

## Magic Mushrooms



Left: Fiorucci Art Trust director Milovan Farronato and artist Micki Pellerano. Right: Artist Paulina Olowska. (All photos: Linda Yablonsky)

Take one haunted house, a bowl of magic, and a brace of hand puppets. Mix with poisonous mushrooms and an intrepid crew of Polish, Italian, British, and American artists. What have you got? A recipe for chaos!

Chaos, in this case, is the wellspring of unconscious desire that fed the second edition of Mycorial Theater, the mycelium of a symposium and retreat organized last week in Rabka, Poland by artist Paulina Olowska and Fiorucci Art Trust curator Milovan Farronato.

Rabka is a provincial spa town in the Gorce Mountains. It's about an hour's drive from Krakow and a few miles from Auschwitz. Normally, people go to Rabka to take the healing saline waters and clear their lungs. After trying out Warsaw and Chicago, Olowska went there to marry her philosopher husband, Bartosz (or Bartek) Olowski, and stayed.

Ground zero for Mycorial Theater was the Villa a, three-story lodge built around 1930 in the post-and-beam manner. Designed by the architect son of Kazimierz Kaden, the entrepreneurial pediatrician and medicinal plant expert who founded the spa, it is an especially splendid example of of Zakopane Modernism, the twentieth-century architectural style named for a nearby town.. Two years ago, Olowska bought it, saving it from demolition, and renamed it Creative House Kadenówka, hoping to make it a place where artists could come and work, and more important, gather to exchange ideas away from the pressures of commerce and career.



Left: Artist Chiara Fumai. Right: Philosopher and founder of Razem Pamoja Foundation Bartek Olowski

Though named for mushrooms, community is really what Mycorial Theater is about. With Farronato, Olowka incubated the idea a few years ago, during one of the Fiorucci Art Trust's similarly madcap Volcano Extravaganzas on the island of Stromboli. Together, the pair selected artists working outside the market who might contribute another layer of history to Kadenówka. From Poland (via Berlin) came Maria Loboda. Joining her were Krzysztof Stefan Maniak and Iza Tarasewicz, who was accompanied by her American amour, writer Matthew Alexander Post. To add a little Mediterranean flavor, Farronato chose three Italians, Niccolo Gandolfi, Chiara Fumai, and Giorgio Andreotta. Another American, Micki Pellerano, lives in Brooklyn. Not present but contributing via the Internet were Danny McDonald, from New York, and Celia Hempton, from London. Carsten Holler, spiritual godfather of the week, unfortunately couldn't make it.

To further stir the pot, Olowka brought in a private chef, Mihail Gnilka, who recently returned to Poland after longtime cooking gigs in Bali, Mexico, and London. He also bore very cool tats. One, appropriately enough, is of a big mushroom.

Why mushrooms? Well, I was told, mushrooms make an apt metaphor for an umbrella project shielding many strands of growth. As either remedy or poison, they have an appealing ambiguity. Many varieties of fungus grow in the Gorce, though because of a dry summer, the artists were able to gather only a single basket of inedible, somewhat alarming mushrooms on an overnight hike in the highlands that preceded my arrival. Their catch made a wonderful centerpiece for the long dining table in the central atrium of Kadenówka, which has unfurnished bedrooms and a hot tub but no heat or hot water, other than what Olowka's crew boiled in an enormous kettle on the hotplate that was the kitchen's only stove.



Left: Artist Giorgio Andreotta. Right: Artist Iza Tarasewicz and curator/writer Matthew Alexander Post

For these reasons, the artists bunked next door in Villa Anna, a monastic caravansary offering towels that felt like sandpaper and absolutely no amenities, unless you count the fake gold-satin duvet covers and pillowcases. However, Kadenówka was said to be haunted. "Something very bad is supposed to have happened to a young girl here," Olowka said.

That attractive rumor, the villa's past lives as a medical staff dormitory, and the collection of musty objects—a handbag, a pair of slippers, empty bottles, a few tins, a pamphlet, an ancient flat iron that weighs a ton—that Olowka found stuffed in the walls, added context to Mycorial Theater's first after-dinner presentation — a "Mass of Chaos," led by the raven-haired Fumai, a Milanese performance artist. She also happens to be a witch.

Dressed in a traditional black robe and hood, Fumai lit candles in an open space on Kadenowka's second-floor balcony while the rest of us seated ourselves around her. Speaking the eerie, "postmodern language of magic,"

which sounded like a mashup of Greek, Latin, German, and Italian, she hollowed out her voice to call upon Metapheranus, or “man of feathers,” a demon savior with the power to vacate any extant evil spirits from the house.

With elements borrowed from Nietzsche, Aleister Crowley, and Tantric ritual, Chaos Magic was the brainchild of a nineteenth-century British artist and mystic felicitously named Austin Osman Spare. It's about freeing the subconscious, and Fumai performed the fifteen-minute mass with such gravity that it was hard to keep from laughing—until Ołowska pointed out, when the lights went up, that my chair had partly collapsed and, balancing itself on three legs, was now leaning against a wall. (I am not making this up.)



Left: Krzysztof Maniak. Right: Artist Jakub Ziolkowski and Goethe Institute (Krakow) program director Dorota Krakowska

There isn't a whole lot to do after nightfall in such remote places except to listen for the flap of a vampire's wings, drink, smoke, and play Villagers and Wolves, a card game designed by Pellerano. Weirdly, he practices chaos magic too. What's Villagers and Wolves? “It's really fun,” Ołowska said. “There's a lot of killing.” By game's end, everyone but Pellerano, Post, and Farronato had died – for fun.

