

Projected and sculptural elements from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details)*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, 2004



Decorative, photographic and projected elements from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details)*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, 2004



The Expedition of Captain Tatarinova; 2004; Found objects, wood, styrofoam; 182 x 70 x 70 cm; Installation view from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details)*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, 2004



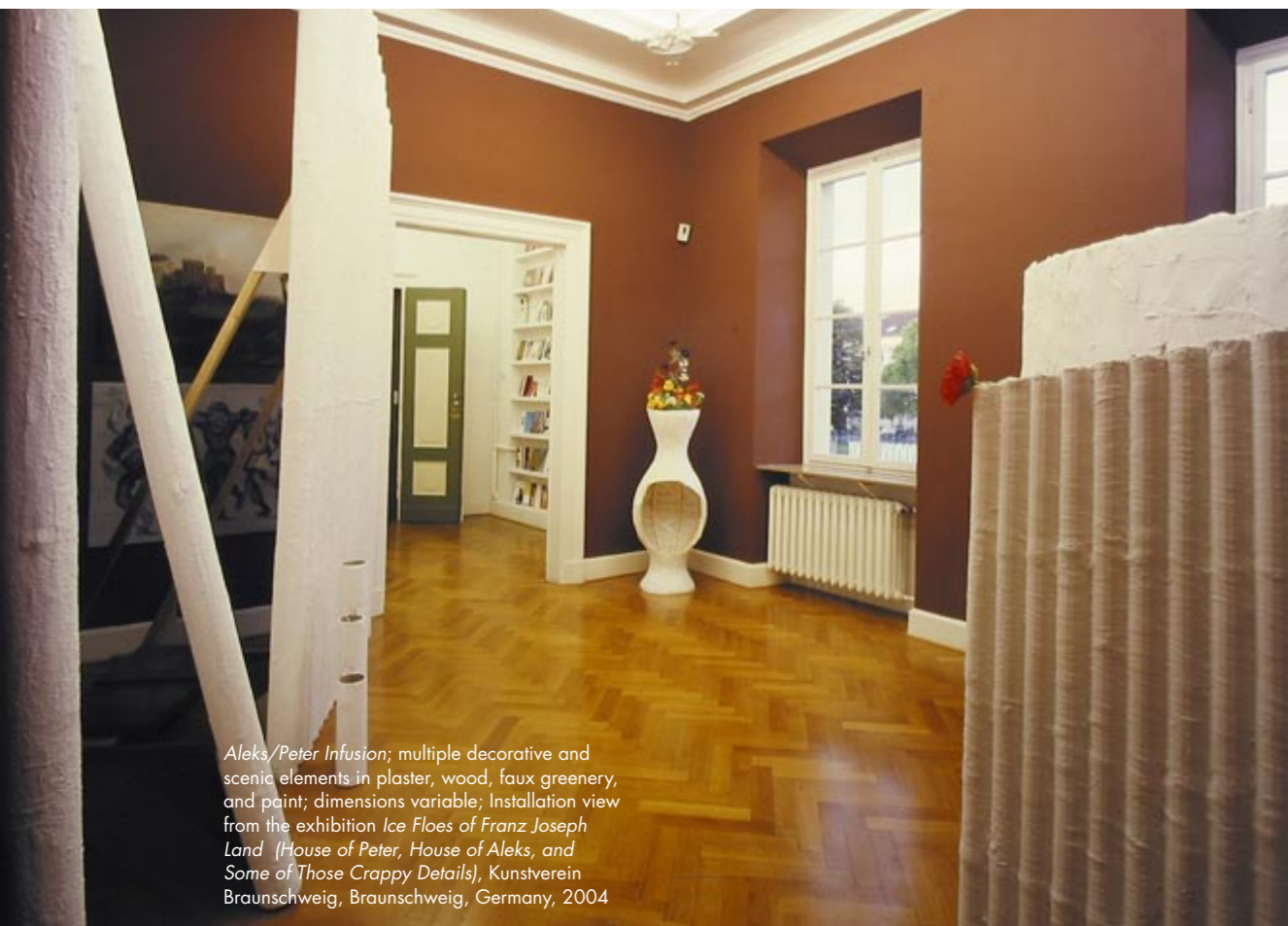
Projected, decorative, and scenic elements
from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph
Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some
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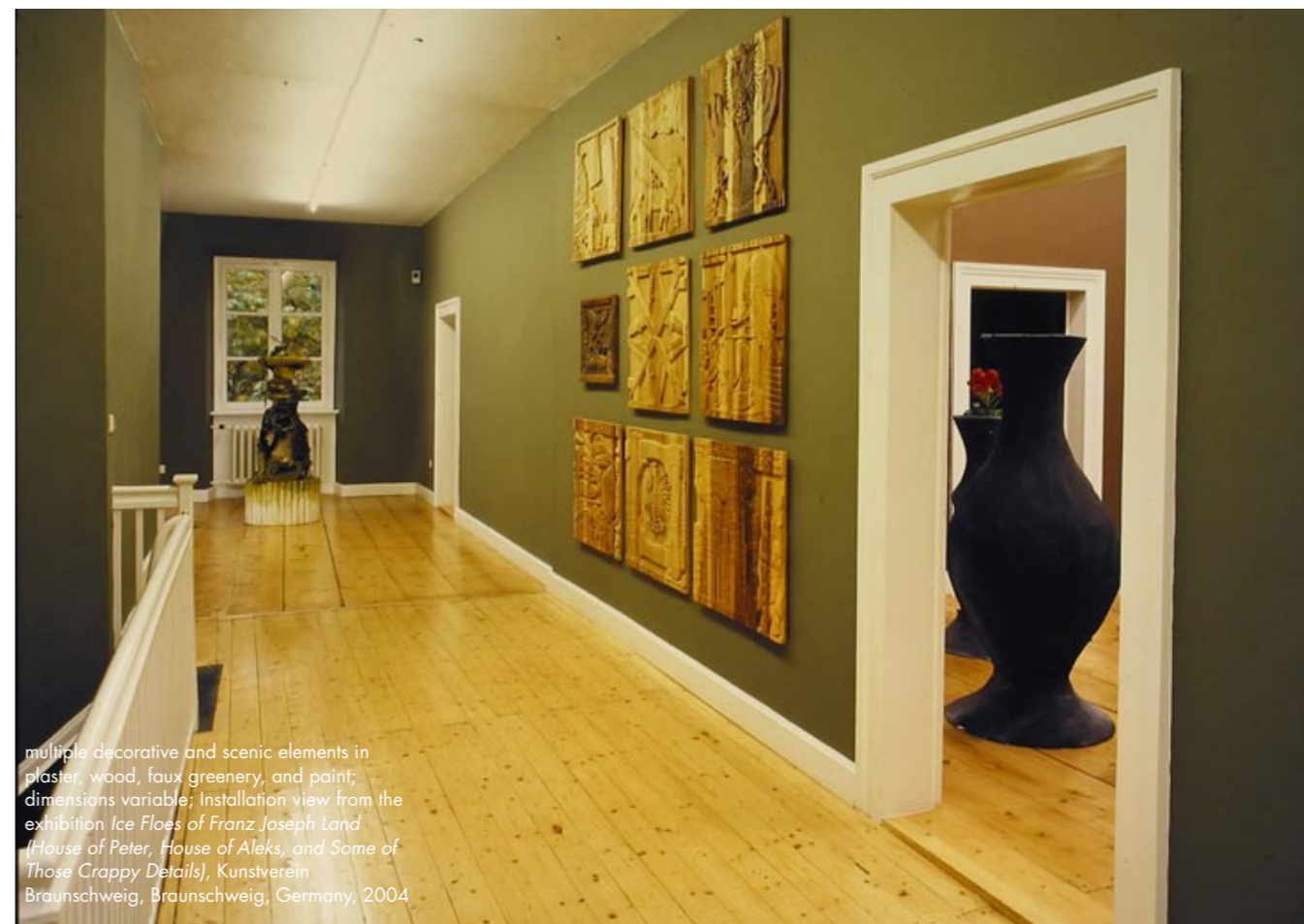
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Floor from the Ceiling of Peter's House #1, plaster; 10 x 220 x 182; Installation view from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details)*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, 2004



