

# Art

## Tea-time in the Gulag

A photographer documents "model" gulags in Russia with surprising results

BY LEA FEINSTEIN

**D**uring two summers and a winter, world-renowned photojournalist Carl de Keyzer toured and photographed Russian gulags accompanied by a local photographer, an interpreter, and two army colonels as bodyguards. Between long waits for official permission to enter the camps, he drank quantities of vodka and tea with his companions, and more than once had to convince local officials that he was not a spy. At first he was shown only the "model" gulags, like Camp No. 27 located within the city of Krasnoyarsk.

"What I saw there was quite surprising," de Keyzer recalls. "I read Solzhenitsyn 15-20 years ago, so I had a very grim idea of these camps, if they still existed anyway ... but the camp itself is sort of a Disneyland ...

there's all kinds of things, ornaments that were really very surprising, like wooden houses to keep the guards in, just like you would see at the entrance of any cheap amusement park. Everything was in color, all the walls and interiors, mostly light blue, light green."

Officials accompanying the photog-

raphers regularly "staged" the prisoners in scenes of work or recreation. His Russian colleague compared it to *The Truman Show* which he had seen in the local cinema. De Keyzer, looking for the reality behind the trappings, worked around these constraints. "It was a game and we knew what the rules were. And they knew after a while that we were playing with them, and they were playing with us, too. It got interesting."

Later, he was able to tour the country prisons, built along railroad trunk lines in bleak deforested areas. Whole vil-

lages of prisoners' families — with cottages and schools — spring up near the prisons, and families' lives are structured around visits to the prisoners.

The results of those trips to the gulags in 2001 and 2002 are on display at the Robert Koch Gallery along with de Keyzer's earlier depiction of religious extremism in America called "God, Inc."

A chronicler of the fleeting expressions on a person's face, de Keyzer has an uncanny ability to engage us in the lives of his subjects.

In *Russia. Siberia. Tchournojar*,

### "Carl de Keyzer"

Through April 28 at Robert Koch Gallery at 49 Geary (at Grant) S.F. Admission is free; call 421-0122 or visit [www.kochgallery.com](http://www.kochgallery.com).

### "Heaven Is a Place on Earth"

Jacob Dahlgren is a young Swedish artist in love with color and pattern who finds his inspiration in everyday life and his source materials in mundane objects. He has made dozens of paintings by precisely copying the patterns of his striped T-shirts. (He owns hundreds.) Repetition is his mantra and in his installations he transforms found objects (yogurt cups, ribbons, dart boards) into art. In a series of paintings shown here, he juxtaposes strips of pastel-colored commercial paint chips, a quiet bow to the painter Agnes Martin. With black-and-white plastic IKEA coat hangers, he creates an "endless column," tipping his hat to the sculptor Brancusi and the Op-art painter Bridget Riley. In his informal photographs we see through his eyes as he looks at the world. Stripes and checks are everywhere — on his girlfriend's ear muffs, on caution tapes at the airport, and on the shirt of the burly customer at the checker-tiled fast food shop. His appetite for color is voracious and his sense of

humor contagious. Dahlgren has created numerous public commissions in Europe such as highway roundabouts, student unions, and corporate headquarters. He will be representing Sweden in the Nordic Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale. —L.F.

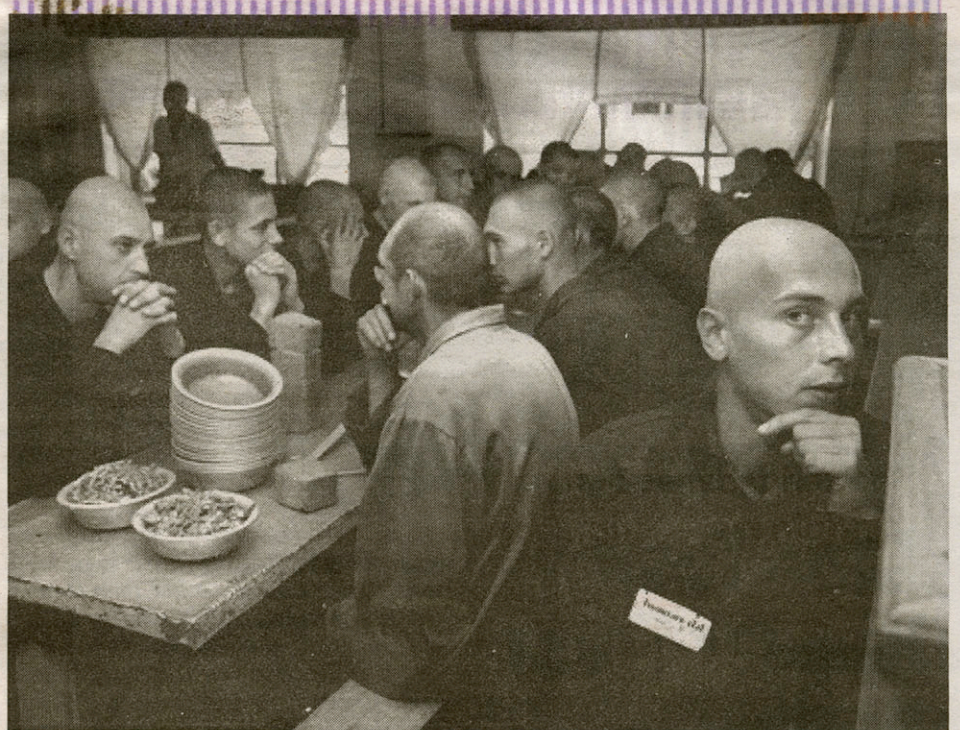
Through April 24 at Steven Wolf Fine Arts, 49 Geary (at Grant), S.F. Admission is free; call 263-3677 or visit [www.stevenwolffinearts.com](http://www.stevenwolffinearts.com).

