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Superstar among curators

VIENNA

Polish-born director of Basel institution wins over artists and critics

BY GINANNE BROWNELL

Adam Szymczyk was more than an hour late for his opening. The Galerie Nacht St. Stephan in Vienna was hosting an exhibition he had curated, on the Romanian-born, Berlin-based conceptual artist Daniel Knorr.

Mr. Szymczyk mumbled his excuses as he was handed a glass of champagne. In fairness, it was not entirely his fault that he was delayed for the show, part of the "East by Southwest" program of exhibitions focused on artists — and curators — from central and eastern Europe that is taking place in 21 galleries across Vienna until Saturday. Mr. Szymczyk, the Polish-born director and chief curator of the Kunsthalle Basel, had tried to fit in a few of the other openings that evening. But at almost every turn artists, fellow curators, critics and contemporary art enthusiasts came up to him, seeking his opinion on the art being showcased.

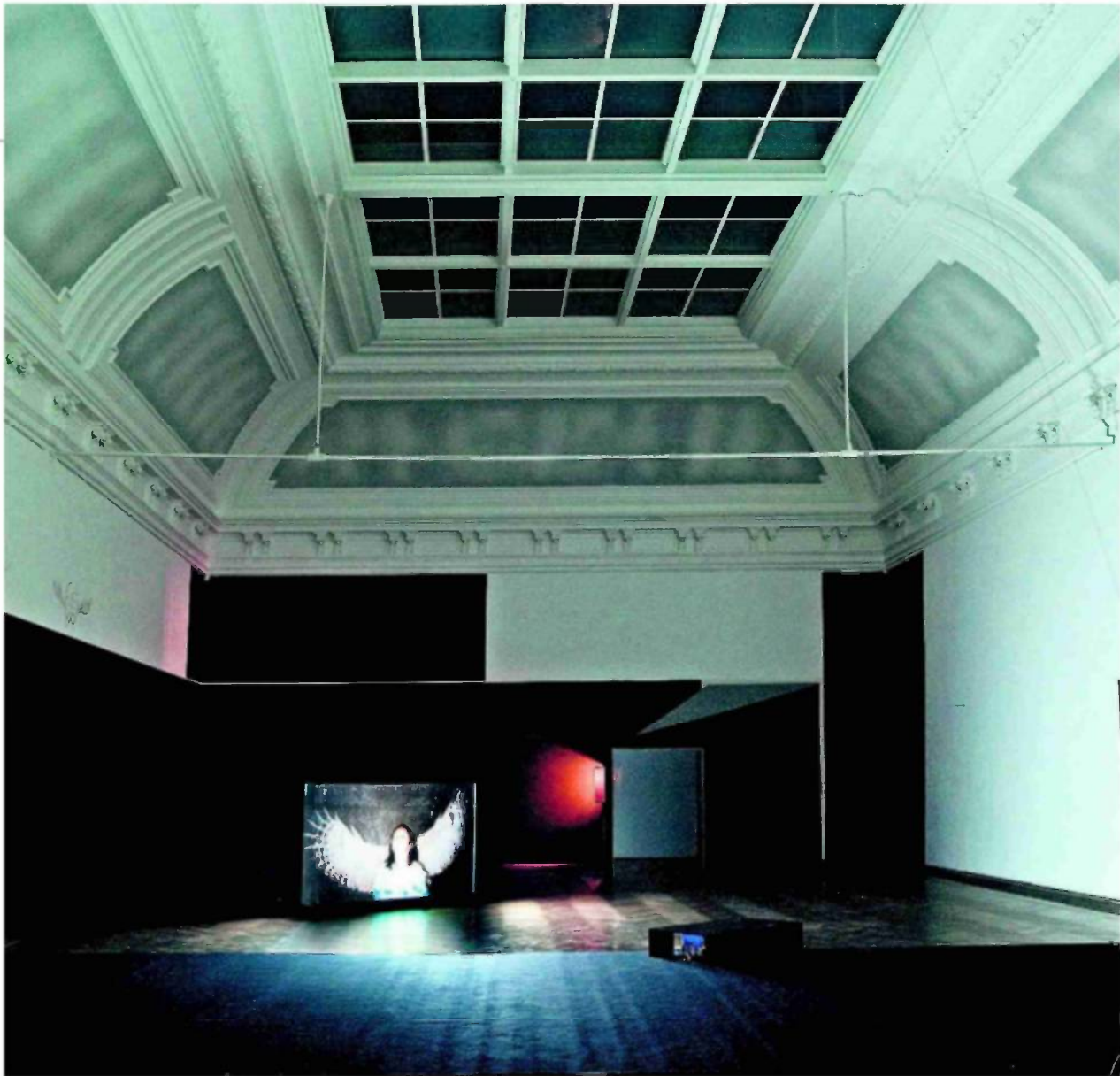
If the reaction in Vienna is anything to go by, Mr. Szymczyk, 40, is something of a curatorial rock star these days. Not only does he look and act the part — he is incredibly thin and tall with shaggy blond hair and has an aura of cool aloofness — but his reputation for being avant-garde in his approach to contemporary art has helped him become a sought-after curator.

Since taking over as director at Kunsthalle Basel in 2003, he has put together several important exhibitions, including the recent solo show of the South Korean artist Sung Hwan Kim and the first-ever comprehensive exhibition in Europe of the late American artist Lee Lozano. He was selected to co-curate the 2008 Berlin Biennale (with Elena Filipovic) and has helped organize shows in Europe including in Rome at the Keats-Shelley House and Istituto Svizzero, in Hamburg at Kunstverein and in Gothenburg, Sweden, at the Konstmuseum.

