

the village

# VOICE

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## Ears to David Lynch!

Obsessive? Artist Christian Tomaszewski rebuilds the world of the movie *Blue Velvet*.

BY ROBERT SHUSTER

**I**f David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*—the 1986 landmark of film noir-bizarre—can officially claim the status of cult classic, then Brooklyn artist Christian Tomaszewski has become its high priest, leading the devoted to worship at shrines he's created in Poland, Germany, and Queens. For the past three years, in a series of museum installations (the final now at the Sculpture Center through July 29), Tomaszewski has been remaking the movie's spaces, props, and moods, including the hallways outside Isabella Rossellini's apartment, a scale-model view from the closet where naked Kyle MacLachlan witnesses gas-sucking Dennis Hopper commit a brutal rape, and that notorious severed ear.

"It's very difficult to describe," says Tomaszewski, attempting to explain his obsession with Lynch and his lushly designed world of shadows, symbols, and demonic B-movie kitsch. "It's just that subconsciously I feel—and maybe it sounds cheesy—but I feel very connected to him." Tall and a little shy, with shaggy reddish hair and a voice that often goes quiet, as if he's used to speaking in a movie theater, Tomaszewski, 35, might come across as another lovesick film buff proclaiming his idols. But that's precisely the point of his art, which intentionally conjures our own cinematic desires—to enter the film we love, to mimic its characters after the credits roll, to discuss every last detail, to carry around scenes and snippets of dialogue like shibboleths ("Heineken? Fuck that shit! Pabst Blue Ribbon!"). "I really consider films our common consciousness, or communication," he says. "So much a part of our language is the movie... so much a part of our behavior."

The persuasive power of great film—and the lure of the eerie and violent—came early to Tomaszewski. Born and raised in the Polish seaport city of Gdansk, he remembers one late night as a small child, alone at home and "totally scared," watching Kurosawa's expressionist *Throne of Blood*, a fog-bound medieval *Macbeth* that, Tomaszewski says, remains "strongly imprinted in my mind." Some years later, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan, where he studied painting but had become hooked on classic Italian cinema, he first saw *Blue Velvet* (and everything else Lynch had done up to that point) at a festival of the director's work. Not long afterward, Tomaszewski ditched the canvas for the movie camera.

But directing didn't quite suit him, either. Instead, he found himself wanting to explore, in art, other people's movies, as social forces. "What interests me is to go backward," he says of an approach that deconstructs as much as it reconstructs. "Into the culture, architecture, and spaces, without using the film." In 2001, after he received a grant from Manhattan's International Studio and Curatorial Program and moved to New York, he began creating enclosures (architecture had always attracted him, too) that paid a kind of amused homage to cinematic fetishism while also acknowledging artistic obsession, particularly by mimicking the monomania of that

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oddball dadaist Kurt Schwitters. Though the title of Tomaszewski's *Blue Velvet* series—*On Chapels, Caves, and Erotic Misery*—touches on the film, it's actually a direct reference to Schwitters's best-known work, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (begun in 1923 and destroyed by Allied bombs 20 years later). This was an attic room that became something like Pee Wee Herman's Playhouse, a lair of kaleidoscopically layered panels, scattered icons, and crazy nooks dedicated to friends, places, and myths.