Aleks/Peter Infusion; multiple decorative and scenic elements in plaster, wood, faux greenery, and paint; dimensions variable; Installation view from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details)*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, 2004



multiple decorative and scenic elements in plaster, wood, faux greenery, and paint; dimensions variable; Installation view from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details)*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, 2004



Aleks Speech #1; plaster, wood; 254 x 110 x 110 cm; Installation view from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details)*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, 2004



9 Woodcuts by Aleksander Kowalczyk;
top row: 1. *Nowy Jork taka moda naszła. Gdy chcesz upolować błazna. Busz rakiet nie aluje. Powinien ustrzelić błazna.* (New York City. A new trend is originated. When u want to hunt for a jester. Bush doesn't spare the missiles. He should shoot the jester) 2. *Na zbrojenia pieni dze si wydaje. Ludzie cierpi a dzieci z głodu umieraj .* (Financial resources are used for armaments. People continue suffering, children die of starvation.) 3. *Za wierność ojczyźnie.* (For faithfulness to motherland.);
middle row: 4. *Powstanie Warszawskie 1944* (Warsaw Uprising 1944) 5. *Historia ataku na Nowy Jork i Pentagon.* (The story of attacks on New York City and the Pentagon. No one will ever forgive you what happened.) 6. *W Iraku otoczenie si zmienia. Trzecia Wojna wiatowa. Cierpienie i ból pozostan na zawsze.* (Surroundings keep changing in Iraq. World War Three. Agony and pain will remain forever.);
bottom row: 7. *Dlaczego przyczyniasz si do wojny wiatowej i do wyniszczenia ludzko ci?* (Why do you contribute to global wars and genocide?) 8. *Zostajmy wierni.* (Lets remain faithful.) 9. *Człowiek człowiekowi zgotował los. Brak zabezpieczenia. Niewinni ludzie gin . Wtorek 11 IX 2001. Wojna z terroryzmem.* (Man forged another man's fate. Lack of security. Innocent people are dying. Tuesday, September 11th 2001. War on terror.)



Floor from the Ceiling of Peter's House #2;
plaster; 10 x 216 x 211 cm; Installation view
from the exhibition *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*
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Decorative and projected elements from the
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ACCORDING TO THE GOOD WISHES OF THE TLAXCALAN PEOPLE, CORTEZ SET OUT ON AN EXHIBITION

Catherine Sullivan

While the precipitating event for *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* was the 2002 Chechen hostage crisis in Moscow, the piece is in no way concerned with its representation or with the fast kill—notions of the spectacle as they relate to terrorism as a mediated form of political address. Also not on the agenda is a neo-Brechtian foregrounding of theatre itself as a metaphor for the presentational excesses terrorism generates. Destruction aimed at the surpluses of the antagonists “way of life” and the symbolic regimes they hold valuable are always the target of a mutual agitation. Particular to this event is the vast spectrum of trauma existent even prior to the hostage crisis, my interest is more in the slow kill—forms of erasure and arbitrariness—some of the extenuating circumstances of any assimilating regime.

My interest in the event began with the musical playing on the stage at the time of the attack—*Nord-Ost*. Billed as “Moscow’s first daily running musical,” the buzz surrounding *Nord-Ost* was that it would be a production of the same size and scope as American and British musicals such as *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Miss Saigon*. It would be a “Broadway spectacle with Russian soul.” Its significance was bolstered by items such as “facts about the musical” one could find on its web site such as, “fact: the first two tickets for *Nord-Ost* were purchased by a couple in the US!” While the musical’s narrative itself supports some notion of a Russian national identity, the nature of the promotional language surrounding it affirms notions of quality in entertainment as Western.

Nord-Ost is based on a novel written by Veniamin Kaverin, *Two Captains*, book one of which was published in the USSR in 1940, book two in 1945. It is a love and adventure story based on the real life search for a lost expedition in the Russian Arctic. Set against historical events such as the Bolshevik Revolution and World War II, the novel details the lives of pilot Sanya Grigoryev and his life-long love Katya Tatarinova, and the development of polar aviation in Russia. Ultimately it is a patriotic novel for teenage boys wherein the personal sensations of adventure and discovery are infused with details of Russian history. Sanya and Katya are obsessed with exploration, the details of which are the sublimation of their romance, and one can see why a popular musical with an expansionist pathology might be of symbolic importance to the Chechens. If one believes that the Chechen militants were aware of both the content of the musical as well as the aspirations of its producers two targets appear between the cross-hair—the sensibilities of both Eastern and Western leisure classes. To what degree the Chechens took aim specifically at this is unclear. To me, the reverberations were particularly strong given the use not only of the Moscow theatre, a place of public identification and assembly for the “Russian soul”, but the use of this particular musical, one which itself was already a product of a broader cultural regimentation and assimilation, the arbitrary quality associated with “Broadway spectacle.”



