

Possessed to Repossess

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Noble ghosts of Germany's Imperial past seem to possess the former Wartesaal for First and Second Class train travellers of the old Harburger Hauptbahnhof, conjuring the protagonists in *Last Year at Marienbad*—listless and disconnected wandering on a green expanse of law. Time severely slows down here. To enter this space we make tentative steps like a patient recovering from the hard realities of the outside world. Immediately, we find our toes combing through grass...is this some new and benevolent reality? This is, in fact, the sublime atmosphere Adrian Lohmüller staged when crafting his proposal, *And to Make You Toe the Line*, for the Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof—a charged architectural space adorned by ornamental details still evocative of Wilhelmine Germany. Clearly, the lines that might have been toed here have departed. We are free to roam and repossess the turf that stands in contradiction to its title. Beware.

The lawn stretched before us makes us recall its own history: one of pure pleasure, sprung from medieval court landscape design, and that of symbolic luxury and power (think of the great lawns that stretch before the Reichstag and the US Capitol). So, perhaps it is not surprising that a grassy wall-to-wall carpet was the artist's response to the memory of wealth and privilege once embodied by the First and Second Class Wartesaal. Yet, a Wartesaal is also a transitional space between here and there, between work and home. The green laid out in *And to Make You Toe the Line*, then, is precisely a preview of what 19th century travelers, waiting there among the exotica of palm fronds sipping their Schildkrötensuppe, would have anticipated when, like clock work, they would disembark from their trains into the jungles of their ambitions or the affluent suburbs of their Hamburg homes. It is the suburbs to which we owe the popularization of sodding grass.

But any reverie about the lawn, while visually inspiring bucolic pastimes that adorn prosperity and leisure, is abruptly interrupted by the urgent sounds wafting in from the windows fixed wide open to the hustle and bustle of contemporary existence: massive train engines belch their energy and loud intercoms project departures and arrivals. The auditory bedlam of comings and goings, welcomes and farewells, unleash an uncontrolled humanity through the Wartesaal idyll. This gesture of just the open windows alone is reminiscent of Michael Asher's work for the 13th floor of The Clocktower, New York in the spring of 1976. While other elements operate in Lohmüller's work he follows Asher's concept to blur the boundaries of indoors and outdoors, making the visitor acutely aware of the weather and their physical presence in the psychology of the space. Lohmüller produces another guard against complacency in his constructed paradise through the projection of an enormous dog baring fangs in the *Speakers' Corner*, a darken side room off the Wartesaal. Could the threatening dog be Lohmüller's particularly violent substitution of Manet's irreverent nude in *Déjeuner sur L'Herbe*? Both artists break with

the history of Arcadia by inserting a cunning embodiment of contemporary urban reality. The dog and the nude meet the viewer with a self-conscious presence that is both alien and integral to their context. So, as we linger within this false *hortus conclusus*, we are made to feel uneasy by a sharp sense of insurrection.

And to Make You Toe the Line reminds us that the street is an equalizer, the quintessential surface from which all segments of life flow. It was the natural sequel to an earlier floor sculpture, *Uma Praça*, The Square, (2011), created for the 6th Biennial of Curitiba. *Uma Praça* also reclaims space for the communal by literally transposing a slice of *calçadas* or pavement inside the Museu Oscar Niemeyer where the Biennial was held. The elements of street sounds and sidewalks truly belong to the boundless and unpredictable world outside. They are spaces unchecked by the social constraints that attend private lawns and bourgeois customs. The use of paving stones, an ancient Mesopotamian invention, eventually migrated throughout Europe. Like the patterns that made them famous, in particular the “Mar Largo” or “the wide sea”¹, the *calçadas* were brought to Brazil as a post-colonial import, i.e. after Portuguese occupation, and flourished as a means of “Europeanizing” (read: “civilizing”) its suburban and urban centers. By the 1960s, in a bold turn of events, modernist architects re-appropriated and adapted *calçada* patterns, reasserting them as *indigenous* Brazilian design. In this way the pillows, bearing those radical “Samba-esque” designs so popularized by Roberto Burle Marx, cushion the hard minimalist fragment of Lohmüller’s *Uma Praça*. *Uma Praça* becomes the symbol of all commons, a place to protest and to rest, perhaps, while listening to the revolutionary songs of Elis Regina. Burle Marx and Niemeyer drafted a “critical regionalism” out of European modernism. One would argue that they succeeded, at least, in their public projects. But Lohmüller develops a margin for skepticism when he toys with the ever-present potential for social disparity in spaces of exclusivity, like museums and first class waiting rooms.

