

PAUL KOS: BER LIN

LAGUNA ART MUSEUM

SATELLITE AT SOUTH COAST PLAZA

JANUARY 11 - APRIL 15, 1990



BER LIN, 1990

"BER LIN includes every store and shop in South Coast Plaza. I am just providing the Eastern Sector."
(Paul Kos, 11 January 1990)

In the last weeks of 1989 anyone with even passing interest in the fate of the world watched as, day by day, one by one, autocratic governments collapsed under their own weight. For Paul Kos, an artist with longstanding social concerns and close

familiarity with Europe, these events could not go by unnoticed. In place of an earlier-planned installation for the Laguna Art Museum, Kos suggested a new idea.

The museum commissioned him to realize his concept in the exhibition presented here. **BER LIN** is both itself an installation—a "site-specific" work of art incorporating its exhibition space and everything within it—and a collection of installation pieces, some developed for the Laguna Art Museum show, some previously installed elsewhere. Taken as a whole, **BER LIN** is an elegant commentary, not only on the particular changes in store for Eastern European communism, but on the inevitability of political change in an authoritarian society. In the end, this exhibition celebrates that freedom of mind which no one can abridge.

Mercifully, Kos doesn't beat us over the head with moralizing on these topics. **BER LIN** is less an essay than a three-dimensional poem that reveals itself in progressive layers of meaning to those who will receive it.

The entry of the exhibition, *rEVOLUTION: Notes for the Invasion—mar mar march*, began as a performance piece presented at the deSaisset Museum in Santa Clara in 1972, and has developed over the years into the installation shown here. It is one of Kos's best-known works.



mar mar march, 1973
1980 installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

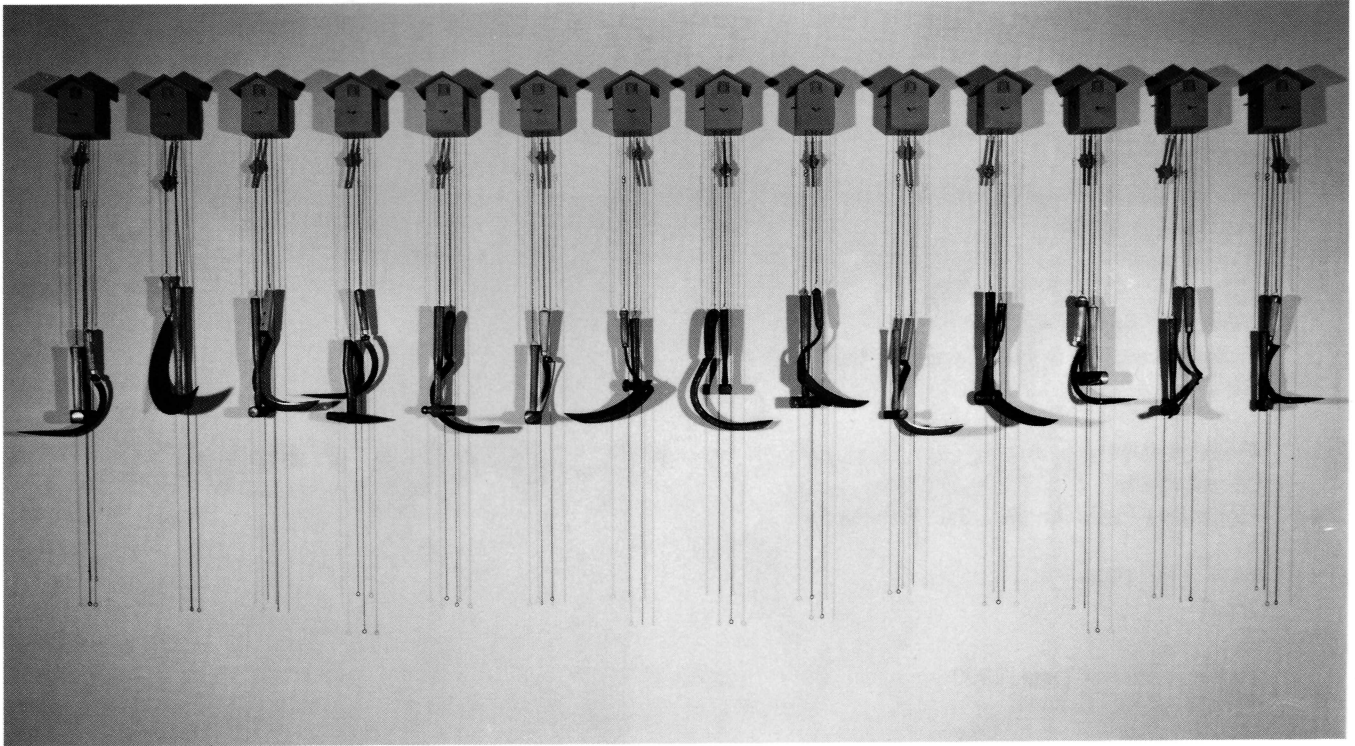
Much of what has been written about the work deals with its implications for the world of art, and the fact that the artist "[engages] the viewer to generate the process" by forcing us to "march" over a series of board to a cadence he has determined.¹ This aspect of *mar mar march* is intriguing: it is performance art turned inside-out, where we are the performers and the artist gets to watch.

