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Artist portrait

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## Laura Kikauka

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Laura Kikauka

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### Big feelings in little things

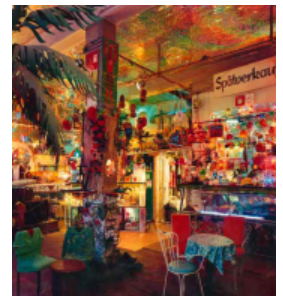
Laura Kikauka from Canada has been called a collectoholic and a technonymph. Her passion for collecting is limitless. She lives in her installations, her collages of kitsch, imitations, nick-nacks, throw-offs, flawed copies and toys. The world of accessories comes to life in her hands and proves to be laden with longing, grief and anxiety.

Whenever there is a good program on the wireless, food thaws in Laura Kikauka's fridge, not from heat generated by the romantic strains but rather because the passionate do-it-yourself artist, who loves to fiddle with wires, has coupled the fridge-door with the wireless. To hear heart-warming music, one needs only open the fridge.

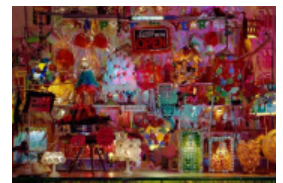
German wurst (sausage) is world-famous. Laura Kikauka came to Berlin in 1992 with her own little sausage, the musician Gordon Monohan, whom she later married, and was quickly bowled over by the one-way jars for wurst, especially those shaped like little bears, Berlin's emblem. She converted them into lamps and dressed them in lampshades of pink silk with tassels. It could be wurst, is written above them in magnetic letters, to acquaint children with the alphabet and the riches of culture. It could be wurst? could be much worse and is a shining example of Canadian fondness for bedside lamps and teddy-bears, if not for nibbling sausages in bed.

Other lamps are made of tikis. Some of these equal, and a precious few even excel, most wurst-jars in invention and cultural value. Made of plastic or glass they revive the ailing tradition of archaic masks, like those of gods and demons on totem-poles. These wonders from the past, once feared to be nearly extinct, now share the celebrity-status of Berlin bears and glimmer from lamps and bottles, as if whisked from their perishing forests and dying lakes to ornament the caves of tenement flats. Laura Kikauka came across them in the

## images



Work: Title Unknown



Schmalzlampe

desolate suburbs and welcomed them into her home with open arms.

Laura Kikauka reigns in the midst of her cult emblems. Her very own lamps shed light into darkness, truly not banishing it wholly but conjuring features up in the nearest shadows. Feathers and charming replicas of hens' feet vie with plastic carrots and toy weapons. It takes only a few volts to bring them to light and life. In Berlin in the 90s, Kikauka's priceless but uninsured collection was often camouflaged cunningly as a club-background for master musicians, but in the course of time it has come to be appreciated for what it is – the quintessence of civilisation. In the depths of a grey Berlin winter, her frilly bears and bare frills strike warmth into the hearts of pilgrims.

In 2001, Laura Kikauka yielded to public demand and kindly made an alphabetical list of her unique collection, but destiny flung out its hand and tipped printer's ink over part of the compendium. The list begins intimately with album-covers and ashtrays and continues in the same domestic vein to fabrics, feet and fish but, tragically, between man and woman toilet symbols and Niagara Falls souvenirs, a torrent of ink has flowed like a melting glacier, though zillions of sub-categories at the foot of the scroll leaves generous room for conjecture.

In Laura Kikauka's home and shrine in Berlin Mitte, each room has its own and inimitable quality. Nylon fur covers pillows and eiderdowns; plastic pearls hang like torrents of stars in the light from her windows; her rugs and wallpapers are mosaics of photographs; and cushions mimic cats with spherical eyes and sunglasses. Nothing but is pregnant with symbolism, fraught with feeling, chosen with love and taste.

'The things are so way out, they become way in,' says Laura Kikauka. No inch of bare wall remains not clad with ravishing hints of her deepest longings; no desire is nakedly exposed to the cold gaze of the sceptical. Yet will her wishes ever come true? Will the plastic lawn leading to her television lead her further to a moist meadow? Will the cat-photograph on her cushion whisper sweet nothings to her as the night draws in? Kikauka has been heard to murmur in troubled sleep of celebration and yet of failure...