Three views of the original (then lost) shooting location for *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*, Morton Grove, Illinois



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; Theaterinis play their theatre; 35 mm production still

The project itself is hopelessly immersed in and confounded by the painful trajectories suggested by the event, what is elusive about them as opposed to what is directly consequential. The strategy (of course defined as such after the fact) was to animate these trajectories by regarding them as a series of continuums on which I could plot basic dramatic elements like character, action, setting, and reference which would shift in relation to one another, and ultimately never remain under my total control. Early on, my view of the situation was somewhat romantic—what took place on the stage in Moscow was the confrontation between the idealisms of one contingency which had formulated the oppressive realisms for the antagonizing other.

> *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*; Sanya encounters dead Stanislav girl. (Pantomime 8/F); performers: Nicole Wiesner, Carolyn Shoemaker, Alva Loomis, Valentine Mielli; 35 mm production still



>> *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*; Sanya stands up to a mean gang of boys. (Pantomime 2/F); performers: Wesley Walker, Michael Garvey, Kacper Skowron, Circus Szalewski; 35 mm production still



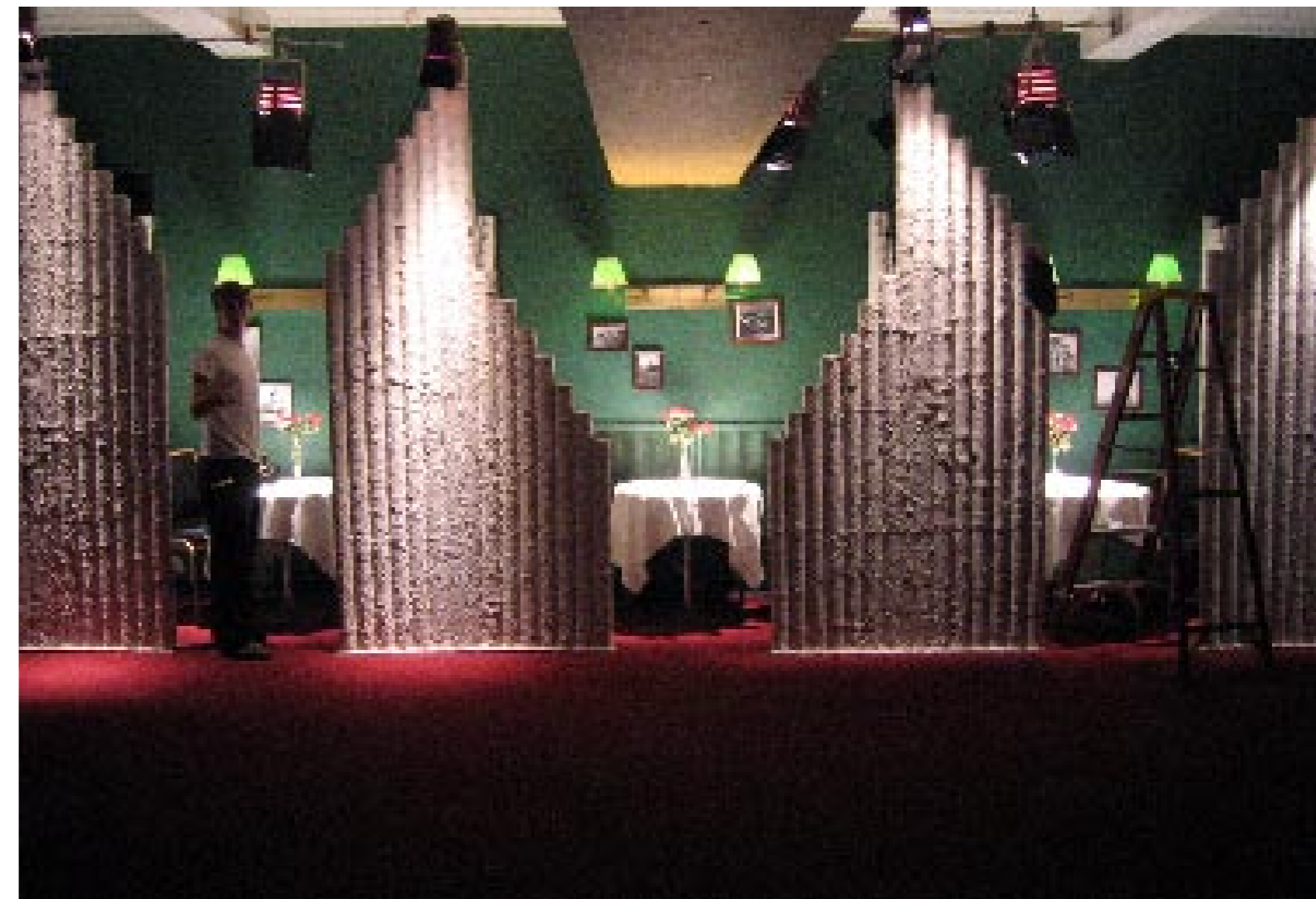
I soon realized that this was a kind of expression of Chinoiserie toward the milieu of the terrorist who is no less idealistic. I became interested in the more uncomfortable aspects of the project such as the impossibility of my own objectivity, and so consciously invented a kind of white on white Chinoiserie to color my view onto the icy landscape of the Russian novel, *Two Captains*, (my working substrate) and the East as a timeless mise-en-scène, where past, present, and future remain hopelessly confused. In working with the novel, I fixated on both major and minor details hoping this would give my summation an effect analogous to the popular musical which relies on conventions that are often arbitrary and ridiculous. Conventions which perhaps have some underlying rationale, but have achieved substance mainly through the force of repetition. The *Nord-Ost* producers' aspirations for the musical and my own projections onto the novel are read through one another in what is hopefully a continuum of otherness and exchange. This forms the basis of much of the painful arbitrariness which circulates throughout the piece.

