

Cultural Domestication - Instinctual Desire: Interpretations and Insights



Jiří Černický :: *FIRST SCHIZOPHRENIA PRODUCED IN SERIES* :: 1998 :: video performance

SWEET & BITTER

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"We always look at things together with their environment, and we habitually consider what they mean in this context. If they suddenly secede from it, they become incomprehensible and awful, like the first day after the creation of the world probably was, before phenomena became accustomed to each other and to us. So also, in glass-clear isolation, everything becomes larger and more distinct, but above all, more authentic and demonic."

Robert Musil – Posthumous Papers of a Living Author, 1936

Considering that the Czech Republic has joined the European Union, it may seem that the social and political transformation started after the decomposition of the totalitarian regime has been accomplished. How-

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ever, the situation is, of course, much more complicated, and in a number of areas the transformation processes are still progressing, or are even just beginning. Also, in the visual arts (as well as in the whole cultural sphere), we can observe the penetration of hybrid manifestations that signal the persisting atmosphere of the changing social paradigm.

Yet in the early 1990s, immediately after the so-called Velvet revolution in the optimistic climate of the times, it seemed there was no barrier to bar Czech visual art from quickly taking its firm position within the social structures and, at the same time, to achieving recognition in the Euro-American cultural context. This positive expectation was probably supported by a romantic adoration of artistic creation, which was an echo of the still substantial influence of late, postwar modernism. Czech visual art, its totalitarian past, as well as the new, post-communist present was, from the domestic point of view, understood as a specific quality that was not quite comparable with the world and, therefore, in demand. In addition, this exclusiveness was combined with an ideological evaluation of art as well as a specific authorial attitude where freedom of content or formal radicality was understood as a political act.

The initial euphoria evaporated quickly though, during the continuing social transformation, and the seriousness and depth of problems connected with both the production and function of art were increasingly distinct. The cursed, but in a way safe and easy to understand, bipolarity of the totalitarian world totally disintegrated, which in the environment enhanced the permanent crisis of the content of an artwork, as well as an artist's social status. Exhibition institutions were not able to react to the changing situation in art either; they have not become places of mutual communication, being afraid of multivalent openness. On the contrary, they made themselves into museums and answered the uncertainty of plurality with a strengthened emphasis on the denotations of modernistic academism. We can also find here an analogy with the broader social situation, especially the awakening from the dream of privatization or the loss of the starring role among the Central-European democracies.

The consequence of the stagnation of museums and galleries, the reduction of communication channels with the public, sporadic anyway, and insufficient involvement in the workings of international cultural operation, was the growing isolation of the Czech art scene. This became even more intensive in the late 1990s, when the historically conditioned interest in

the artistic production of the former communist countries subsided in Euro-America and, at the same time, the last residues of financial support for visual arts remaining from the totalitarian state died down. It seems that in this period, the Czech visual art scene reached the imaginary bottom, which became synonymous with the partial decline of the first, post-revolution generation of Czech artists, with a repeated attempt to find the national specifics of visual arts and a resignation from intensive cultural cooperation within the post-communist countries or the deepening crisis of the most significant national institution in the field of contemporary art in the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art of the National Gallery in Prague.

However, occurring simultaneously, with this deep fall and in the context of contemporary Czech visual art since the end of the 1990s, we can trace individual, group and, even rarely, institutional activities using new strategies of artistic creation and public presentation. These activities are connected with the generation of authors born at the turn of the 60s and 70s, who have acquired an impressive, though a trifle ill-fitting label: "1968-Generation." Within this framework, for the first time in the Czech environment, features typical of the contemporary Euro-American culture can be distinctly recognized. This is seen in an emphasis on the nonartistic contents of an artifact, which derives its foundation in the effort for open communication between an artwork and the viewer, reflecting the post-totalitarian and transformational processes in a natural way. Besides this social sight, an ease of expression appears in this generation's works, both in the genre range and in the variable use of different media-not so widespread in the Czech milieu-especially digital photography, the video-art, or computer techniques. In this context, we cannot leave out the newly defined issue of the center and the periphery, which in the Czech environment is defined in relations to foreign countries and as it concerns the rising regional scenes of contemporary visual art (Brno, Ostrava, Ústí nad Labem).

The truth is, though, that these new activities on the Czech scene have a markedly hybrid character compared to the international context. The source of such incompatibility is not personal authorial attitudes, but again the broader frame of art - its social or institutional anchoring. The insufficient structure of the post-totalitarian Czech society and its distinctively national character, together with the non-existence of multicultural elements or so-called citizen principles play an important role, indeed. The position of the state apparatus, still strong and omnipresent then projects

in all levels of artistic operation. The most serious problem in this situation seems to be the continuing absence of a specialized centre for contemporary art working internationally. In this situation, the artists associated in the loose-fitting "1968-Generation" often choose the strategy of deviation from the local environment, and become wittingly international. At the exhibition, "Bohemian Birds," in Kunst Haus Dresden, which was one of the few comprehensive reviews of contemporary Czech art abroad (2000), the German curator Harald Kunde commented on their attitudes pertinently:

