



Tobias Putrih

quasi-random

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Organized by **Laumeier Sculpture Park**

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This publication was produced on the occasion of the exhibition *quasi-random*.
Essay by Merrily Kerr. Cover photo: Tobias Putrih, *Laumeier Studio*, 2006

acknowledgements

Laumeier Sculpture Park is pleased to present the exhibition Tobias Putrih, *quasi-random*; one of the most significant installations of the artist's work to be realized in the United States to date. The exhibition brings together a sampling of the artist's work and is presented within the five interior galleries of Laumeier. These works of art, individually and as a group, occupy an important place in the contemporary art dialogue. They are highly intelligent, unpredictable, humorous, and are embedded with the concept of error and random order, as Merrily Kerr so aptly describes in her essay for this catalogue.

The largest work in the exhibition, titled *Studio at Laumeier*, occupies three entire galleries from floor to ceiling and further establishes Putrih as one of the nation's leading voices in the field of sculpture. His work creates an experience of timeliness that is fresh, complex, conceptual and simply brilliant. From the connective meanderings of *Studio at Laumeier* to the singular topographical beauty and architectural presence of *Macula A_0*, to the mesmerizing installation titled *SpaceScriptSet*, the immediacy and distance simultaneously expressed in Putrih's sculptures and creative process resonates with greatness and explores the unexpected result of random occurrences with the intelligence of a great purveyor of art and ideas.

I am grateful to our many generous supporters for believing in Laumeier Sculpture Park and for contributing to the growth of the institution. As always, I want to thank Laumeier's Board of Directors for their superior governance and ongoing contributions which elevate Laumeier immeasurably. To the staff of Laumeier Sculpture Park I extend my thanks and congratulations for excellent team work and commitment to our mission. Additional thanks goes to Kim Humphries for his effort and tireless work in realizing the exhibition; Robert Goetz for helping to facilitate the installations; and BJ Vogt for his attentive assistance installing the show. Special thanks go to Max Protetch, Josie Brown and George Wong of Max Protetch Gallery, New York, for generously working with us on the production of *quasi-random*; your time and expertise are greatly appreciated. Laumeier Sculpture Park benefits from the help of many important organizations that make all of the programming at Laumeier successful. My thanks go to everyone at the Regional Arts Commission, the Arts and Education Council of St. Louis, the Missouri Arts Council, Jordan Charitable Trust, UMB Bank, the Mark Twain Laumeier Fund and the University of Missouri, Saint Louis, Aronson Endowed Chair. The Laumeier docent corps, volunteers, FANs, friends, and student ambassadors all deserve special recognition for their positive and instrumental service to Laumeier. To our partner Saint Louis County Parks and the Saint Louis County Council, thank you for a great collaboration. This exhibition catalogue benefits from an insightful and thoughtful essay by Merrily Kerr and I would like to thank her for contributing to this publication.

Finally, I want to convey a very special thanks to Tobias Putrih for simply being the great artist and collaborator that he is, and for bringing an important perspective to the dialogue in contemporary art with such clarity and finesse.

Glen Gentele, Director, Laumeier Sculpture Park







Macula A_0, 2005

Platforms for Play

Two Installations and a Sculpture by Tobias Putrih at Laumeier Sculpture Park

by Merrily Kerr

Last spring, Tobias Putrih found himself in a dilemma. His deadline for *Studio at Mudam*, an interactive installation opening at the new contemporary art museum in Luxembourg, was fast approaching, and problems had arisen with the design proposed by his collaborator, Sancho Silva. Silva's plan called for a Spartan "box" (a room occupied by two benches and accessible only by lying down and rolling in) to be surrounded by and connected to a wild, sculptural arrangement of modular furniture by Putrih. Silva and Putrih were excited to create a platform for unexpected activity within the museum; the curators were concerned about exhibiting an essentially empty space.