We were all up bright and early next morning for breakfast at Kadenówka. The table groaned with delicious local cheeses, local butter, local honey, local breads, pickled mushrooms, and cooked local eggs. When we were done, Ołowska led the group on a stroll through Rabka's enormous parkland, which is directly behind the house and has many sanitarium treatment centers all over it. It also has a bronze of the Polish Pope, John Paul II, and quite a large cemetery for a place that, in theory, helps people to a longer life.

Next, Ołowska took us to a parking lot-flea market to do some shopping. Just up the street was an old puppet theater, where children come every morning to see the show, which has human actors as well as hand puppets. For Ołowska, puppetry is a neglected form of art performed with music and objects that move. Artists, she said, always used to collaborate with theaters. So, as a gift to the town, she painted the building's outside walls with puppet figures. For that reason, the theater's director gave us access to its costume shop, where the artists had a field day trying on costumes and looking for props to use for the open house that would be the week's culminating event.

Dinner that evening was a mushroom risotto enhanced not just by Gnilka's cooking but also a healthy hunk of parmesan cheese that Gandolfi had brought from his native Bologna. Afterward, it was Pellerano's turn to make witchcraft, and complete the evil-chasing spell cast by Fumai on the previous night. This time, the two worked together and dressed in white. Out came more candles and a video projection by Pellerano, who bathed our hands in scented water while a recorded female voice intoned a litany that I didn't quite catch. I can say that afterward we all felt cleansed. “There's no such thing as black magic or white magic,” Fumai told us. “Magic is gray.”



Left: Artist Maria Loboda. Right: Mycorial Theater facilitator Kuba Gacek

Tuesday was a day to pursue individual projects. I spent most of it at the Olowska/Olowski house and studio, which are set on a gorgeous hectare of gracefully sloping land with panoramic views of the mountains. He cooked the bigos that night for the dinner party that he and Olowska hosted at home to celebrate their ninth wedding anniversary.

This is when it became crystal clear that the purpose of Mycorial Theater was less about mushrooms and magic than realizing a utopian vision of artistic community. “Artists can create gatherings that are quite substantial,” Olowska told me. “In my work,” she said, referring to a month-long collaboration with Lucy McKenzie in 2003, when the two young artists operated a bar in Warsaw, “I was always interested in establishing a community. That’s why finding mushrooms was less important than the bonding experience of the hike. It’s very important to meet about something other than making objects. It’s about the process,” she said, “about making a future museum of meetings. I’m interested in proposing artists not just to exhibit together but also to question what an exhibition is.”

On Wednesday, I took my own hike up a mountain with Olowski, who has established the Razem Pamoja Foundation, which connects art students and teachers in Krakow to their counterparts in a major slum of Nairobi, Kenya. I would see their paintings and crafts in the foundation’s gallery the following day. Meanwhile, we just talked about it, and night fell before we got back down the mountain. That evening’s root vegetable dinner and performances drew guests from Krakow: the painter Jakub Ziolkowski and Dorotna Krakowska, program director of the city’s Goethe Institute and the daughter of the late artist and theater director Tadeusz Kantor, a revered figure in these parts. First Andreotta showed a beautiful silent film featuring a burning boat and a dance of fireflies—actually the headlamps of miners on an all-night walk along the Sardinian coast. (Fire is his principal material.)

Next came a video documenting the six-night performance of *The Mother An Unsavoury Play in Two Acts and an Epilogue*, Olowska’s adaptation of an old Polish play performed for six nights the week before at Tate Modern, with the adept Farronato in a supporting role. The set was a reproduction of Villa Kadenowka, though this one had paintings from the museum’s collection. (Olowska will reprise the performance at the Kitchen in New York next year.)



Left: Artist chef Michal Gnilka. Right: Fiorucci Art Trust curatorial assistant Marina La Verghetta and Mycorial Theater facilitator Aleksandra Idler

The rest of the entertainment that night was voluntary—sleeping in the house. Only the two curators did so. “It was kind of cold,” they admitted the next morning, before clearing out the rooms for the evening program. During the Open House, about thirty people came from Rabka and Krakow to sit down for individual tarot card readings by Loboda, drink the bottled waters, eat mushroom hors d’oeuvres and morel-inflected soup by Gilka, and check out the spell that Fumai had painted on the walls of an upstairs room, near a miniature mushroom diorama that Gandolfi created in a closet, opposite his wall-size scan of all the mushrooms collected on the hike. Outside, Andreotta made an intervention with fire pits and the upended roots of a fallen tree.

All week, we had been emailing sounds recorded in the house to Hempton in London, and videos shot around town to McDonald. Hempton sent back a resonant sound collage and the images of two abstract paintings that Olowaska put on canvas for her, perfectly mimicking Hempton’s impastoed style. McDonald’s hilarious and surreal video played in another room downstairs, while up on the balcony, Tarasewicz and Post presented “Fungal Follies,” a puppet show that would have been more entertaining with live, rather than recorded, voices. To cap things off, Fumai and Pellerano led the audience in a Chaos Magic workshop, “The Secrets of Sigilization,” or how to realize your dreams. The quickest way, it turned out, is through masturbation.

Well, no art camp would be worth its name without a sexual metaphor. “Magic works!” Pellerano exclaimed. It also travels. Next year, Mycorial Theater is likely to generate even more heat—from its satellite location, mushroom-laden Minas Gerais, Brazil.

— Linda Yablonsky



Left: Rabka Puppet Theater. Right: Artist Niccolo Gandolfi