The latest feather in his curatorial cap came last month, when the Menil Foundation in Houston gave him the Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Achievement. The \$15,000 award celebrates mid-career curators.

What made Mr. Szymczyk stand out, according to Iwona Blazwick, who served on the selection committee and is the director of the Whitechapel Gallery in London, was his championing of unknown artists. "This award is to support not the sort of people who have established museum profiles but to look at people who are experimental, who are giving artists their first big chance, which is quite risk taking and pioneering," Ms. Blazwick said. "I think all of these words would describe Adam because if you go to the Kunsthalle Basel you are always sure of a big surprise, that is his hallmark."

The Kunsthalle Basel, founded in 1872, has built a strong international reputation for championing cutting edge contemporary art. When the director posi-



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tion opened in 2003 the board of the Kunstverein Basel (Art Association of Basel), which runs the Kunsthalle Basel, made a concerted effort to look for a younger curator, someone "who would have a new look on contemporary art," said Peter Handschin, who served as president of the Kunstverein Basel from 2003-9. "He is like an artist himself so this is why his exhibitions are totally different than what you see in other institutions."

Mr. Szymczyk, in turn, is interested in introducing younger artists — or artists who are not well-known in the public sphere. For example, Thea Djordjadze's "Endless Enclosure" (2009), the first solo exhibition of her work in Switzerland, garnered much attention for her sculpted pieces, which challenged visitors to reinterpret spatial relations. And a current show, "How to Work (More For) Less" (running until Aug. 21) is a continuation of an exhibition held last year entitled "How to Work" that explored the change (in terms of materials and overall expectations) in how contemporary artists work.

"He is able to identify what is happen-

"You have a feeling that you are participating in the same adventure, that you are creating something together."

ing in the zeitgeist," said Ms. Blazwick of Mr. Szymczyk's choices, "to have his finger on the pulse and create the intellectual framework within which to understand it."

Mr. Szymczyk said he sees his role of curator as someone who can create opportunities for artists who would not otherwise have the chance to make a show on such a grand scale. "I prefer to invite artists who bring their ideas into the Kunsthalle and I help them develop and materialize those ideas," he said. "It's an experiment because you do not know what the outcome will be."

That hallmark of promoting the unknown and untested has been a strong thread throughout Mr. Szymczyk's career, possibly because of his background. "Though art from Eastern Europe was not invisible during the

Cold War, it was not seen with the depth and acknowledgement that it is now," said Ms. Blazwick. "Adam must be credited for being a part of that."

Mr. Szymczyk was born in the small Polish city of Piotrków Trybunalski in 1970, and his family moved to Lodz when he was 4. The city's Muzeum Sztuki (Museum of Art) is one of the oldest modern art museums in the world and a place Szymczyk frequented as a teenager. When he was 15, Hans Richter's book, "Dada: Art and Anti-Art" proved to be a seminal influence on him. "Dadaism was a new notion to me because before that, I understood art was about beautiful painting, the Sistine Chapel," said Mr. Szymczyk. "I was into new wave and punk music and this book was all that, it had this rebellious attitude but it was expressed in a different way."

It was while he was an art history student at the University of Warsaw that he started to hang out at Foksal Gallery, a non-commercial art space that had a strong history in avant-garde art traditions, having been set up in 1966 by artists including Tadeusz Kantor and

Edward Krasinski.

In 1991 Mr. Szymczyk was chosen as a curatorial intern on the exhibition "The Wealth of Nations" at Warsaw's Center for Contemporary Art. His job involved helping one artist organize a project that included analyzing the chemical ingredients and microbiological profile of holy water from the pilgrimage town of Czestochowa to determine if it was different from regular water. "It was the first time I was confronted with the machinery of a big exhibition and an artist, who was making new work," said Mr. Szymczyk.

After completing a curatorial training program at De Appel arts center in Amsterdam, Mr. Szymczyk returned to Warsaw and along with two university friends, Andrzej Przywara and Joanna Mytkowska — as well as the then director of the Foksal Gallery, Wieslaw Borowski — set up the Foksal Gallery Foundation (FGF) in an effort to promote, research and fund Polish contemporary art. The foundation began participating in international art fairs including Art Forum Berlin and Liste, showing works by Polish artists like Pawel Althamer, Wilhelm Sasnal and Edward Krasinski. (Foksal Gallery and FGF went their separate ways in 2001.)

It was at Liste that Mr. Szymczyk first made an impression on the Kunstverein Basel and in 2003 he applied for the director vacancy at Kunsthalle Basel.

The curator's next major project is a show that will open Aug. 27 at the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City looking at how history is constantly being reinterpreted. "I am always interested in new challenges and developing new projects in parallel to my daily work in Basel," said Mr. Szymczyk in an e-mail after the opening in Vienna.

Whatever the project, his relationship with the artist and audience becomes paramount. "He totally integrates the artist into the space and wants to get the best out of them," Mr. Handschin said. "But he also does the same with visitors, so they are not just passing through looking from one art piece to another."

Nairy Baghramian, a Berlin-based artist, says that is the best part of working with him. "He is searching for a gentle dialogue between the artist and the curator," she said. "Working with Adam, the ground under your feet is never secure. He produces a healthy little gray cloud of doubt."

The Warsaw artist Monika Sosnowska agrees. "Working with Adam is a very special thing because it is more like a partnership," she said. "You have a feeling that you are participating in the same adventure, that you are creating something together and I think this is perfect."

Adam Szymczyk, above, director of the Kunsthalle Basel, bottom left. Since taking the reins there in 2003, he has put together important shows, including a solo exhibition of the South Korean artist Sung Hwan Kim, top left. This month he is involved in the "East by Southwest" program in Vienna, which is focused on central and eastern Europe.



HILDEGARD SPIELHOFER