In the end, the box remained, the show opened, and the public loved it. Because the museum visitors received the installation so well, the museum staff was satisfied, too. (At last report, a group of teens had actually carried pieces of Putrih's project inside the box to make their own structures.) The incident illustrates not only Putrih's willingness to put his own projects at risk by inviting other artists to collaborate, but his practice of creating a space for his audience to interact, then leaving them to it. Like the Mudam project, *Studio at Laumeier* is a kind of stage set, completed only by the presence and response of an audience. It is a temptation to look, explore and touch.

"I am offering candy," says Putrih. "The structure is a lure to visitors, intended to activate their bodies." *Studio at Laumeier* fills three galleries, stretching from ceiling to floor like an activity gym for adults. Its wooden components can be rearranged to create different structures, though for the duration of this show, the framework will be fixed. Putrih would have his audience members imagine themselves able to do anything with the pieces of this sculpture. What would you take down, or build? How would you begin to fill an empty gallery? Or suppose *SpaceScriptSet*, an installation of vertical rods held together by connectors in the shape of letters, was yours for a moment - would you spell out a message for others to find? From their inception, both installations tempt the audience to break the traditional museum rules - keep back and don't touch - by interacting with both sculpture and other visitors.

As far as Putrih is concerned, his own art objects aren't precious. For all the care he takes to make his work attractive - converting functional connectors into a gorgeous recession of white disks in space for *SpaceScriptSet* or transforming a stack of cardboard rings into *Macula A_0*'s stately presence - he is just as motivated to give it a feeling of impermanence. The approach has roots in underground Eastern European and Russian Conceptual Art, which rejected traditional forms of art making co-opted by the state (painting and sculpture) in favor of practices that valued conceptual content, hence temporality. In the search for subject matter untouched by Communist ideol-



ogy, artists staged performances and collective “happenings” and embraced esoteric thought processes premised on the idea that the visible, or aesthetic, aspect of their work was only a surface quality.

Led by the influential Irwin group (an arts collaborative that emerged on the alternative scene), many Slovenian artists of the 1980’s adopted the related position that they would not only pursue conceptual art but would work collectively as a way of shifting emphasis from the artist’s personality to the content of the artwork.ⁱⁱ When young artists of Putrih’s generation came of age in the 1990’s and began to explore the idea of making objects, they inherited the concept of the avant-garde artist as group member. In Putrih’s practice, he not only collaborates with other artists, but also with the workshop in his native Slovenia that manufactures his installations and with audience members themselves. His process allows him to distance himself from the final product while having a hand in all stages of production. He is simultaneously chief designer and production team leader, provocateur and observer.

Putrih sees the results as not quite real, referring to his pieces as “models.” His logic argues that if an artist accepts an artwork as a finished object of value, he or she encounters a range of logistical problems (how to make it, transport it carefully, and store it safely). “The only way to start building an object was to start with an assumption that there would be no object,” says Putrih. “There would just be substitutes - blueprints, maquettes, and manuals. Objects were built that simulated the existence of the real object but the real object never happened.”ⁱⁱⁱ As both a practical and theoretically meaningful gesture, Putrih began making his models from cardboard and other inexpensive materials, sometimes throwing old projects away, sometimes recycling them to realize new ideas.

Despite their deliberately lowbrow materials, Putrih’s objects have always managed to embody an élan that owes much to careful presentation. In one early piece, he suspended a giant inverted disco ball, made from small pieces of cardboard and packaging tape, from the ceiling, allowing his audience to duck underneath and into the structure to encounter a magical cavity of glittering mirrors. He has perched a curious, egg-shaped mass on the legs of a fashionable Eames rocker, covering it with invitation cards to the opening at which it was shown. But the

most extreme and recent example of Putrih’s ability to transform the humble into the elegant are the *Macula* sculptures, a series of rising masses made of wavy, corrugated cardboard rings positioned on feet-like stands, which summon what New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman has called “architectural magnificence.”