In the same year, *Fundament I & II*, installed outdoors on the lawn of the private estate Kartzitz in Rügen with its ancient aristocratic history, also connects the haves with the have-nots. The first part, *Fundament I*, another minimalist platform, at once reminds us of the abandoned vacation sites not only on Rügen, such as the infamous Nazi era Prora, but all those that continue to scar beachfronts throughout European resort sites due to economic instability and political corruption. At the same time, it is a concrete block that is slightly raised to face a pond, which indicates a stage for a voice, the potential for democratic action or romantic arias—a “speaker’s corner”. Step down the side stairs off the platform, and we quickly find ourselves under the earth, suggesting a bunker or a crypt, perhaps a memorial to former days of failures and follies. Stairs leading into the earth propose a subterranean connection with *Fundament II* located on the other side of the water. There, no foundation exists only the evocation of graves, underground water systems and the sinking feeling of death, everywhere present.

¹ The “Mar Largo” design was first used in 1849 on Rossio Square, Lisbon when Portugal was no longer a

Previously, Lohmüller led us into dark and derelict building sites, where we would meet jerry rigged skeletons of PVC, metal, or wood fashioned into mechanisms that leaked over various powders, involving chemicals and transformative processes. In this regard, it is impossible not to think of Duchamp's two-dimensional mind games like so many microscopic glass slides of chronic psychosomatic states, or Ernst's collage novel, *Une semaine de bonté*—Lohmüller's sculptural versions being more about feting the remedial failure of such uncanny experiments. In *Klärwerk* (2008), for instance, he indulged in elaborate and intensive efforts to capture ephemeral human residue, to the point where he “crawl[ed] through the drain in the sink after brushing my [his] teeth to arrive somewhere, to get the whole picture. I [He] arrived in the sewage and ultimately in the wastewater treatment plant, which 'cleanses' the waste of all people connected to it—a homogenous flow of enciphered material, carrying the code of the population within the area”. Like a man under the influence, such Houdini-like maneuvers have allowed the artist to bring to public attention the famous “cleansing” corporations of our Western culture, if not, at least, redirect some dirty aspects of our ailing urban environment.

But, in *The Tongue Ever Turns To The Aching Tooth* (2009) the artist has gone too far. Last time we heard from him he was brushing his teeth. Now, they are aching and we can see why: “I cracked open the perfect seal of an urban parking lot in order to create a cavity, an empty space without predetermined use. This was a view to history...you could literally see what happened in the last decades as there were layers of war debris, burnt roofing material, layers of pavement to conceal it, more debris on top and more layers of concealment. My idea was that it could be a place for lovers to hide away in.” We recognize that at the crux of these extraordinary feats to couple deep side the underworld is a charming act to challenge injustices gone unacknowledged— retrieve the wrongs of history and fix them with love, at least, bow to the absurdity of doing so.

Fordlandia (2014) is another such recovery trip. With this piece, as with *And to Make You...*, we are again mucking around with an imperial situation of sorts. Back in the late 1800's, which is like the present and probably the future, entered the successful entrepreneurial mind of the North American industrialist, Henry Ford, who decided to cut out the middleman by cornering the market on rubber, a crucial material in car production. He bought on spec a big track of land in the Amazon rainforest, popped up an instant Yankee town and country club and, with the same blind enthusiasm of a true expansionist, called it after himself, Fordlandia. But, because this was remote control shopping (he should have known better), Ford's vision for a garden community in South America was lost in translation, the regional population refused to toe the party line and, ultimately, Fordlandia was recuperated by those who loved the jungle best.

Although *Fordlandia's* familiar story is not one we can physically experience, like the Wartesaal or the square of *Uma Praça*, its object elements and accouterments go a long way to carry its narrative. Treated like relics subjected to scientific research, a facsimile of the pen (with which Ford signed his contract of purchase), a container of rubber (the cash crop he was unable to extract) and another vial of milk (the product the local population

now produce in its place) are made to foment enclosed in glass tanks for aesthetic observation. As in many of Lohmüller's adventures, the power of *Fordlandia* was in the doing: meeting decedents of Ford's colonial fantasy to solicit signatures for a revisionist document that underscored their participation in the ritual of "repossessing" a big strip of land. As we wander through the *Warteräume* of the world, creating our "desire paths" on its surfaces, Lohmüller tells us that we leave a "subconscious act of resistance", however small, for others to repossess and find meaning.