

Cultural Domestication - Instinctual Desire: Interpretations and Insights

Seeking Solace in Sirens: The Manufactured Interruptions of Jiří Černický

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"A Screaming Comes across the Sky"

Everyone has heard it: that relentlessly screeching, violently piercing, commanding shrillness. The standard fire alarm obtrusively alerts one to a critical situation, an impending emergency. The regulatory device drives us all away, for our own protection, of course.

Anyone who has experienced that silencing shriek, however briefly, also knows that fire alarms, like any machine (including a "natural" system), tend to malfunction. Rather than fire, say, the obnoxious squawks can signal the need to change a battery or someone taking a shower, smoking a cigarette, overcooking dinner, etc. Once an alarm's call can be established as "fake," the first priority becomes ending the commotion or else, if possible, vacating the premises until the situation is resolved.

Regulatory blasts are one thing in a prison, detention center, labor camp, where one expects brutal limits on free will and independent motility, but what about on the "outside" of the penitentiary system? What if fire alarms emanated from the very skies above, and at all times? What if humanity were pushed on constant code red alert, society pulled in a state of perpetual crisis, such that self-concern evaporates in place of total capitulation to external pressure, anything to make the screaming go away?

In that dire climate, having thoughts, being creative, engaging imagination, much less sharing one's expressions with others, seems nearly impossible. For one thing, except in the lag between pulses, the blaring immediately obliterates the reflex to think, not to mention constantly interrupts an idea's development, should you be able to carry a thought from the previous relief of silence. With no room for even mental wandering, how would art get made?

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the unification of East and

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West Germany, the break-up of the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia – the latter brought about by a so-called “velvet” revolution – one would think such analogies as fire alarms unnecessary. Now that the Cold War has “ended,” how is it that any former Eastern bloc nation would persist in stringent security upholding? The fact remains, however, that the entire world, by now, has become that place in which alarms constantly erupt. Life on the “outside” has, indeed, taken after life on the “inside,” in effect, producing a globally internalized gulag. “Attica is all of us,” even if we fail to recognize it as such.²

“To have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other’s misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion – joy, anxiety, happiness, and pain.”³

Jiří Černický was born during a brief period of geopolitical “thaw,” on August 1, 1966, slightly northwest of the Czechoslovakian capital Prague (in Usti nad Labem). The liberalization had originated (under Khrushchev) in the Soviet Union that, since World War II, had locked down Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia. If, during the years leading up to “Prague Spring,” civil liberties appeared to multiply, enabling new relations of order, the possibilities quickly evaporated yet again, come 1968, when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and re-installed a puppet government. By 1989, the year of the “Velvet Revolution,” while several Eastern bloc dictatorships finally crumbled, Černický was studying art education in Usti nad Labem’s Pedagogical University. By the time the newly democratizing Czech nation and its neighbor Slovakia were peaceably separating (done by 1992), Černický was a graduate student in Prague where he continues to reside. He received degrees from the Academies of both Applied Arts, in 1993, and Fine Arts, in 1997.

Having consistently practiced in both art and design, along with the increasingly ambiguous territories between them, Černický cannot be classified easily except by such broad contemporary labeling as “conceptual” – given his profusion of verbal explanations, diagrammatic narratives, and site-specific circumstances. In terms of formal materiality, the diverse work could loosely operate in three domains: performance/video, object making (painting, sculpture, photography, etc.), and mass-production engineering. Alternatively, one could speak of a “commercial,” “industrial,” “residen-

tial” body of work (the latter, for instance, might include sewn, embroidered, decorated idiosyncrasies). Despite textuality permeating most of his “nomadic” industry, Černický’s exquisitely crafted objects may ultimately prove more attractive than their linguistic trappings.

In a few exceptions, however, viewers may prefer the story to witnessing events, as when the artist flew a kite with his butt, an untitled (video-taped) action from 1991-1992. The piece evolved during Černický’s interest in survival mechanisms, a “language of visual transformation connected to emotionality.”⁴ Bodies that change in relation to moments of stress would include a chameleon’s color shifts or an octopus releasing an inky camouflage, simultaneously disorienting predators. Employing an emulsion that would foam upon contact with human perspiration, as well as take dramatic color, Černický coated his naked body and squatted at the bottom of a deep pit. Then, in his rectum, he inserted the wooden dowel of a kite with a fifty-foot lead that began climbing powerful winds, the force of which overwhelmed Černický. After being rocked and buffeted by the kite’s agitations, the artist became covered in a red, foamy sweat.