Convention makes work go smoothly at the factory. Musical theatre is a brutal regime. Forcing a relationship between a reduced and generalizing form of expression, pantomime, onto another, the novel, which aspires to psychological complexity, subtlety, and nuance was another blunt choice in constructing the piece. The ten parts of the novel were reduced to a series of roughly 50 pantomimed vignettes, both emblematic of its heroics (Pantomime Part 2/E "Sanya reads, learns, and dreams") as well as idiosyncratic (Pantomime Part 6/G "Katya's roommate's mother drives her mad with her nonstop talking"). The resulting re-construction of the novel through the pantomimes was aberrant and arbitrary, and the 21 performers who signed on for *Ice Floes* were given the thankless task of mechanizing, learning, and executing them as if they were the oldest and most prestigious theatre ensemble in Russia. Which one? Who knew. The Polish, Bulgarian, and American performers had different interpretations about what this meant, and the historical dimension of what would constitute the performance style of the work would ultimately be a matter of lack detail supplemented by projection, imagination, and regimentation.

Some of the pantomimes involve one character (Pantomime Part 7/A "Katya busies herself with her geological work") others several characters (Pantomime Part 2/A "Sanya takes a blood oath with his friend Petya, they run away to Turkestan, they march with the other waifs and strays.") However, each actor learned all the roles within each pantomime, and the pantomimes themselves are presented as both en-masse choreographies and individual solos. The form of each pantomime was learned in exactly the same way: in large ensemble numbers, the individuals are assimilated mindlessly into the whole; and conversely in solo numbers asked to be the isolated representatives of it. Aberrations in execution are part of the struggle evident throughout.