But by resurrecting this early work for the exhibition at the Laguna Art Museum, Kos has chosen to restore its original political content, both by its new context in a larger work and by its function here. Where all previous installations of *mar mar march* dead-ended at its sound source (in this case a video monitor, but in some earlier versions an audiotape player), here the work provides an entry to a second gallery. Thus, it becomes a frontier which must be crossed—a series of obstacles reminiscent of the once peril-strewn East-West border.

Once across the border, we are presented with four new elements. Most prominently placed and yet least insistent upon our attention is *Rift*, 1990, a swath of carpet cut from the wall-to-wall expanse that, paradoxically, creates a barrier by the removal of material. Applying a lesson learned from previous visits to art museums and galleries, viewers Do Not Touch the tear or the two-foot-wide expanse of concrete it has left exposed; most will not even come near, choosing an inconvenient route around the tear rather than across it. Like dictators everywhere, Kos controls our actions as much by psychological as by physical means.

Just a Matter of Time, another work created for the current exhibit, is the show's axis and a key to its interpretation. Fourteen identical cuckoo clocks painted gray, their hour and minute hands removed and their ordinary weights replaced with paired hammers and sickles, tick away at various speeds. No one knows when the next bird will sound—tempos are governed by the different hammer weights—but it is clear that its ironic laugh will be set off by the same symbols that manage its operation.

The metronomic sound of the ticking clocks, suggesting certain and inescapable change, is echoed elsewhere in **BER LIN**: in the audible meter of *mar mar march* and in the mute rhythm of *Silenced Tongues*, 1989. Originally conceived as an elegiac response to the Tien An Men Square massacre, *Silenced Tongues* is the only piece in this exhibition incorporating a favorite Kos symbol, the bell. Not capable of sound in this case, this bell—an etched glass image casting a shadow from a light at the end of a long



Just a Matter of Time, 1990

pendulum—nevertheless "rings" when the pendulum is gently pushed. The mute image of so joyous and flamboyant a sound is a chilling tribute to those who must content themselves with memory in place of speech—though perhaps the floating message of *Silenced Tongues*, "When tongues are silenced...only memory remains," takes on a new, more hopeful meaning here, where we are reflecting on memory translated into action.

Trotsky, 1989, is a simple and powerful portrait of the great intellectual leader of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky. It consists of a small red stool and, embedded in the wall above, an alpine ice ax of the type used in the famous revolutionary's murder. Once again, a work developed earlier is lent new intensity by its inclusion in this exhibition. For Trotsky's contribution to political thought was not limited to his agitation for an end to Czarist rule; when he saw the new order as it was developing under Stalin, he led the call for democracy and a new revolution to restore power to the workers—a radical position which almost certainly led to his assassination.

By positioning *Trotsky* across the gallery from *Just a Matter of Time*, Kos reinforces his democratic message.

Paul Kos is clearly no more comfortable with Western conspicuous consumption than he is with Eastern totalitarian political structures. He has written with concern, for example, about the "disparity between US riches and Mexican poverty" and produced art which addresses such issues.² His statement incorporating the rest of South Coast Plaza into **BER LIN** requires us to consider what alternative we in the West present to people of the world who seek the simple right to speak their own minds, or to scratch out of meager, gray lives a little more comfort. Is the only choice one between the right to acquire more than we could ever need and no rights at all?

Charles Desmarais
Director

NOTES

1. Suzanne Foley, *Space/Time/Sound—Conceptual Art in the San Francisco Bay Area: The 1970s* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1979), 64. See also Judith Van Baron, "A Means Toward an End," in *New Artists Video*, ed. Gregory Battcock, (New York: Dutton Books, 1978), 177; and J[ay] B[elloli], *Joel Glassman, Carlos Gutierrez-Solana, Paul Kos* (La Jolla, Calif.: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1973), 5.

2. An example is his *Study Model for the Galvanized Bell or Bell for the Revolution*, 1988, shown at Iannetti Lanzone Gallery, San Francisco (12 May-11 June 1988). The quotation is from the exhibition brochure.