Černický’s performative interest in the symbolic roles played by bodily fluids was to carry forward, in 1993-1994, with a project entitled *Tears for Ethiopia*. In this case, Černický requested actual tears from anonymous strangers. Here again, the idea of crying for the afflicted might register with greater intensity than any actual “performing” of it, given the fact that many people elected to weep alone, presumably provoked by private sadness. Even the glass receptacles Černický designed for collecting the liquid may attract more attention than the project’s ostensible aim, to convey compassion by delivering tears. Černický requested but was refused assistance in delivery by various humanitarian organizations, so the precious drops were sealed in a thermometer that he himself gave over to the spiritual leader of an Ethiopian monastery, “high in the mountains...where the temperature often and dramatically changes.”

In addition to traveling through Africa, Černický also visited the Middle East, his experiences inspiring a number of works, including *Fashion Explosion* (1998). A statement explains that he and a friend walking down a Jerusalem street spotted a splendidly dressed pregnant-looking woman, apparently running to catch a bus. Just minutes after coining a phrase, “Beirut fashion,” to describe her stylish sensibility, they were rocked by a detonation behind them, coming from the bus station. On the news later that night, the explosion was reported to be the responsibility of a female sui-



TEARS FOR ETHIOPIA :: 1993 - 1994
Post-utopian charity project in Support of Africans from Central Ethiopia.

FASHION EXPLOSION (nuclear explosion according to the latest fashion) :: 1998
7.2' X 3.9' X 3.9' polyurethane, silicon, Damascus lace, plastic, pearls, artificial fur.

HOME EXPLOSION (environmental installation with lamp and video) :: 1998
lamp - 3.9' X 2.5' X 2.5', glass, light, video

PINCUSHION - FATHER (daily voodoo) :: 1999
5.5" X 3.9", cloth, metal, glass



cide-bomber who very much resembled the woman rushing past Černický and friend. **Fashion Explosion** depicts a fetching femme fatale. Tastefully embroidered, delicately evoked, elegantly detailed, the colorful scene is nevertheless riddled with pearl-covered protuberances that morbidly suggest body entrails and fragments. With its spreading base, climbing plume, and cresting cap, moreover, the figure of the female terrorist simultaneously signifies a nuclear bomb's mushroom cloud, an image branded in every brain.

The cataclysmic allusion also emerges in **Home Explosion**, another 1998 work that is equally art, design, sculpture, and appliance. This three-dimensional glass portrait of mass extermination by radiation serves as a light source. Explains Černický, the form was designed to operate as "some kind of 'voodoo' which, in the comfortable intimacy of the apartment... subtly disturbs the resident," who sets it off whenever turning on a lamp. Voodoo becomes an even greater factor with the pincushions Černický began crafting in 1999, the first depicting his father and made for his mother.

"Ever-Present Chaos That Can...Cause Your Mind to Split"

What happens when imagination is forced to exist in a subterranean sphere, below comprehension or consciousness, particularly whenever taking public form? When pressured to emerge only in the private confines

of a household (or, say, an isolated monastery or empty mining pit), what happens when art gets domesticated, harnessed, confined, in an effort to survive? What refuge can be found in pleasant color harmonies, soothing decorative flourishes, superb familial stitching? What ergonomic properties, what aerodynamic formations, what tasteful provisions could satisfy the average viewer? How might Černický's appliances save a brutalizing day? What can they offer today's alienated homebodies of all genders? Perhaps nothing more than subliminal glimpses across a broad spectrum of acculturated violence, already over-mediated by telecommunications industries. Yet, however cliché the narratives, Černický's depictions may still shock viewers.

Consider **Fashion Explosion's** luscious terrorism, the horrifying discordance of the pincushions, and the casual portraits of disasters. Equally subtle in acknowledging violent death by sudden impact, Černický's motorcycle helmets represent an entirely different sequence of behavioral data. One of the earliest versions, from 1998, incorporated a visor made out of infamously sturdy Czech crystal, its faceted structure enabling only semi-translucence with anticipated results (as "documented" by Černický – a downed bike and immobile rider, helmet still attached).



