

Art in America

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JANEK SIMON

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RASTER

by daniel miller



WARSAW Janek Simon (born in Poland in 1977) is a tourist, a sociologist, a bogus scientist and a sort of graffiti artist. In the tone-setting work *Janek was here* (2010), which opened his recent show, "Morze" (Sea), Simon connected the dots marking poultry distribution centers on a map of Ghana to spell out the three titular words. This act of *bêtise sublime*—the term is associated with Flaubert's discussion of a *crétin* named Thompson who wrote his own name on Pompey's Column in Alexandria, and also applies to the legendary World War II tagger Kilroy, celebrated by Pynchon—links Simon to colonialists of every kind who have left their signatures, literally, on the cultural landscape.

Other works in "Morze" departed from this opening theme. Furthest afield perhaps was *Chinese Keyboard* (2010), a pointless adventure in D.I.Y. electronics that emits random, tinny compositions when switched on. It belongs in an "infernal electronics" category of Simon's artistic output, as do the almost self-explanatory *Walking Bread* (2007), a loaf fitted with customized robotic limbs, and the attractively steampunk *Homemade Electronic Watch* (2005).

But the exhibition's main subject was European imperialism. Poland, with its own dodgy nationhood, missed out on this chapter of history, though it briefly indulged in colonialist dreams in the mid-1920s and '30s. Simon showed 19 issues of the magazine *Morze* (first published in 1925), the beautiful house organ of the Polish Maritime and Colonial League (a naval exploration advocacy group), along with the machine he devised that analyzes his own responses to the magazines. *Artist's reactions to Morze covers perception analysed with DIY skin galvanometer* (2010) formed a pseudo-rationalist complement to *Tristes Tropiques* (2009), in which Simon diagrams a centerfold from Claude Levi-Strauss's memoir in order to demonstrate its implicit comparison of a tribesman to a chimpanzee.

Although Simon's approach could almost be bracketed as anti-imperialist critique, his work seems too naive, even childlike, for the designation. The show's purest and most enigmatic work is *A guided tour of Fort Amsterdam* (2010), a video of the artist hiring a rickshaw to ride around a European fort in Ghana. The trip looks uncomfortable, both physically and morally, yet the artist seems at peace, serene.

The largest single work, measuring approximately 4 by 6 by 5 feet, was *Time-space compression of Trinidad* (2010). Placed over a map of Trinidad, a three-dimensional lattice charts the time required for moving from point to point by public transport. How is time stretched, compressed, defied or appeased on a journey in a foreign country? Simon seems genuinely enthralled by the question.

Photo: Janek Simon: *Janek was here*, 2010, ink on map, 24 by 1438 inches; at Raster.

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Joe Fig, Inka Essenhigh, 2005

Currently on view in the group show "Redux" at New York's Cristin Tierney Gallery (through Feb. 4) are two works by Joe Fig, both related to his 200

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