



## Wilhelm Sasnal/MATRIX 219

November 20, 2005 – February 27, 2006

**University of California  
Berkeley Art Museum**

MATRIX

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In the summer of 2003, I traveled to Poland with four other museum curators as guests of the Polish Cultural Institute and ArtsLink. It was a research trip that offered access to hundreds of artists, many of whom we met and heard speak directly about their work. Soon Polish artists appeared in *The American Effect*, the 2004 Carnegie International, and in residencies at the Headlands Center for the Arts. Paintings by Wilhelm Sasnal appeared on the covers of *Frieze* and *Artforum*. Critics and collectors wrote and talked about him, always as a painter.

My introduction to Sasnal's work came in a condemned building located on the grounds of a hospital for the elderly. Tipped off to Sasnal by a Berkeley collector whose taste I admire, I asked the two young artist/dealers who founded *Raster* magazine and then Gallery Raster to show us what they had. Our group watched three or four 16mm films and was shown a comic-style book that came with an audiocassette tape. We saw a few odd paintings, on the basis of which I invited Sasnal to participate in the MATRIX exhibition *Some forgotten place*, a group show of eight artists from around the globe who are re-imagining the landscape through painting, in the fall of 2004. When Sasnal arrived in Berkeley for the opening of *Some forgotten place*, we talked about the attention his painting had been attracting, and discussed the real diversity of his practice. I invited him to come back to Berkeley in 2005 to present his first one-person museum exhibition in America, and requested that he not do a painting exhibition but instead show film and work in other media.

Sasnal felt very comfortable in Berkeley and was surprised by this reaction. In September 2004, anti-American sentiment was keen in Europe and around the world; President Bush and the policies of his administration were reviled in Poland. After a week with us, Sasnal shared his realization of the diversity of American identities and thought. And, like many other MATRIX artists visiting Berkeley, he shopped for books on Telegraph Avenue. There he discovered and purchased *The River* by Pare Lorentz, a 1938 book based on a film that has become the subject of his solo MATRIX exhibition.

In the 1930s the United States government sponsored photography, radio, and eventually film projects to document the effects of the New Deal. Under the direction of the Resettlement Administration, the films were intended to get a message to the widest possible public. *The River* was Lorentz's second film for the Administration. It told the story of the great rivers of the American continent, and in particular the Mississippi and the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority, created in 1933 to establish flood control and build dams. Lorentz employed the documentary format in a revolutionary way and inspired others to use film to transmit social and political messages.

Lorentz's images evoked a simpler, more successful American past, and his films conveyed a belief that by reclaiming the best aspects of the past,



Americans could “bring themselves out of the malaise into which they were floundering.”<sup>1</sup> Sasnal's choice of this work must be seen as a political comment on the current state of America. The subject is remarkably prescient. *The River* had its world premiere in New Orleans. Lorentz shot footage of the great flood of 1937, and referred to its consequences in the narrative:

*Food and water needed at Louisville: 500 dead,*

*5000 ill;*

*Food and water needed at Cincinnati;*

*Food and water and shelter and clothing*

*Needed for 750,000 flood victims;*

Think New Orleans, Biloxi, and many other towns in fall of 2005. Needed: food, water, shelter, and clothing.

Lorentz wrote the free-verse script for *The River*, which was compared by critics to the work of Walt Whitman and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1938. He also collaborated on the score, composed by Virgil Thomson based on American folk themes combined with Thomson's own compositions and influences from George Gershwin and William Walker. The film won the Venice Film Festival award for Best Documentary in 1938 (beating out, among others, Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympiad*).

For his MATRIX work, Sasnal is filming the images in the book page by page. Bay Area bands provide the soundtrack, using the text from the book as lyrics—though, with each band making a different song, the film will not necessarily present the lyrics in their original order. The effect is at once homespun and contemporary. Sasnal is also creating a series of ink drawings that, in both size and content, will function as posters for the film.

Sasnal's film is an interesting historical twist on the original. In his introduction to *The River*, Lorentz indicates that the text is taken verbatim from the film, and that the photographs are primarily from the film or taken

COVER: *Untitled (Gershwin)*, 2005; ink on paper; 26 x 19 in.; collection of Stephanie & John Rubeli, Los Angeles; courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

*Smuggling (day)*, 2005; ink on paper; 84 x 126 in.; collection of Rubell Family Collection, Miami; courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



by government cameramen working in the same areas in which Lorentz's crew filmed. Sasnal's film of the book includes the cover as well as the jacket sleeves, preface, and title page. It is literally a film of a book of a film, yet one whose visual qualities differ significantly from the original.

