestigious Netherlands Blazers Ensemble orchestra to create visuals for a special performance. He is photographing an ancient, 126-kilometer dyke. One day a month over the course of a year, he slowly walks the dyke from dawn to dusk, pushing a camera on a wheeled tripod. The thousands of photos will be compressed into a 40-minute film. The piece has a performance aspect: walking the dyke is physically taxing, Okx said, and moving at such a slow pace puts him into a heightened state of awareness. "You can get a good look at the things happening around you," he said. "I'm actually in another time perspective. I want to meet people and try to make them snap out of their normal time perspective and into mine." For a brief span of time, Okx created a similar disjunction amid the industrial environs of Kingston, his shimmering, sonorous visions glowing in its dusty shadows like vivid, unforgettable dreams.