

Illuminating

Seeing the *Light Traps*

By Alice Winn

At the Wood Street Galleries, German artist Mischa Kuball evokes both heaven and hell on earth. Illumination and darkness chase each other through spare sets where beauties and horrors play. Using projected light and imagery upon minimalist sculpture, Kuball's installations reveal a multiplicity of meanings within their simplicity.

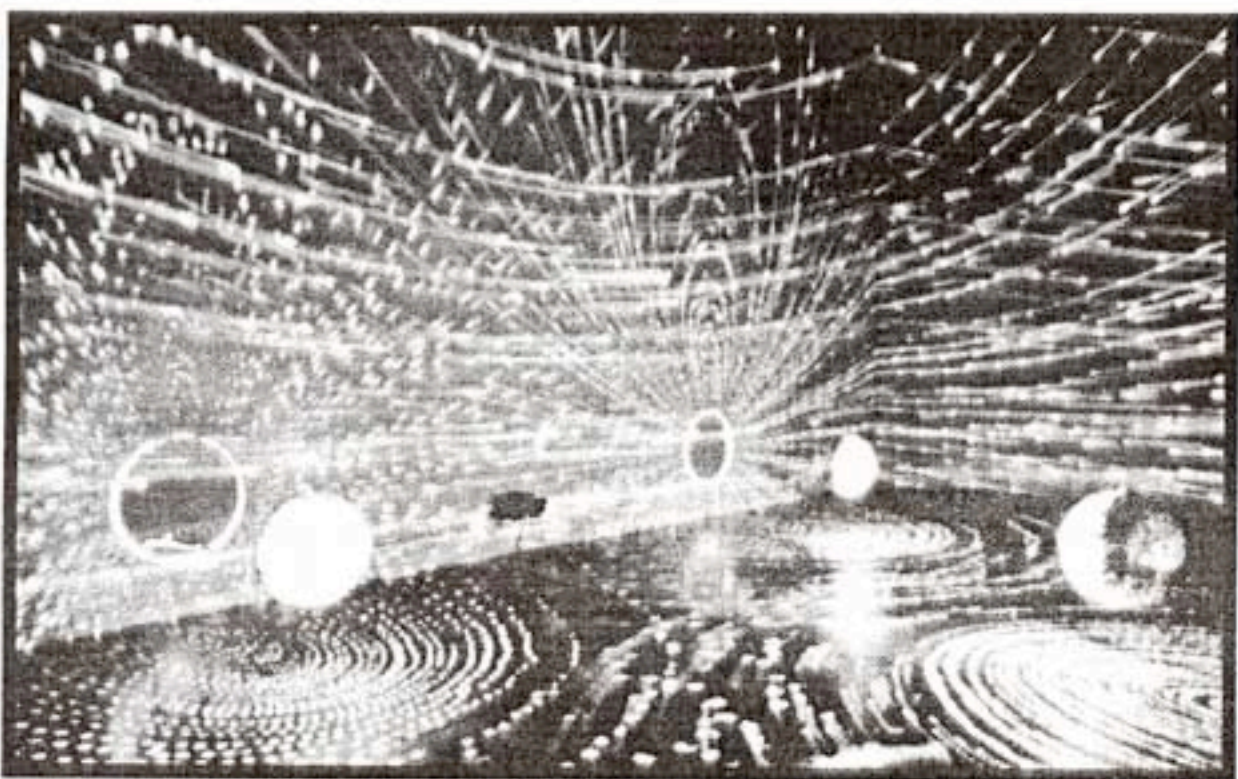
His magic appears to all be done with smoke and mirrors to produce realms of luminous immateriality. Within one blackened gallery, slide projectors shoot the words "speech," "space," and "speed" onto glittering, spinning disco balls. Their distorted, broken letters, infinite and glowing, splinter through the air, turning the room into a viewer's private solar system, a starry blizzard that seems to penetrate physical reality and burn through it — a place where real and imaginary things mingle. There's a sensation of stepping out of the empty night, hypnotized, onto some dance floor only to follow one's own shadow through deepening dreams, awakening just on the edge of language. It's a space without definition or time, where the world, possibly falling to ruins, remains far distant.

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of lab coats, parallel views of urban structures from Germany and Pittsburgh mix with photographs of vanished German cultural figures, building a web of familiarity, memory and interpretation. The vacant uniforms might recall concentration camp medical and psychological experimentation, provoking reactions of bodily and spiritual viola-

tion. The fleeting vistas of architectural achievements and introspective faces act as a counterforce that spotlights individual values.

Kuball also resurrects the haunted screen of German Expressionist cinema, with its atmospheres of psychological unrest and collective unease. Its imaginative terror predicted elements of the Nazi regime that was to come — the overreaching evil of its protagonists and its scenes of torture. For "Hitler's Cabinet" Kuball uses stills from the films, which rely on unbalanced framings, bizarre sets, motionless shadows and low-angle camera shots to produce a sense of entrapment or malaise. These images, transferred to slides, are intermittently projected from the ends of four rectangular boxes arranged as a cruciform. This mute object seems a symbol for the silent resignation and passivity



Mischa Kuball's "Speed/Space/Speech"

This port of entry offers the intoxication of exploring a limitless universe. But whatever multifaceted potentialities were discovered within this expansive free zone of abstract alphabetical glory get lost in what lies ahead, some of which is steeped in the most claustrophobic period in German history.

Nazi films attempted to reduce the population's intellectual capacities so as to facilitate acceptance of their propaganda. Seeming to summon these works' dark purpose, two video projections dissect a German word meaning "to ask," symbolically dismantling the will to question authority. Its disconnected letters beat wildly, like captured hearts, under the narrow gaze of some unseen eye. Yet there could be positive, formative shadings to the work. It could also be taken as a simulation of the mental experiences of very young children which must be a kaleidoscope of sensations and impressions, as they begin to link sounds with meanings, trying to make sense of a blooming, buzzing environment.

Kuball seems to indict totalitarian manipulation in other works. One piece could possibly refer to Nazism's intent to overthrow humanization and peaceful progress. Projected upon a circle

of those under the irrational power of tyrannical rule. The work creeps into consciousness quietly toward that lonely, interior landscape where reality fuses with nightmares. The spirit of violence that sweeps through the cross materializes into the shape of the swastika. This shifting apparition reflects that Nazism's existence depended upon its ability to transfigure all reality, leading the masses to believe in the solidity of the swastika world. In the calm between projections, however, the cruciform appears again. Enshrouded within this nether world, the sense of impending doom, while always threatening to overwhelm the scene, is, for these moments, in suspension. Fighting fire with fire, this installation of fearful grandeur acts as a reminder of the tragic dimensions of these visions, a cautionary statement against complacency toward all atrocities worldwide, historical and contemporary.

Kuball's work also indicates that sometimes the predilection for what promises to frighten, shake or repulse us is as deeply imprinted in the psyche as the counter-impulse toward light, truth and goodness. ☞

Light Traps continues through Dec. 26 at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. 471-5605.