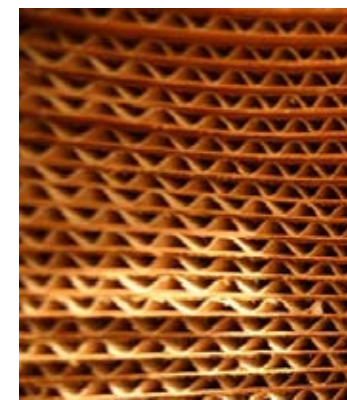
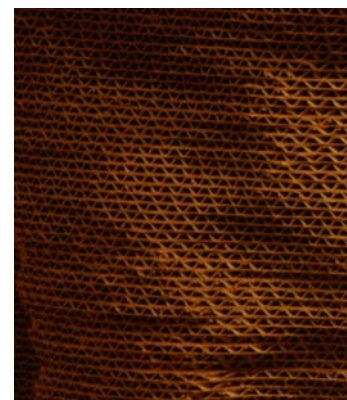
At Laumeier, one macula holds an entire small gallery, projecting a magisterial calm that contrasts the busy installations in the main galleries. A room full of macula can resemble a gathering of ghostly apparitions; partially transparent when viewed from a certain angle, they morph from apparently heavy, rock-like objects into shimmering, cloud-like nebula. Weathered-looking, stratified surfaces suggest both desert rock formations and the reverse, rock fissures or caverns, two associations that add a certain significance in the context of a sculpture park.

As evocative as their appearance is, the process by which they are made is of equal importance. Each begins with the artist’s attempt to draw a perfect circle. He then copies his effort, including errors, again and again until the circle has come to resemble a wavy ring. He gives the end result to a friend and asks that person to repeat the entire process, passing along his or her final version to another friend. By the end, up to twenty people can have contributed to what has become a wildly looping, amoeba-like shape, which Putrih scans into a computer, machine cuts into cardboard, and then stacks.

Putrih calls this process “the amplification of the mistake,” or literally the result of mistakes compounded by the hundreds as the shape of the original circle disintegrates further with each drawing.^{iv} The concept of error is embedded even further in the work’s identity by its name; the term “macula” is an etymological root of the word maquette, which reinforces the impression made by the sculpture’s cardboard construction that it isn’t quite a finished artwork. As a model, the macula is a work in progress in which unintended results (mistakes) are to be expected. Macula also refers to the part of the eye’s retina that controls the central vision crucial to activities like drawing, making it ironic that the macula sculptures are a result of a game played blindly by participants following Putrih’s rules.



Top: *Endless Eames*, 2003.
Above: *Which Cinema is Your Cinema? Which Cinema is Your Discoteque?* 2000



Detail views:
Macula A_O, 2005.

Putrih adopts the strategy of a game or play in order to observe social behavior but without attempting social activism. "I don't even want to start from a position to change anything," he says. "My starting position is mainly an effort to understand social phenomenon or interchange between individuals (if there is any) caused by my structures."^v In other words, the audience's act of experiencing an artwork is as important as the work itself. Putrih finds a somewhat unlikely historical model for this kind of equilibrium in early 20th century movie theaters, which served as the setting for a unique kind of social interaction in which viewers were, in a sense, both audience and actors. Theaters were opulent places, designed to convey as much drama and splendor as the movies themselves, and the collective pleasure of being in the screening space competed with the individual's enjoyment of the film being screened.

To explore the idea that context directly affects the viewer's reception of avant-garde film or artwork, Putrih has proposed many cinema models in past projects. One series of maquettes envisioned radically alternative cinemas: one with a ring of screens billowing like sails on a ship, another riffing on Robert Smithson's 1971 unrealized project to blast out an underground cinema deep in the earth. The movie theater analogy is subtler in his most recent work at Laumeier, but the underlying concept is more relevant than ever, as the "set" in the title of *SpaceScriptSet* suggests.

The design of Putrih's installations is the "lure" to entice participants to interact and experience the art objects themselves and the physical space of the museum in a new way. The potential impact is an altered view of reality: the forest of poles and jungle of wooden shapes in the gallery affect the way in which viewers might subsequently encounter the forest outside of the gallery walls and, beyond that, the built environment of houses and city. How, and the degree to which, each person finds his or her perspective altered is up to him or her. Putrih doesn't set up a scientific study, he builds a platform for his audience to observe its own behavior.



