

Pools of Belief - Hugh Merrill

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Zemek Center, Poznan, Poland

Max Skorwider is a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan, Poland. Max lives in Poznan and is a noted poster designer, artist, and contributor to the art magazine, Areton. He and Maja Wolna interview Hugh over a Piwo (beer) in The Proletariat Bar in Poznan, Poland, September 2005.

Max: Can you tell us about Pools of Belief?

Pools of Belief is a community art piece, performance, installation and exhibition. I created 4 graphic images of a children's swimming pool filled with water. Each was about 4X4 feet in diameter. Floating in the pools are images of mousetraps shaped like boats. Trailing from the traps are narrow sheets of paper with the text "I believe in the New York Stock Exchange" and other such answers. The graphic pools are adhered to rubber mats that are easily moved from place to place. The pools were displayed in public places in Berlin and Poland where the people walking by are asked to participate by writing their own answer to the phrase "I believe in _____" on a narrow sheet of paper. They are then asked to place their "I believe in _____" paper strips in a mouse trap and place the trap on one of the graphic pools. All of their responses are kept for later exhibition. I was

able to work with a group of Polish art students who helped with the performances and installations. The Pools were taken out to locations in Berlin. In Poznan they were installed at the National Museum of Poland, and in front of the Zamek Cultural Center. The final installation/exhibition took place at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan.

Max: Are the pools a metaphor, and if they are what do they stand for? Or, why Pools? Why children's pools?

We are a light society, a society of consumer goods, material desires, a society consumed by what is fun, goofy and playful. We are desire and we are life-style driven. Our time is much different than the old oppressed societies of Eastern Europe under Nazi occupation, then under communist occupation. If Poland is occupied now it is by Nike, Reebok and beer companies. So the first consideration was to create a visual metaphor for our consumer society and a shallow children's pool seemed perfect. They are beautiful, clear, not only shallow but lacking in depth; they are made for fun and play; their borders are plastic and air. Old borders were steel and iron, barbed wire and guns; they called it the iron curtain. Now the western world lives in a continuous mall. The children's pools act as a metaphor for national boundaries: children's pools stand for realms of existence, countries, institutions and religions they stand for our light attitudes toward these institutions and concerns.



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Max: What about the mousetraps? Where do they come in, and where does belief fit in?

A belief system is double edged; the values that keep a person a float in life are also a trap that blinds them from seeing the oppression they cause. A belief system centers us and provides moral and social guidance, political opinion and establishes our degree of tolerance. That same belief system is also the lens which prevents us from seeing others clearly. Belief is a trap that prevents us from seeing the harm and terror we do to others. So our belief system is both a trap and a boat and only when we see it as both can we step back and assess our actions. Absolute belief is like absolute power it is corrupting and always leads to some one getting killed. The metaphor is simple: belief is neither good nor bad. It has both positive and negative qualities. Belief both saves a person's life, gives their life context and meaning and it traps a person makes them into oppressors.

Max: Have many people refused to put their beliefs in a trap?

No! Its amazing. Hundreds of people have stopped to participate in the action, and no one, no matter how sacred their belief is, no one has not completed the act of putting their belief in a trap and placing it on the graphic pools. I am not sure what that means, but it is interesting.

Max: *You not only did public performances, but you did an installation of Pools of Belief in the rotunda at the Academia of Fine Arts in Poznan. How did the installation differ from the performance?*

The installation of the pools at the Academia in Poznan is meant to have a deeper and darker weight than the public performance I described. The 4 pools and traps trailing people's beliefs are placed on the floor of the gallery. On the walls are stenciled the words *Belief Boat Float Saved Belief Trapped Confined Death Belief* in English, Polish and German. There is a table in the gallery on which



Academy of Fine Arts, Poznan, Poland

are pens and narrow sheets of paper and tape so people can add their thoughts and beliefs to the installation. The gallery setting provides the audience time, space and quiet to consider their beliefs in a more thoughtful and in a less entertaining and active space than the public performance. I watched people read the work, read others' beliefs and contemplate the nature and meaning of the piece. They spent a good deal of time with the work.



National Museum, Poznan, Poland

Max: *What will happen to the Pools of Belief will you continue the project into the future?*

Yes, I envision the pools as a two-year project ending with an exhibition in Kansas City in March of 2007 at the Southern Graphics Council conference. As the piece is performed/shown over 2 years, the weight and complexity of the piece increases with the documentation and records of beliefs accumulated. Where the pools are placed in the landscape determines or changes the reaction of the audience. Placing the pools in front of a historical site like the Jewish Cemetery in Berlin Germany is much different that placing the pools in a mall in Colorado Springs. The Final exhibit will document these changes.

Thanks to Max Skorwider, Miroslaw Pawlowski, Krzstof Molena, Beauvais Lyons, and Maja Wolna.



Pools of Belief, Berlin, Germany



About the artist:

Born in Maryland in 1949, Hugh Merrill was raised in Washington, D.C., and Alabama. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore in 1973, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University School of Art and Architecture in 1975. Merrill has received numerous grants, including a Yaddo Society fellowship and a regional National Endowment for the Arts grant. Merrill's work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Harvard Museums, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, among others.

Merrill collaborated with artist Christian Boltanski on the community installation project "Our City Ourselves" at the Kemper Museum, Kansas City, Missouri in 1998. He has produced Percent-for-theArts and community arts projects nationally and internationally, including works in Dublin, Ireland; Havana, Cuba; Sydney, Australia; and Nairobi, Kenya. He is Professor at the Kansas City Art Institute and the Executive Director of Chameleon Arts and Youth Development, Kansas City, Missouri.

For more information, or to schedule a *Pools of Belief* art action, please contact:

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