On her arrival in Berlin in 1992, the city was quickly changing. For decades the western part had survived as a city of pensioners and suicide-cases. There was a lack of new industry. As soon as the wall dividing the city had fallen, there were changes on both sides. On the eastern side, dilapidated tenement blocks were thoroughly renovated, new electrical firms were founded, and residents began to hanker for western commodities. On the western side, the average age of residents fell. This hot-house rate of development and the wish to be international and modern are mirrored in Kikauka's collection. Much of what was tossed out onto the street was then tossed into her rooms in the last non-renovated house on Rosenthaler Straße. She granted these refugees a chance of survival; she offered the lonely a chance of partnership; she enabled the snows of yesteryear to refreeze.

But the queerness of Berlin's subculture is only one of Kikauka's inspirations. Her passion for collecting dates back to years in Canada where, in the 1980s, she began with the notion of a Funny Farm. This is a popular term for psychiatric clinics, where tossed-out humans are collected. The farm, which her parents lent her, was similar in granting a home to the outcast, and in lending esteem to the commonplace. She filled each room with things of a different kind. 'It was so designed that each room got a theme of its own,' she explains. 'For years I was obsessed with the notion of filling each room with things of a certain hue. I began with beige, went on to turquoise then turned to pink. I had certainly no liking for these hues, but put together in appropriate rooms, the things lost their ugliness. Then I began to animate them electrically, giving them little motors, to have them move. On going through the rooms, visitors activated sensors which animated the things or produced some cocktail music, which in the early 60s was everywhere. Then there was also... a kitchen whose utensils led lives of their own, a grotto to match the dream of any sorcerer's apprentice.' (Interview with Susanne Meyer-Büser, a handout from the Sprengel Museum Hannover, 2000).

The first Funny Farm was a manifestation of the urban in the midst of a wide



Wurst

and lonely landscape. The inspiration for the ordering of things comes also from nature, she says. Out in the country, she longed for the pace of city-life; in the city, she longs for the quiet of the countryside. These two contrary longings led to her forming, as a testament to the contrariness and absurdity of humanity, a collection of human artefacts in a place peopled mainly by animals.

But wherever they have been, her rooms have become meeting places. Kikauka likes them to function as collective living-rooms, where she, as the unknown genius, can move unheeded among strangers and view their appreciative reactions. She has made telephone kiosks, as in the House of World Cultures, and designed theatrical foyers and stages. Only in the last two or three years has the fruit of her affection found its way into museums, as in Hannover, Munich and Vienna. In *Glowing Pickle* (1992), her first installation in a Berlin garage, she and Gordon Monahan bought electrical waste and poured green vodka out as a libation. In *Late Buy* (1995/96) she sold nylon tights or do-it-yourself in a glass pavilion next to the Volksbühne, a well known theatre. In *Schmaltz-Wood* in front of the Praterbühne, the stools wore skirts, the tables bore phones, and Laura Kikauka in person and pyjamas of fake fur joined the band Fuzzy Love. Her art is humble, humane, hummed and humid.

In the era of electronic webs, Laura Kikauka's assemblies are webs of possessions. In form or function, shade or shape, things come to her from afar and discover their secret kinship. She preserves no virtual trash on gleaming screens but real and delightful originals, a bounty for eyes and ears, for hands and feet. Laura Kikauka has culled the real fruits of the past for the virtual present.

(Translation: Phil Stanway)

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## Bio

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Laura Kikauka was born in 1963 as the daughter of Lithuanian immigrants. After studying at the Ontario College of Art, she turned in 1981 to new technology, electronics and performances, developing her first *Funny Farm* on her parents' farm in Ontario in 1986. Grants took her to San Francisco and Austria. Since 1992 she has spent part of each year in Berlin and found a public of connoisseurs. Thanks to German appreciation, Canadians are beginning to think twice about her.