Detail views: *Studio* at Laumeier, 2006.



Detail views: *SpaceScriptSet*, 2006.

Studio's starting point is an array of component parts from which chairs, tables and shelves - the basic set-up for a work or social environment - can be constructed in an infinite variety of ways, including fantastical, playful departures from pure functionality. Putrih fashioned this modular furniture with an adaptability that recalls early 20th century Constructivist architect and designer Fredrick Kiesler's multifunctional furniture - round edged, biomorphic forms that could be used as a chair, a pedestal for a sculpture, or a picture stand, for example. They also evoke the soft angles of Jean Prouvé's mid-century architecture and design and the flowing forms of Charles and Ray Eames.

Studio is a riot of shapes, appearing at first glance as if the room had been turned upside down, then righted again, with pieces of furniture still falling to the ground. Crazy angles give it a dynamic of constant movement. As an object to look at, the installation is attractive, but as a place to sit and relax, or even to perch for longer than a few minutes, it causes problems. "I was trying to achieve functionality given very restricted rules set by modularity and mobility," explains Putrih. "What was produced was not very comfortable furniture. "Good" design is a compromise between function and form, which has to result in a resistance as a value."^{vi}

SpaceScriptSet involves its own "resistance." The piece was conceived along the lines of *Studio*, as an interactive means for participants to construct an environment. Putrih added a further conceptual dimension by making the connectors resemble abstracted letters of the alphabet, which would allow those who could identify them to construct not only shapes or shelters, but their own text, strung out in space. Putrih's audience might wonder what his intentions were in offering his audience a literal forum for expression, but the pressing question is what they would choose to say, given the chance to manipulate the rods and connectors. What message would be worth the effort of planning a text, then finding and arranging the letters, when clear written communication can be difficult to achieve in the best of circumstances?

Putrih elaborates on the difficulties of good design by talking about the pleasures and challenges of using an Eames chair. Although the chair is expensive, it's not necessarily comfortable - users must adapt their needs to its specifications, sacrificing functionality for the luxury of using a rare object of desire. As they use the chair,

their discomfort reminds them of the pleasure they simultaneously experience. In the same way, “You expect that a typeface will be invisible,” says Putrih. “It doesn’t interrupt you while reading, in the same way you expect that a chair won’t interrupt your dinner. Resistance triggers a sudden recognition of the unreadable typeface which offers you visual or some other stimulation (for example, the enjoyment of a decorative typeface).”^{vii}

The participatory nature of Putrih’s installations carries with it a risk. He subjects himself not just to the possibility of an unfavorable critical reception by his art world audience, but to a more severe sanction - the possibility that viewers will ignore the interactive nature of his structures. He must accept the added complication (resistance) of an institutional context. Though originally intended to be fully manipulated by audience members, the heaviness of *Studio*’s component parts and the stiffness of *SpaceScriptSet*’s rod and connector structure make it impractical to freely interact with the pieces without the presence of a full-time attendant. Putrih hedges against the disaster of complete non-interaction not only by producing attractive, contemporary looking design and creating physically tempting environments but by maximizing the fantastic potential of each artwork. Both *Studio* and *SpaceScriptSet* are modularity in overdrive: so overwhelmingly busy that they are amusing and, as such, break down barriers between audience and installation.

Perhaps it won’t come as a surprise that Putrih is attracted to 20th century visionary thinkers who created environments to affect social behavior. *Studio*’s design refers to Kiesler, while other early artworks play with ideas originated by Buckminster Fuller. (In one project, for instance, Putrih crafted a malleable sphere from wooden dowels in imitation of Fuller’s Cloud Nine globes, which were to operate as giant, floating cities above the earth.) Though he is critical of the limitations that kept many of these artists’ proposals on the drawing table, their projects for radical experimentation (the more outrageous the better) fuel Putrih’s proposals to alter behavior in his own terrain - the art gallery or museum. At the core of his thinking is the idea that from “mistakes” come the interesting breakthroughs that make for provocative and engaging art. The question remaining is for the viewer - how will you respond?