Transforming iconic images from another culture into a different visual art form links Sasnal to other international artists, including the Brazilian Vik Muniz and American Doug Aitken. In one of his earliest series, *Best of Life*, Muniz drew from memory photographs from *Life* magazine (the Saigon execution, John F. Kennedy Jr. saluting his father's draped coffin), and then photographed the drawings. Much like Sasnal's effort, Doug Aitken, in his multi-screen video installation *Into the Sun*, captured in static form—photography—fast-paced Bollywood filmmaking with thousands of images that he then reanimated by shooting them on video.

Sasnal's film repertoire is not nearly as extensive as his paintings. His earliest film, *Untitled (Encyclopedia)* (1998/2003), is a visual antecedent for his MATRIX work in being a series of quickly edited images shot straight from an encyclopedia. *Untitled (Chicago)* is shot from an elevated train: buildings, people, and environment speed by and, together with the soundtrack, evoke an authentic sense of place—seemingly unedited and unfiltered. *Untitled (Touch me)* begins with a standard urban landscape of buildings and streets. Then a swirling form of black ink descends from the top like poison gas, the aftereffects of fireworks falling to earth, or the imaginary “sparks” of an idea. The ink mutates into various psychedelic forms. *Untitled (Revolution)* sets two silhouetted figures against a barely perceptible, abstracted landscape. As they near each other and begin an extended kiss, their shapes distort into simple forms. Next, paint pours down the screen, evoking the gestures and compositions of Morris Louis. Sasnal's films are spare and decisive. Like his paintings, they are pared

*Untitled*, 2004 (detail); oil on canvas; 21 3/4 x 15 3/4 in.; courtesy of the artist.



down to essentials, revealing only what Sasnal wants the viewer to watch and hear. They feel serious, self-aware, and melancholic.

Unlike his films, which are stylistically cohesive, Sasnal's paintings can be so aesthetically varied the viewer might attribute them to different artists. But inherent in his "everystyle"<sup>2</sup> is an authorial sensibility that reflects his political, moral, and aesthetic response to reality. His subjects often appear isolated and seem to exist in some respects as formal exercises, playing with the conventions of representation and using perspective and focus to disrupt our expectations. He works with a reduced language of color and shape, retaining only essential elements like light and shadow,<sup>3</sup> and toys with the notion of duality that is basic to abstraction.

Drawing on a broad range of historical sources and aesthetic styles, in all of these works Sasnal is highlighting inconsistencies—in political philosophies, in a range of popular cultural issues—and questioning the truth in what is presented. Central to his practice is the idea that "little can be done to render something faithfully and accurately."<sup>4</sup>

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson  
Former Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator  
Director and Chief Curator, Aspen Art Museum

Wilhelm Sasnal was born in Tarnow, Poland, in 1972. He studied architecture from 1992 to 1994 and painting from 1994 to 1999 at the Academy of Fine Arts, Krakow. He currently lives and works in Tarnow.

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2005  
Anton Kern Gallery, New York  
2004  
*The Band*, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich  
Camden Art Center, London  
*Zawa Srad*, Galerie Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne, Munich  
2003  
Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, Germany  
Kunsthalle Zurich, Zurich  
*3 o'clock road block*, Sadie Coles HQ, London  
*T-ow*, Anton Kern Gallery, New York  
MUHKA, Antwerp  
*Wisla*, Sommer Contemporary Arts, Tel Aviv  
2002  
PHD, Galerie Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne  
*Show on your hands—Look—Come closer*, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw  
Parel, Amsterdam  
2001  
*Cars and Men*, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw  
*Everyday Life in Poland between 1999 and 2000*, Galeria Raster, Warsaw

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

2005  
*Material Time/Work Time/Life Time*, Reykjavik Arts Festival, Reykjavik, Iceland  
2004  
*Time and again*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
2003  
*Hidden in a Daylight*, Cieszyn, Poland

*Untitled*, 2005 [detail]; oil on canvas; 19 3/4 x 15 3/4 in.; courtesy of the artist.

2002  
*Painting on the move*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel  
*Pause*, 4th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju, South Korea  
*Urgent Painting*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris  
2001  
1st Tirana Biennial, Tirana, Albania  
*Bureaucracy*, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw  
*In Between*, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago

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*Moscice*, 2005 [detail]; oil on canvas; 75 x 59 in.; courtesy of the artist.

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[www.PolishCulture-NYC.org](http://www.PolishCulture-NYC.org)

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*Cotton*, 2005 [detail]; oil on canvas; 27 1/2 x 21 3/4 in.; courtesy of the artist.

*Untitled*, 2005; oil on canvas; 19 3/4 x 23 3/4 in.; courtesy of the artist.