In the end, the pantomimes do not serve the details of the novel; they are largely dissolved into the bodies of the actors. It is in the costumes, however, that the mise-en-scène of *Two Captains* emerges as a series of roughly 100 archetypes or costume clichés and as the multiple manifestations of Sanya and Katya depicted throughout the course of the novel. For example, the character Katya is seen as a young girl, a sophisticated geologist, digging trenches in Leningrad, and as starving after the siege, but she is manifest through several actresses and

Partial view of shooting location – the downstairs cantina at the Polish Army Veterans Association of America, Chicago, Illinois; Decorative elements by Aleksander Kowalczyk





Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; Sanya's sister dies of pneumonia during the birth of her child. (Pantomime 7/F); performer: Democco Atcher; 35 mm production still

several costumes and at times all in the same scene. Different actors wear the same costume in different scenes, the archetypes are informed by the unique physical interpretation of different actors. Some costumes are refined, some are degraded and incomplete. Each actor wears a variety of costumes bearing no relationship to the pantomime he might be performing at any given time. An alternate set of archetypes unified loosely by modern dress and ad-hoc martial motifs are seen interrupting, coerced into participating, or passing within the action. These "insurgents" do not embody or represent an identifiable ideology, they are simply operating through another set of codes inconsistent with that of the dominant iconography of *Two Captains*.

All of the interior scenes for *Ice Floes* were shot at the Polish American Army Veterans Association (P.A.V.A.) in Chicago, Illinois, a kind of multi-purpose social hall with a series of adjacent rooms (downstairs bar, classroom, kitchen, dressing rooms, bookshop), used mainly by the Polish-American community for various social events and teaching of Poland's military history. The interior is replete with a compelling combination of nationalistic regalia, military photographs and portraits, and original artworks by local Polish artists from Chicago. Of particular significance are a series of carvings by Alex Kowalczuk depicting a variety of social and political subjects such as terrorism, the Catholic church, and the Polish situation throughout the 20th century primarily under Soviet and German domination. In the portrait room is a particularly impressive display of small Plexiglas vitrines, which house objects such as a resin cast of a broken hammer and sickle nestled within a mound of small clay skulls. Repetitive decorative motifs are found throughout the building, such as the stucco-covered fixtures arrayed in cascading geometries, and strange plaster vases and fountains. The film presents the location as it exists, the only addition was a representation from *Two Captains* of the shipwreck of Captain Tatarinov which is placed on the stage in the ballroom. The secondary locations are the parking lot of an abandoned nightclub, Moscow Nights, in a suburb of Chicago, and a cornfield further in the suburbs. Both outdoor locations are situated next to large generic industrial buildings.

It was my hope that multiple elements would animate one another to such a degree that many objects of consideration could be generated in each shot. The location depicts historical events in both a nationalistic and idealistic way, but it is a war memorial and so the numerous representations of death somehow strangely subvert the heroic grandeur. The idealistic iconography of the *Two Captains* novel and the exotic image of the young terrorist are mirrored off the iconography of the Polish Army Veterans Association, but because the latter iconography also bears out the painful consequences of idealism, I hope that neither the overtly stylized theatrical action nor the details of the location are absorbed into a pure fiction. The interiors are treated with contrasting lighting aesthetics, one that is flat and uneventful and somewhat neo-realistic, the other high contrast, somewhat film-noir. I associate these two cinematic movements with a kind of cold war era paranoia. The shots in *Ice Floes* are often staged to transition from one lighting condition to another without cutting, creat-



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; Katya waits, sighs and thinks of Sanya (Pantomime 6/F) Sanya reads, learns and dreams. (Pantomime 2/E); performs: Bart Sadkowski, Juliusz Dobiesz, Bob Wilson; 35 mm production still



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; Sanya fishes for blue crabs in the river Peschinka. (Pantomime 1/A); performs: Nickolai Todorov, George Ducker; 35 mm production still

Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; Sanya reads, learns, and dreams. (Pantomime 2/E); performer: Circus Szalewski; 35 mm prod. still

ing an effect which loads and unloads light onto the subjects in unbroken sequences of time. In one shot light can lend and borrow theatrical magic from the pantomimes, but the actors must maintain their conviction to them regardless of their supporting circumstances.

It is ultimately the mutation, recombination, and ongoing interface between action (pantomime), setting, and character that is the narrative "progress" of *Ice Floes*. The attempt was to distribute as much of the action throughout as much of the location as possible using as much recombination of the elements as my resources would allow. Pantomimes are repeated throughout the interior, in arbitrary and automated recombination, forcing themselves into a variety of compositions upon a variety of costume archetypes and performers.