Merrily Kerr is an art critic, writer and art tour guide living in New York City. She studied art history in England, where she began writing art criticism. In addition to writing regularly for international art magazines, including Time Out New York, Flash Art, and Art on Paper, she leads gallery and museum tours for individuals and groups.

ⁱⁱ From the collected correspondence between Tobias Putrih, Sancho Silva and Monica Portillo, Dept Head of Education and Special Programs, Mudam in Winter '05-'06 and Spring '06.

ⁱⁱⁱ East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe, IRWIN, ed., Afterall Books: London, 2006, p. 319.

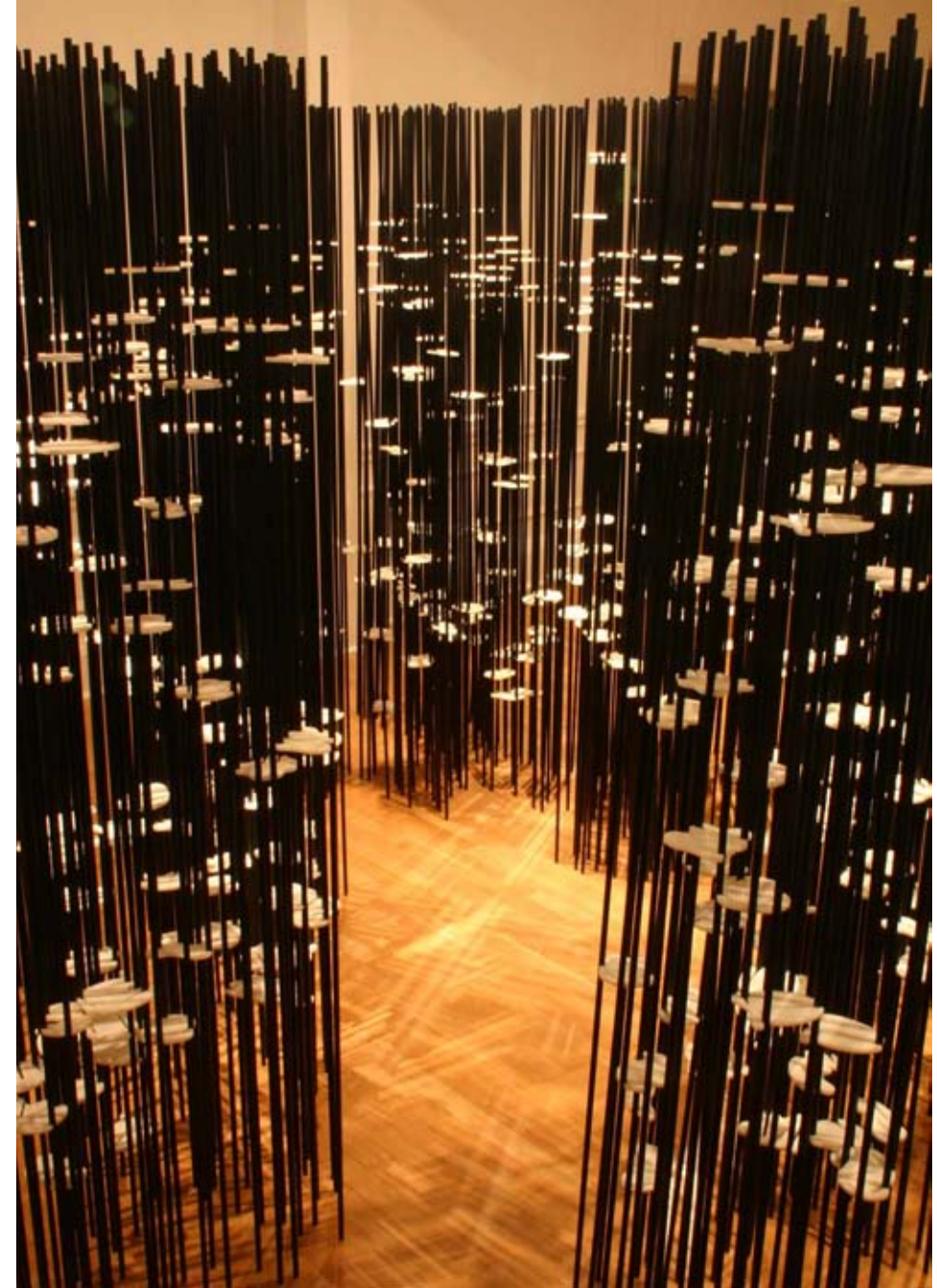
ⁱⁱⁱⁱ From correspondence between Tobias Putrih and Catherine Chevalier, Spring '06.