*"The younger the artists were, the more significant was their inner orientation to international development: there was no more a question of a specific heritage of the Eastern avant-garde or Czech characteristics ñ it was cheerfully considered obsolete. The important thing was success, the possibility to leave and return again, the participation in exhibitions, scholarships, lectures..."*² This shift is visible in a changed perspective, which views the Czech art scene as already a part, though by far not the most important one, of the broader Euro-American context. A number of young artists are starting to cooperate naturally with foreign curators and galleries, they are globalizing their language, though at the same time they have not lost certain particularities arising from their own historical and cultural experiences. However, these activities still only have an individual character and are not part of the systematic international cultural policy of local institutions, despite the exception of those steadily trying to make some steps in this direction (House of Art Brno, House of Art České Budějovice, Display Gallery Praha, Emil Filla Gallery Ústí nad Labem, Futura Gallery Prague, Center for Contemporary Art Prague).

In the past years, aforementioned situation has brought a number of quality authorial achievements, fully compatible within the international context and presented in prestigious European museums and galleries. At the same time, however, the crisis on all levels of the domestic artistic operation has deepened, and this paradoxically weakens the general international position of the Czech art scene. This, among other things, results in the poor participation of Czech artists in prestigious displays, such as Documenta in Kassel, the traditional Venice Biennial, or even the migrating biennial Manifesta focused on young artists' work. The seriousness of such absence becomes even more apparent if we realize the possibly anxious political correctness of these events, their effort to represent national artistic scenes democratically and multiculturally, as well as the fact that in

the early 1990s (the period of high interest in the post-totalitarian countries' visual art), Czech art was an obvious part of them. The question is, whether this strengthening weightlessness of contemporary Czech art is a consequence of its spiritual and expressive diversity, or above all it reflects the disorderliness of its own social and institutional frame.

The contradiction between searching for substantive and aesthetic originality on the one hand, and the aspiration for integration in a broader socio-cultural context on the other hand, could be yet understood as one of the key moments of contemporary Czech visual art. Artistic activities that are being born in such an atmosphere are rooted in hybrid social conditions representing deep political transformation, and at the same time they use specific communication strategies oscillating between a local aesthetic tradition and a global visual language. The bipolarity of such a cultural scheme is above all manifested in the accent representing the phenomenon of relations between the center and the periphery. Yet, the proclaimed "otherness" of the periphery follows up the critics of the so-called Western world dominance, and, in connection with Derrida's "différance", also the principles of deconstruction. Contemporary Czech art often applies this "otherness" in a process of denoting, while within its framework it prefers hybrid models of documentarism, fictitiousness or representation. An aesthetic discourse of visual uncertainty and seduction thus emerges, imbued with the total absence of any center and intensive supplementarity of meaning.

Within such a loosened discourse, in order for them to be able to fully use the dichotomy of the periphery presence and its artistic reflection, the authors assume the position of anthropologists or ethnographers analyzing the social and cultural manifestations of a specific community and its members. An American critic, Hal Foster, justifies the application of the anthropological and ethnographical model in contemporary art as follows: *"First,... anthropology is prized as the science of alterity, in this regard it is, along with psychoanalysis, the lingua franca of artistic practice and critical discourse alike. Second, it is the discipline that takes culture as its object, and this expanded field of reference is the domain of postmodernist practice and theory (thus also the attraction to cultural studies and, to a lesser extent, new historicism). Third, ethnography is considered contextual, the often automatic demand for which contemporary artists and critics share with other practitioners today, many of whom aspire to fieldwork in the everyday. Fourth, anthropology is thought to arbitrate the interdisci-*

plinary, another often rote value in contemporary art and criticism. Fifth, the recent self-critique of anthropology renders it attractive, for it promises a reflexivity of the ethnographer at the center even as it preserves a romanticism of the other at the margins.”³ In the Euro-American context, this model is used on various levels of intermingling of the artistic creation and social reality while it perhaps dominates most significantly in the area of gender art. The phenomenon of the periphery and its interdisciplinary exploration is thus not at all limited to the geographic issue, but it is underlined in a large number of contradictory cultural processes of the globalized world.

Similar, clearly articulated, decentralized positions, however, seldom occur in our environment and are definitely not in the nature of established streams or movements. However, a certain alternative of pronounced and socially engaged artistic expression in a local milieu can be the consistent use of the site-specific principles. These principles do not focus directly on the issues of race, gender, or other social groups, but are based on an understanding of a specific place or a significant situation as a cultural/social sign. The artwork within its framework does not imitate, but rather, documents reality, deconstructs reality, creates an illusion of a real action, confronts reality with artificiality. The reality that becomes a theme is at the same time viewed in a complex way in the intersection of specific features of the historic, the social, the cultural and the aesthetic. In this way, an aesthetic code comes into being whose basic function dwells in the capability of an authentic and tautological reference of a place, an urban complex and its social climate.