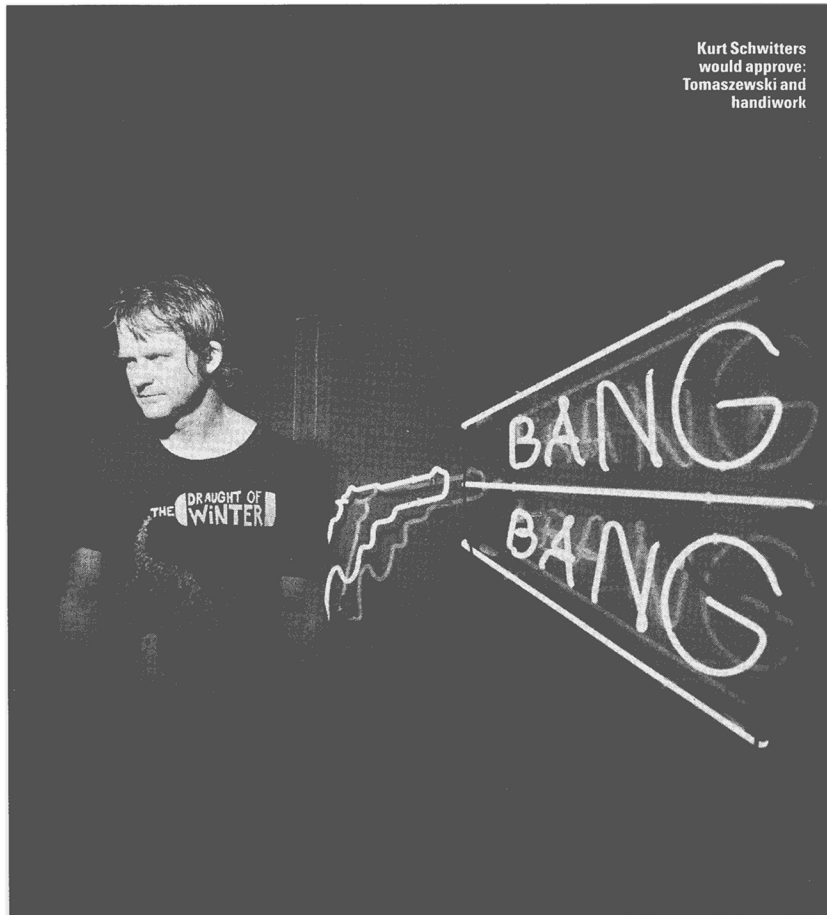
Tomaszewski points out a connection between Schwitters and Lynch in their use of random objects/images, but, more emphatically, states the kinship he feels himself with an artist who "had an obsession with building something for no purpose." Last year's version of *Erotic Misery*, at a museum in Germany's Chemnitz, was a very Schwitters-like cave of jagged shapes (assembled from hundreds of cardboard triangles) that housed all the *Blue Velvet* creations. And while the installation in the Sculpture Center's basement focuses mostly on the reconstruction of the film's dim hallways, it, too, includes a room of jumbled icons—notably an array of table lamps, all handmade and all copies of those seen in the movie (as well as a couple from *Twin Peaks* and *Mulholland Drive*). The effort, weeks of 16-hour days, brought Tomaszewski to the verge of collapse and pushed his viewings of the film up to 130.

Tomaszewski's tastes and projects run well beyond Lynch. An upcoming installation at a Toronto museum, still in preliminary stages, will consist of what he calls "fragments of space—several characteristic corridors from five different films," a list that likely includes one directed by Kubrick (a director who tops his list, "if I have to choose an absolute favorite") and the first chapter of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue*, the series of well-regarded shorts on the Ten Commandments. For an exhibit in 2001 at Dublin's Irish Museum of Modern Art, Tomaszewski selected

35 crime films—*Rear Window*, *Gun Crazy*, and *Pierrot le fou*, to name three—and using the original scripts and Irish actors, he spent two months filming (on the cheap, after midnight) their dialogue-only, plan-the-escape scenes. Then he projected them, in sequence, inside a strange horse-drawn carriage he built from scratch, a Pushmi-pullyu invention with two front ends and (getting around restrictions for an outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease at the time) a real horse hitched to each, facing in opposite directions. Just as he's done for the *Blue Velvet* installations, Tomaszewski included no labels or guides for any of it. "I was always interested in the surrealistic way of not explaining exactly what is going on."

He hopes that his next major project—a series of posters for non-existent movies—"will totally confuse." They'll use the names of well-known directors and actors, with the usual dense small-text credits, and will appear around the city as a kind of street art, pasted up next to those advertising the real thing. "We'll see how far we can go with it," he says, "but it's quite an important part of the concept. I don't want to apply for a permit and all this... I want to create a new story. I don't just want to have posters hanging in a gallery." Individually painted, they won't resemble the typical American version, which Tomaszewski says, with a hint of disdain, "is always about selling the product." Rather, he'll draw inspiration from the Polish School of Posters—renowned in the '60s and '70s for their clean bold motifs—as well as other European styles that he's meticulously researching. So look for announcements around town of a trilogy by Lynch, a mysterious tragedy called *Akira*, and—presented with a striking red-and-black image of a steam engine—a "hauntingly fascinating" work by the masterful Andrzej Wajda. Like fantasies from a film buff's midnight bull session, they're coming soon to a non-existent theater near you.

Kurt Schwitters would approve: Tomaszewski and handiwork



Alana Curdy