

## Cultural Domestication - Instinctual Desire: Interpretations and Insights

### Not At Home

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Jiří Příhoda includes no written commentary on the Web site that contains an extensive and visually eloquent record of his work. He categorizes his work only according to, first, a minimal chronology – a body of work in each decade – and then a typology of work within and across the decades. In the 1980s, these typologies are based on natural elements; from the 1990s, they are those of the art-cultural world: sculpture, objects, installations, and video. Descriptions of his work are terse – title, date, materials, and dimensions. The work itself, or, rather, its image, is powerful. Natural, artificial, and digital light, captured by the chemical surface of photography and the pixels of the microchip, ripples, glows, explodes, and defines spaces that are compelling yet strangely quiet and hollow.

Příhoda's brief biography documents his birth as taking place in 1966. Thus, Jiri was two years old when the Prague Spring took place and twenty-three years old when the Velvet Revolution transformed his homeland, the Czech Republic. He was twenty-four years old when he began his art studies, and thirty years old, when he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, the most prestigious Czech art school.

The first documented work on Jiří Příhoda's Web site dates to 1985. He was nineteen years old when he began to construct elemental landscape settings for the human body. This work, completed before his art studies in Prague, appears to have had no audience other than the author and the camera.

The work of the 1990s and after is different. Equally minimal and elemental, it is architectural—in both its scale and subject matter. It is set within and reinterprets distinct buildings, including a number of gallery spaces. It becomes more and more architectural over

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time, showing its construction. At the turn of the new millennium, it even includes a design (unbuilt) for a private house. Příhoda, or rather Příhodadesign, now works 'in culture with a specialization in fine art and architecture'. As he has embraced architecture he also has embraced the culture industry and the business of design.

Why? The answer, of course, is that we do not know. If Příhoda wanted to tell us, he would. This artist is wary of words. This artist arranges words – but only for others. We cannot speak for him.

Why not? Because 'he' has already been 'spoken for', too often.

The history of the Czech nation is a history of language as power. The Czech nation, during the twentieth century alone, experienced the dominance of three languages. German, followed by Czech, followed by German again, followed by Russian, finally followed by Czech. Thus the Hapsburg Empire was succeeded in 1918 by the newly independent Czech Republic, itself erased by National Socialist occupation in 1938 ('that far off nation of whom we know little', in the words of Neville Chamberlain), followed by brief independence, ending with the rise of Communism in 1948, itself sealed by the Russian invasion of 1968. With each language came an ideology; an 'ism' with every language. A powerful suspicion of theory and words, across all areas of Czech culture, has been the result.

The history of the Czech nation is also a history of space and power. The Czech nation, during the twentieth century alone, lost and gained significant areas of territory. It was created 'ex novo' by the Versailles Treaty of 1918 as a buffer state between the empires of Germany, Austria, and Russia. The buffer was buffeted in 1938 when it lost the Sudetenland to Germany, and in 1939, when it lost Slovakia to a Hungarian National Socialist administration, and the Czech Lands and Moravia to the German National Socialist administration. In 1945, it lost Ruthenia to Russia. In 1993, Slovakia became an independent nation. With each spatial shift came an architectural rupture. Imperial classicism was replaced by progressive modernism; the Nazi nationalist vernacular was replaced by monumental Stalinist classicism and finally the banality of architectural mass production. Today, the ecstasy of the marketplace instead offers every architectural style and form, ornamental element, and type of art gallery to an increasingly

prosperous Czech population, voracious for consumer pleasures.

To counter the new cultural gluttony, reputable Czech architects and artists have, for the most part, adopted a strict, almost monastic diet of minimalism. Příhoda's 'silence' is therefore eloquent about the cacophony that surrounds it and the history that preceded it.

Příhoda's works in nature of the 1980s show the authentic spaces available to Czechs before 1989. During the Communist decades, every second Czech family had a 'dacha' in the 'forest'. Here people would sing, talk, drink, make love, and find refuge in family, sexuality, and desire. It is no accident that Příhoda stands naked on one of the works of that period. Artists and architects, well supported by the state if they produced buildings, sculptures, murals, and prints celebrating the victory of communism, had to withdraw to rural space to produce independent works; the Czech architectural firm, SIAL Liberec, spent the 1970s and 1980s working out of a legendary rural farmhouse in northern Bohemia.



UNTITLED, 1987 Paint, combustible 205" X 495"

Příhoda's shift to architectural works from the 1990s onwards shows the reintegration of independent artists and architects into mainstream culture. Příhoda's work also stands for the capacity of the new generation of artists and architects to create spaces of 'silence' within the commercial art world—while at the same time, they draw sustenance from it. Thus the work of contemporary Czech artists speaks of being 'not at home' within the art gallery and the international art system. And the work of contemporary Czech architects is not yet fully 'at home' within the postmodern city and the global market for architectural services.

Příhoda's work, seen in the context of Czech culture, suggests that its art and architecture can never be 'at home'. While we can feel, we cannot fill the void.