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Machines That Speak Volumes

By TED LOOS

WHEN Sheryl Oring's "Writer's Block" had its debut in Berlin on May 10, 1999, the weather provided an unexpected historical echo. Ms. Oring had painstakingly arranged the work — 21 large steel cages filled with 600 typewriters from the 1920's and 30's — on Bebelplatz, the square where the Nazis had held a book burning exactly 66 years before.

"It was a nice warm day in May," Ms. Oring recalled. Musicians and dancers were to perform among the cages at dusk. Just as they began, a storm blew in. "It came from nowhere — a downpour," she said.

The storm sent some spectators running for cover and soaked everyone who remained. It also made an eerie parallel: it had rained at the 1933 book burning, and the organizers had had a hard time getting the fire started. "It really felt like an act of God," Ms. Oring said. "It was a powerful beginning for the piece."

"Writer's Block," a sculptural exploration of censorship, will be on display in Bryant Park, just behind the New York Public Library, from Saturday through Oct. 12. The New York location has its own significance. On May 10, 1943, 1,000 people gathered on the steps of the library to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Bebelplatz book burning.

Ms. Oring, 37, a staff editor for The New York Times, recently moved to New York from Berlin, where she spent six years concentrating on art. While there, she used the tenacity she had learned as a reporter at a small California newspaper and as an editor at The San Francisco Chronicle to surmount a number of barriers to showing "Writer's Block."

"I can't imagine having dealt with the Berlin planning department if I hadn't once covered a city planning department," she said of the wrangling it took to show the work on Bebelplatz. She was denied permission twice, a decision reversed only after a local reporter wrote an article about "Writer's Block." She was granted 24 hours for the show.



Kay Herschelmann

Sheryl Oring's "Writer's Block" was first installed in 1999 on Bebelplatz in Berlin, site of a 1933 book burning. The city gave her 24 hours for the show.

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"There were a few times during the project when it became an advantage for someone to tell me, 'No, you can't do this,'" Ms. Oring said. "It evoked the fight impulse."

To get typewriters, she contacted all of Berlin's daily newspapers. She told them she was organizing a typewriter drive for her piece and collected 250 of them. In the end almost all of the materials were found or donated. It took 13 letters and many follow-up calls to find a German company that would move all 21 cages, which weigh a half-ton each, free.

Though she received several small foundation grants, Ms. Oring spent more than \$20,000 of her own money on the project. "Sheryl is a very gutsy young woman," said Tom Freudenheim, who was deputy director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin when the piece was shown there in 1999. "She figures out how to make things happen."

The impact of "Writer's Block" comes from the unsettling sight of beautiful old typewriters upended within rough, rusty cages. "There's something quite mysterious about it," Mr. Freudenheim said. "But then you go up close, and you see the languages represented by the keys, and the strange accents." The typewriters are mostly German, Czech, English and Hungarian.

"With political pieces, the message usually comes across really well, but the art is often problematic," Mr. Freudenheim said. "Sheryl's cages have a sculptural quality that is very powerful, in addition to having a powerful message."

"Writer's Block" was inspired by another artwork. "When I first arrived in Berlin, I went for a walk on a Sunday morning," Ms. Oring said. "I stumbled on Bebelplatz and saw Micha Ullman's memorial."

Mr. Ullman's work, "Empty Library," also refers to the book burning of 1933. Underneath the square he placed empty white bookshelves, which, until the area was torn up for renovations this summer, were visible through a plexiglass window in the ground. "That just gripped me," said Ms. Oring, who is Jewish.

She found herself going back to Bebelplatz again and again. Her knowledge of the square's history started to merge with a longtime fascination with old typewriters, which she was finding all over Berlin.

"I love how they look," Ms. Oring said. "I love the sound. I love the smell of the ink." She has collected more than a dozen of them for her own use.

"There's something human about them," she said. "When I first put them into a cage, they seemed to be struggling to get out."

Ms. Oring has been adamant about having that struggle displayed in public places. "I like the element of surprise — it touches people who wouldn't normally go into a gallery," she said.

In Budapest last year, "Writer's Block" was set up for three weeks in the Lion's Courtyard of Buda Castle, a square surrounded by the Szechenyi Library, the Budapest History Museum and the National Gallery. "It was a very interactive piece," said Anita Semien, who runs the Cultural Exchange Foundation in

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Washington and arranged for the installation in Budapest. "Kids reached into the cages to touch the keys. Some people took out a piece of paper from their pockets and began to type on it."

Ms. Oring said that she liked the way the piece takes on new meaning with each location. "In Budapest, it really referred to censorship in the Communist period," she said.

In New York, 18 of the 21 cages will be exhibited. The PEN American Center has organized an opening reading, "Bebelplatz to Bryant Park," to be held on Sept. 30. Arthur Miller, Russell Banks and Grace Paley, among others, are to read.

But the Bryant Park exhibition of "Writer's Block," which follows a showing earlier this year at the Boston Public Library, goes beyond being another commemoration of a long-ago book burning. "It also makes reference to the exile experience, since so many of those German writers came to America," Ms. Oring said. She added that the work is a universal protest against book burning and censorship in all forms, wherever it occurs.

"Writer's Block" may comment on the outside forces brought to bear on writers, but the work also addresses self-censorship — even though Ms. Oring has certainly not let that stop her from making art.

"It's about the internal fight to create, and the problems we all have communicating," she said. "Thinking about that is a bit of an obsession of mine."

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