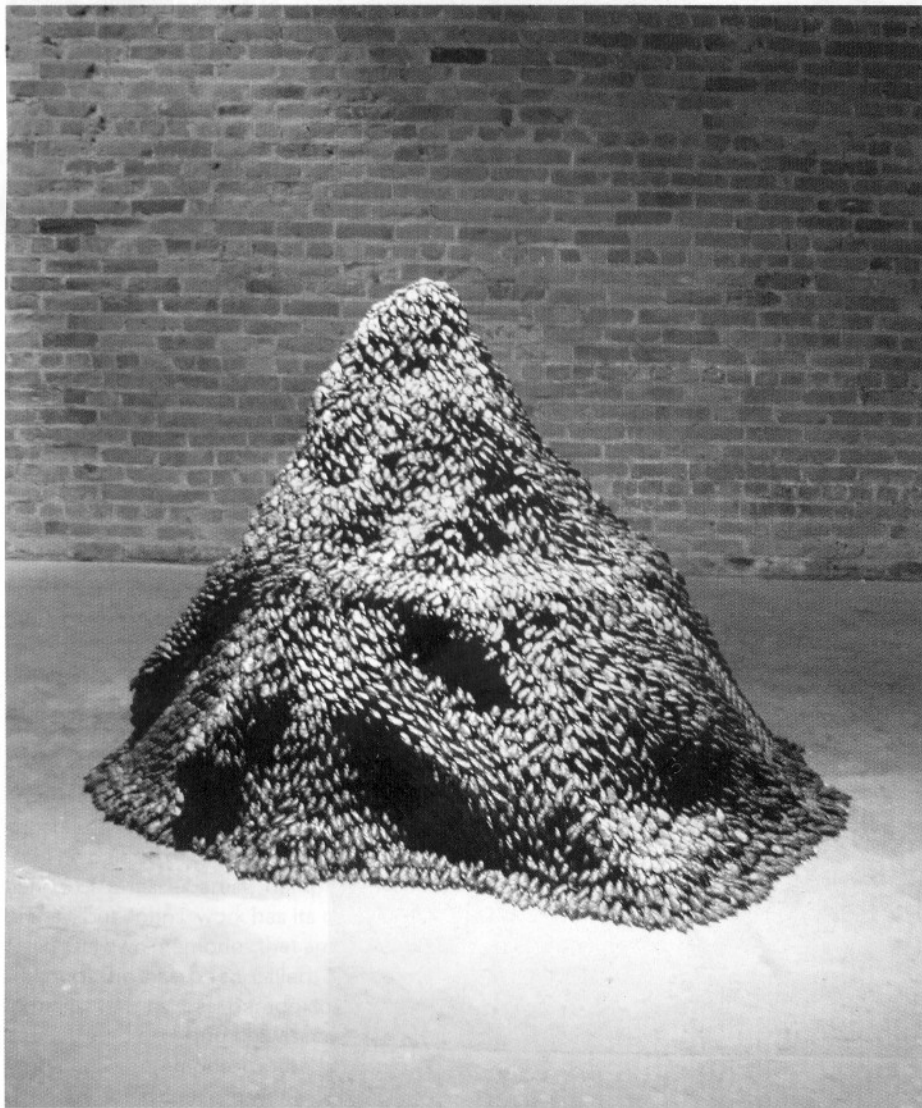


WHEN CANARIES FACE THE CAT

Katherine Dolgy Ludwig

Tom Bogaert's solo exhibition *Amahoro* was on view in February 2008 at Jack the Pelican Presents Gallery in Brooklyn.



Courtesy of Jack the Pelican Presents.

Amahoro—the title of Tom Bogaert's first solo show—means Peace. It is a word of African origin with special meaning in Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo, lately just some of the nations politically torn with carefree violence and genocide. It is said that when members of different tribes greet, they hopefully wish each other "amahoro"—yet with artists like Bogaert popping up with carnage video games and mountains of rodents, how can any of those memories be so simply buried? Jack the Pelican unapologetically shows artists that challenge political quiet. Well thank God for that.

Bogaert, who was a lawyer for Amnesty International, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, isn't interested in disregarding what he saw. As a UN representative to Rwanda he documented genocide and human rights abuses in Africa and Asia for 14 years. Five years ago he resigned to become an artist. There are only four pieces on view at Jack the Pelican, each one startling.

This is Rwanda, stylish in its staged animation, draws the viewer into a little 90s pop ditty pumping Game boy, only to slash down all hope with footage of witnessed

machete butchery—the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, in which as many as 80,000 ethnic Tutsis and their moderate Hutu sympathizers were killed—it's unforgettable. In the center of the gallery black licorice mice fight their way up a mountain obscured by the swarm, their smell unavoidably strong and sweet in the closed gallery space. Ironically titled with the technical term for constructed silence, *Black Noise* waits at the wall nearby, thumping a deafening bleak beat into the space produced by a stylus on the backs of a licorice mouse-infested spinning turntable. Lastly, in *Canary Space Station*, two canaries sing live in an elaborate ad-hoc contraption built by clumsy hands. In the audience-powered spectacle, with chilling sound, smart titling, and appropriately high/low tech configurations, Bogaert delivers his message unflinchingly.

Traditionally, New York has provided many venues that support the individual voices of artists who finally have a chance to speak, whether they have been witness to abuse or suffered abuse themselves. There are private and publicly funded institutions, like freeDimensional, also Brooklyn-based, that not only show the artwork of political refugees—like Senegalese painter and installation artist Bara Diokhane, cartoonist and painter Issa Nyaphaga of Cameroon, Iranian fiction writer Moniro Ravinipour, and Congolese playwright and novelist Pierre Mumbere Mujomba—but also provide them with temporary places to stay while exhibiting here, as well as a network of practical help. As freeDimensional notes on its website: "independent art and media are communication tools that can be used to resist entrenched power structures. We understand that resistance often results in censorship." Artists need support to make sure that acts of atrocity are not forgotten, that they are enabled to testify to what they have seen, so that they won't be afraid to say so. Should canaries be hopeful when facing cats?

Thanks to organizations like freeDimensional and Jack the Pelican, artists who want to flip the bird, have been given the chance. □