The site-specific principle and the interdisciplinary methods of its analysis within contemporary Czech artistic creation are also perceived in the selection of media and formal methods. The nature of the place is used as a visual metaphor, its recording (often a photograph) escalates the tension between the essence of reality and the fiction of aesthetic forms. In addition to documentary methods, site-specific elements are applied in the form of intervention and confrontation of the specific milieu with an external action with different cultural or social criteria. Another sign of evidence of a place being made the theme is the utilization of performance methods whereby the author physically enters the space and models an illusive action in it. Last but not least, the interconnection with the milieu asserts itself as it stresses a public component in the form of public art or new

genre public art. Within its framework, the artwork leaves the traditional structure of the exhibition operation (in the Czech Republic insufficient and, for an artist, often unacceptable) and undertakes an insecure way of communication in the open space of everyday life.

Being aware of the accent put on the projection of a specific environment into the structure of an artifact, it is obvious that Czech art often mythologizes itself or, perhaps more accurately, its own discourse. This anthropological projection of contemporary art certainly has its roots in the modernistic conception of exploring formal boundaries of an artifact. It is just modernism as a rich source of stories to be read in a new way, to re-cultivate their cultural as well as social potentials. The relativizing pathos of modernism surely convenes with the current transformational reality of not only the post-communist environment, but also the Euro-American world in the era of global (and to a certain extent also multicultural) terrorism.

From this point of view, it is clear that there are four basic spheres of issues pre-dominating Czech contemporary art - they, however, blend with the global social context. Without a doubt, one of these issues is the reflection of often very dramatic political and cultural stirrings reflecting the social transformation after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the early 1990s. These hard-biting topics, however, are not handled from clearly cut sub-cultural positions in the post-totalitarian environment, as was (and still often is) usual in so-called Western art. Maybe a certain diffidence about the involvement of art as the heritage of totalitarian cultural policy plays a role here, but at the same time it is obvious that this more inward and also individualized approach better suits the general communication strategies of the local audience. In simplification, perhaps we can say that post-totalitarian art deals with the social topics due to the compulsion to entrench the intimate principles of sharing social reality, rather than the desire to contribute to the instrumentalization of its institutional reflection.

Another important moment creating the character of contemporary Czech art is its relation to the global cultural context. Together with the destruction of the socialist regime, new topics started to appear in the local artistic discourse that, owing to the state of the totalitarian society, were not yet topical enough or could not be discussed due to political repression. Into these new areas of interest, we can involve criticism of the power of media, development of technologies, consumer mechanisms and social violence, as well as gender, race, multicultural or environmental issues. An

interesting impulse in this area has proved to be the collision between the (transformation) experience of representatives of the contemporary Czech art scene and the rules of a functioning global society.

In listing the important principles determining the form of contemporary Czech art, it is essential to note the deconstruction of its modernistic roots from the point of view of late-postmodern philosophical and cultural standpoints. The form of an artwork, its projection into the rules of the social hierarchy and also the exploration of models and limits of communication between the artifact and the viewer (the public) have become key in this process. Within the totalitarian society, modern art decisively prolonged its influence and dominance over the local cultural milieu, as the absolute freedom of creation proclaimed by it was identified with political attitudes defining themselves against the ideology of power. Together with the fall of the communist regime, Czech visual art then finds itself in weightlessness. Being thrown mercilessly into a different political context, deprived of its privileged social position and comprehensible communication codes, it is forced to define its own structure and character again.

The last, and to a certain degree, the key topic of contemporary Czech visual art is contemplation of how its own framework functions. The institutional scheme of art presents a package of issues in which we include educational institutions, programmes to support artistic activities, production, presentation, and the institutionalization of artifacts, the art market, expert and popularizing reflection, presentation of arts in media, etc. It is obvious that the condition of this complex mechanism corresponds with the hybrid transformational reality of the whole post-totalitarian society. Using the process of institutionalization and socialization of contemporary visual arts as a theme serves as a field suitable for redefinition of the basic artistic categories (the author, the artifact, the viewer, the social context, etc.), but can also be understood as a metaphor for the instrumentalization of elementary social relations.

Contemporary Czech visual art in the whirl of multicultural and societal influences is sorely seeking its exaggerated originality. What especially attracts us to art is mutual communication. Visualized and anesthetized personal stories from various ends of the globe broaden the limits of our perception. These shifts may be modest, but they always bring new experience. Czech transformation empiricism is (highly or particularly or mainly) distinguished by its non-settled state and hybridity. In the mosaic of

the global world, it has its own firm place, and in the context of contemporary art, it asserts its small but clearly characteristic particularities.

¹ Robert, Musil: *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author (Pozůstalost zaživota)*. Odeon Praha, 1991, page 321.

² Kunde, Harald: *Bohemian Birds*. (exhibition catalogue) Kunst Haus Dresden, 2001, page 8.

³ Foster, Hal: *The Return of the Real*. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Cambridge, 1996, page 182.