## Works

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### Group Exhibitions (Choice)

Exhibition / Installation

2005 "All About Berlin 3", WhiteBOX, Kultfabrik, Munich, Germany 2004 "Biennial Lodz", Biennial Lodz, Lodz, Poland 2001 "Aller Anfang ist Merz", House of World Cultures, Munich, Germany "QUOBO", Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany "Die schöne Gärtnerin", Galerie am Prater, Berlin, Germany "Sommerfest im Podewil", Podewil, Berlin, Germany 2000 "... Von Kurt Schwitters bis heute", Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover, Germany "QUOBO", HK Arts Centre, Hong Kong, China "Heimat Kunst", Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany 1999 "Und ab die Post", Postfuhramt, Berlin, Germany 1998 "Grenzgänge", Meinblau, Berlin, Germany "Fluten 2", Stadtbad Oderberger Straße, Berlin, Germany 1997 "Never Mind the Bolleges", Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam, Netherlands 1996 "Berlin-Moscow-Exchange", Galerie XL, Moscow, Russia 1995 "Arti et Amicitiae", Artists Union Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands "Artist in Residence", Contained, Voest Fabrik, Linz, Austria "You Can Run, but You Can't Hide!", Rupert Goldsworthy Galerie, Berlin, Germany "Many Portable Things", Galerie De Buck, Ghent, Belgium "A

Sense of Reality", Likör-Fabrik, Berlin, Germany 1994 "Kunst und Barbie", Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany "Chromapark", E-Werk, Berlin, Germany 1993 "Lydbelieder II", Museet for Samtidkunst, Roskilde, Denmark "Privat", Kunstwerke Berlin, Berlin, Deutschland, Germany "The Return of the Cadavre Exquisite", Drawing Center, New York, USA "Knocken (Fuzzy Money)", Galerie o zwei, Berlin, Germany 1992 "Headspace", Het Appolohuis, Eindhoven, Netherlands "Fetish", Lake Galleries, Toronto, Canada "Age of Electronicus", Lake Galleries, Toronto, Canada "Neurotic Art Show", Artist 's Space Gallery, New York, USA 1991 "Broken Music", Musee d'Art Contemporain, Montreal, Canada "Artist in Residence", The Exploratorium, San Francisco, USA 1990 "Artist in Residence", Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada "Headspace", Generator 547, New York, USA "Broken Music", Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, Canada 1989 "Machinations", La Societe D'esthetique de Quebec, Quebec, Canada "Beyond Electronics", Gallery 1.1.1., University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada 1988 "La Salamandre", Musee d'Art Moderne, Bourges, France 1983 "Currently Alternating", Artist Resource Centre, Toronto, Canada

## Solo Exhibitions (Choice)

Exhibition / Installation

2004 "Janet Cardiff, Laura Kikauka, John Körmelin", The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada "Laura Kikauka - Exactly the Same, but Completely Different", The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada 2003 "Laura Kikauka - It could be worst", DNA - Die neue Aktionsgalerie, Berlin, Germany 2002 "M.A.N.I.A.C.", Mak Museum für Kunstgewerbe, Vienna, Austria 2001 "Dream Home", Kunstprojekt Riem, Munich, Germany "Fashion Show & Fuzzy Love", Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg, Germany 2000 "Festival of Vision", Tamar Centre, Hong Kong, China 1999 "Camp Insomnia", The Western Front, Vancouver, Canada "Time for Tomorrow", Marstall Theater, Munich, Germany "Laura Kikauka - Relay Room", New Music Concerts Festival, Toronto, Canada 1997 "Set design, Schlacht um Europa I – XVI", Volksbühne, Berlin, Germany 1996 "Forbidden Sciences", CCA, Glasgow, Scotland "Schmalzwald", Foyer des Theaters im Prater, Berlin, Germany 1995 "Spätkauf", Kunstsalon im Pavillon an der Volksbühne, Berlin, Germany "Laura Kikauka - The Pickle Barbecue", Contained, Linz, Austria "Laura Kikauka - My Greasy Hole", Galerie Paradigma, Linz, Austria "Laura Kikauka - Bastlerine", Kunsthaus Raskolnikow, Dresden, Germany "Laura Kikauka - Only Seat in the Theatre", Spiel.Art Theaterfestival, Munich, Germany 1994 "Maschinen Stürme", Kampnagel, Hamburg, Germany 1992 "The Glowing Pickle", Edison-Höfe, Berlin, Germany "Distillation from the Funny Farm", Technology Fair, S.U.N.Y. Binghampton, New York, USA 1991 "Headspace", Generator, New York, USA "Laura Kikauka - The Eternal Nano-second", Kutsher 's Country Club, Monticello, New York, USA 1990 "Museum of Unnatural History", Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, New York, USA "Laura Kikauka - The Electronic Bog", Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Centre, New York, USA "Misplaced Affection", A Space, Toronto, Canada

## Projects

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