Ice Floss of Franz Joseph Land; Metropolese Lady and Military Nurse walk with cabbages, Vagabond waits for Metropolese Male; performers: Beata Pilch, Carolyn Shoemaker, Valentine Mielli, Tim Beamish; 35 mm prod. still



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land;
Multiple pantomimes parts 1 through 10;
35 mm production still



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; Katya digs
trenches in Leningrad. (Pantomime 7/1);
performer: John Kahara; 35 mm production still

They are treated and forced toward ongoing mutation, and this is the experience of narrative time the piece proposes. The mechanized pantomimes played in large ensemble scenes repeat themselves in intimate spaces imposing the cruelty of the unquestioning collective onto the solitary individual. The pantomime “Sanya’s pregnant sister dies in childbirth,” when played as a large ensemble with 21 performers lying on the floor miming “pregnant” bellies and groaning in pain, signifies a kind of empathy. The same pantomime played in the noirishly lit classroom by a singular male actor invokes both the indoctrination and cruel humiliation inherent in the arbitrariness of the pantomime itself and the empathy it selfishly demands. An unmotivated camera passes through room after room of recombined elements, suggesting that the idealizing regime of *Two Captains* could mutate into



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; Beautiful bride
Katya and variable pantomimes parts 1 through
10 – Metropolese Scene; performer: Nicole
Wiesner; 35 mm production still



Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land; En masse
pantomimes parts 6 through 8; 35 mm prod. still

a mindless infinity. Within arbitrariness itself there lies a brutality whose only logic is a repetition which becomes increasingly more painful with every recombination.

In building the sequence of shots, parables formed as pantomimes were linked together, strange epiphanies and eerie reminiscences were generated through certain combinations and accumulations of action and setting. The pantomime “Sanya drinks red wine, white wine, then red wine at the officer’s club on his base,” depicts the ensemble drinking from their mimed wine glasses, becoming sad, then passing out in their chairs. When staged into the portrait room at the Polish Army Veteran’s Association, with its morbid decor, the pantomime generates connotations outside its originating content, but not unrelated to it. The frequency of the recombinations presents the actors with a regime they are constantly called upon to embody, no matter how ridiculous it becomes. If the piece itself has a kind of spatial circumference, the scenes at Moscow Nights and the cornfield are its outer edge. Here, the ensemble is introduced to a new theatrical backdrop, one that provides no support for the conviction with which they execute their action, and it is here that the regimes concocted by the work are articulated at their most arbitrary and thus most brutal.

When I began work on *Ice Floes*, I knew that the presentations that would work best for the piece would be those that allowed additional spatial articulation. The most successful to date has been the installation at Kunstverein Braunschweig in Germany. The interior architecture of the Kunstverein, a 19th century neo classical villa was yet another loaded setting. Unique to this installation was the consideration of two decorative regimes, one referencing the interior decor conceived for the Polish Army Veterans Association by Alex Kowal-zuk, and the other, the interior of the Kunstverein Braunschweig as conceived by its former owner Peter Joseph Krahe. Motifs from the P. A.V.A. and its idiosyncratic and ad-hoc ceremoniousness have been abstracted from the setting and reconstructed as a series of discrete structures, and are then staged inside the Haus Salve Hospes. Although the “neo-classical” finds itself in both settings, it is in a very different way, and the result is that the interiors have something in common and nothing in common.

In the sense that the films begin with the novel *Two Captains* and its projection into the decor of the P.A.V.A., so is the decor of the P. A.V.A, projected into the Kunstverein Braunschweig, and, like the actors who play the characters in the films, it is assimilated or not into its most recent setting. I hope this can be seen as a series of transpositions—from historical event (the 2002 Moscow crisis), to the musical *Nord-Ost*, to the novel *Two Captains*, to the interior of the P.A.V.A., to the interior of the Haus Salve Hospes. Each transposition loads the piece with additional references, inferences, suggestions, and ultimately consequences through which to read its themes. Each transposition moves the piece into the present tense through spaces that are very much conditioned by the past. This movement forward—the piece’s “progress”—forces issues of relationality and assimilation, and ultimately the experience of history as a baroque and theatrical construct.