^{iv} From an interview between Tobias Putrih and Merrily Kerr, New York City, Aug 21, '06.

^v Putrih, Chevalier, *ibid.*

^{vi} Putrih, Silva, Portillo, *ibid.*

^{vii} *ibid.*



**Space
Script
Set,
2006**

artist bio

Born Kranj, Slovenia, 1972
Lives and works in New York

education

Graduated at the Academy of Fine Arts, Ljubljana, 1997
Studied at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf, 1998

selected solo exhibitions

- 2006 *quasi-random*, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis
2005 Max Protetch Gallery, New York
Tobias Putrih (with Toby Paterson, Grazer Kunstverein, Graz
2004 Galerie Almine Rech, Paris, Franc
2003 Max Protetch Gallery, New York
Mala galerija, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana
2002 *Science Fiction*, Bezigrajska galerija, Ljubljana
2001 *Movie Tales*, Skuc Gallery (with Ziga Kariz), Ljubljana
2000 *Dragset & Elmgreen project*, SLO Fine Art, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana
1999 *Alkatraz*, Metelokova, Ljubljana
Modrordeea Mediana (all-you-can-drink party), Likovni salon (with Bostjan Drinovec), Celjem, Ljubljana

selected group exhibitions

- 2005 *Greater New York*, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York
Downtime: Constructing Leisure, New Langton Arts, San Francisco
2004 *Collective Effort*, Baltimore Museum of Art
Mediterraneo, MACRO Contemporary Art Museum, Rome
Haag Skulptuur, The Hague, Netherlands
2003 U3, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana
In the Gorges of the Balkans, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel
Art Unlimited, Basel
2002 *September Horse*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin
Kunstexpeditionen, Forum of Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz, Berlin
Manifesta 4, Frankfurt
Max Protetch Gallery, New York
Twinklings, Skuc Gallery, Ljubljana

- 2001 *Moltitudine*, City Hall, Tolmezzo, Italy
Slovene Way Galeria Neon, Bologna
Becomings, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tirana; traveled to Mestna galerija, Ljubljana
Shall I or shall I not?, Pavel-House, Laafeld
1999 *Biennial of Young Artists of the Mediterranean and Europe*, Rome
Work in Progress, Teatro Miela, Trieste
1998 *ARTleria*, Kluze
When Art's Doing It, Skuc Gallery, Ljubljana

exhibition list | Tobias Putrih: *quasi-random*

gallery 1

SpaceScriptSet, anodized aluminum, PVC, dimensions variable, 2006

gallery 2

Studio at Laumeier, plywood, dimensions variable, 2006

gallery 3

Studio at Laumeier, plywood, dimensions variable, 2006

gallery 4

Studio at Laumeier, plywood, dimensions variable, 2006

gallery 5

Macula A_0, cardboard, 2005

All Tobias Putrih works are courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

other works | referenced in essay

Endless Eames, 2003

Eames rocking chair, invitation cards and adhesive; 51 x 40 x33"
Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, NewYork

Which Cinema is Your Cinema? Which Cinema is Your Discoteque? 2000

Cardboard, aluminum, mirrors, camera, monitor and stroboscope ; dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, NewYork



Studio at Laumeier, 2006

Tobias Putrih

quasi-random

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