### "Liminality: Art on the Threshold"

The Palace of Fine Arts/Exploratorium is a challenging but fun venue for an installation artist. A cavernous hangar with steel trusses and concrete floor, it is filled with ingenious exhibits about science, art, and perception. Many are marvelous works of art themselves. How does an artist compete with this rich environment, or even make a dent? In this show, where five works were "hidden in plain sight," only one artist came out ahead. Paul Andrew Hayes' *The Thing About Accumulation* addressed both the science and the scale of the place. He

strung 5,500 crumpled pieces of white paper on dozens of thin steel wires to form an 18'-by-18' suspended cube (with a lower corner "cut out" and offset). Porous and light, it rustles and moves in the ambient air. Sayed Alavi's computer-controlled array of electric bulbs in simple sockets is less compelling than adjacent displays. Alex Clausen's assemblage of found objects lashed to a second-story balcony and Erica Gangsei's *Retrofit*, crocheted spider-webs on ceiling-high trusses, were almost imperceptible in the visual din. Lead Pencil Studio contributed a pseudo diorama, *In Between*. A meditation on archaeology and "breaking ground," it seemed contrived and out of step with the liveliness of the Exploratorium. In a clean "art" space, it would read differently. Young viewers approaching the glass walls and barren slope of dirt lit by an arch of fluorescent tubes waited for the hamsters to emerge. —L.F.

Through June 3 at the Palace of Fine Arts, 3601 Lyon St, S.F. Admission \$13 adults, \$10 students; call 397-5673 or visit [www.exploratorium.edu](http://www.exploratorium.edu).



Carl de Keyzer captured life in Siberian prisons, including "model" ones like this.

*Camp #22, 2002*, a young woman, dressed up for visitors' day, descends a staircase into a swarm of black-clad boys, their heads freshly shaved. She is a startled bird, pinned at the angle of the staircase — her hand stiffened on the railing, her eyes wide. Who does she see? A brother? A lover?

In another shot from the same camp, teenage boys are crowded around tables waiting for a meal. In the center of the frame, a young man, arms crossed and elbows on the table, lifts his eyes to the camera — sad, suspicious, resigned ... a touch malignant. Who are these boys, and how did they end up here?

Metaphors of incarceration abound. A captive wolf paces in a gold-painted cage; pigeons in a closed courtyard flock to a seed trough tended by an old inmate. Bleak winter vistas of camps (minus-50 degrees centigrade) are both harsh and ethereal. *Russia. Siberia. Camp #27, 2002* (taken at the model gulag) frames an icy prison gate, and in *Russia. Siberia. Camp #12, 2002*, clouds of silvery steam envelop a crouched man who tries to warm his hands as a fellow prisoner, across a sheet of frozen ground, carves a life-size horse in ice.

The context of an exhibition has a powerful effect on how it is viewed. I first saw de Keyzer's gulag photos in

2004 at the Museum of the International Red Cross in Geneva. It's an angular modern building that houses a permanent installation of millions of index cards in boxes — ranks upon ranks in alphabetical order — each bearing the names and statistics of war prisoners from World War I. An adjacent exhibit of children's playhouses at the Geneva museum featured prototypes of child-sized prosthetics — false hands, arms, and legs for the thousands of Afghan children who lost limbs in landmine explosions. De Keyzer's haunting photos of the men and boys in the confines of the "model Russian prisons" lose some — but not all — of their emotional clout in the context of a commercial gallery. It is strange to see them here.

In de Keyzer's sharply observed scenes, there is a deep humanity and pervasive curiosity. He has a keen eye for the small dramas of daily life under difficult conditions, and an unsentimental patience for the follies of his fellow human beings. Like Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson before him — who, like de Keyzer, were Magnum photographers — his mission is to take pictures that reveal and interpret the events of the world as he sees it. It's not often the gulag comes to San Francisco; it's worth a visit. ●