In another version, entitled *First Schizophrenia Produced in Series*, instead of a visor, the “nomadic development designer” commissioned three openings aerodynamically derived from the perpetually horrified features of Edward Munch’s *The Scream* (1895) that, for Černický, “expresses... a sense of systemic or human behavioral failure.” In *PROGRESS*, yet another visorless design in production from 1998 to 2002, named for the Eastern European (Moldovan) manufacturing firm that initially agreed to fabricate it, the only opening was at the neck. That is, the helmet offered complete coverage as well as no protection whatsoever. Designed to have a “numbing effect,” *PROGRESS* helmets disabled riders from seeing, smelling, hearing, speaking, etc., while, at the same time, enabling a turning inward, if only temporarily.

Both *PROGRESS* and *First Schizophrenia* ran into production difficulties, however, once subcontractors absorbed the absurdist qualities of mass-producing Černický’s models. In accompanying statements, Černický poignantly contrasted his projects with earlier periods when “Eastern European workers found themselves forced to partake in the production of weapons intended to kill their fellow citizens.” The tear-shaped *Panasonic Emotions* (2002), Černický’s latest assembly-line device, accommodate those who have become numb and can no longer convey feeling, or anyone wishing to hide emotions from others (say, when transacting business).

Černický’s small, private acts (sewing, sticking a pincushion, diminutive details) are ultimately as monumental as the heavily orchestrated variety of practices (e.g., hiring companies to make motorcycle helmets,

recruiting the people of Prague to cry tears for Africa). Likewise, the baroque convolutions of several Černický projects simultaneously bear a sense of the simple, a tiny instant of life, a salty tear among millions. Whether miniscule or gargantuan, Černický’s gestures hanker to impact viewers and do.

Protect yourself and your interests by preprogramming your emotional responses to external human pressures. Cover your entire head with a motorcycle helmet that cushions it like a coffin. Or else enclose your skull while exposing, in Munchesque shriek, your fatally vulnerable eyes and mouth. Czech glass visors allow riders prismatic views of an already fractured reality. Or consider devices for the home and/or office, including disquieting light sources and sweet monstrosities. Černický’s objects enable you to imagine hurting those who have hurt or continue to oppress you, getting even in an unequal relationship, overcoming a structurally weak position.

Meet Your Antidote for Emotional Deficit

Frankly, I fear, and fear for, Jiří Černický’s art. However mesmerizingly, lovingly, beautifully detailed, much of it encompasses a latent violence I want to ignore or pretend not to notice. However increasingly blatant or pervasive the implications, I might block out that possibility, in the same way one treats an errant fire alarm, disregards crazy beggars, remains oblivious to the feelings of even one’s friends much less anonymous prisoners, whether confined to a penal colony, despotic regime, fanatical devo-



FIRST SCHIZOPHRENIA PRODUCED IN SERIES :: 1998
9" X 9" X 12.5 fiberglass, acrylic paint, foam, textile

PROGRESS (low-tech meta-management) :: 1998
- 2002 9" X 9" X 12.5", fiberglass, textile, acrylic



tion, or just a problematic marriage/relationship.

Rather than discuss out loud domestic violence, for example, society prefers a diametrically opposed attitude: better to believe you never noticed it taking place. Yet Černický refuses to cloak such subjects, enticing viewers instead to engross themselves in the sordid details of strangers' all-too-human miseries. Each work inspires a mesmerizing repulsion of having to assimilate the details of other people's suffering. To succumb may require becoming voyeuristic, yet, ideally viewers do, indeed, draw even closer to others by, say, projecting themselves onto the subjects for whom were made such apotropaic devices.

While consistently captivating, Černický's work may seem patently offensive – at times perhaps subconsciously so but also as if deliberately. The artist, moreover, seems to indicate a conscious interest in measuring or calculating exactly how far one may offend, particularly in a context of skewed power differentials. At the very least, Černický's instrumental production serves the needs of the artist himself, even his friends and family (though they may never have personally requested such help). Even if never literally resolving a dysfunctional state of affairs, Černický's work offers seismographic readings on how a situation stands at a given point.

Imagine life for someone forcibly exposed to constant fire alarms, from which no refuge were possible, subject to violence at another's hands, or, even, at the technologized tendrils of the State. For anyone without the wherewithal to imagine otherwise, Černický's potentially self-empowering tools offer a variety of options. He tilts at rigid inequities, flaunts stereotyp-

ical social conventions, incites – even if only defensively – bodily harm in himself and others. Alarmed calls to safety, Černický's art interrupts regular programming, allowing viewers to attend potential sirens while plumbing their own vicarious inclinations, as subjects capable of being battered or battering back.

¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 1995 [1973]), 3.

² In the words of Frank "Big Black" Smith (1933-2004), valiant humanitarian and tragic inmate at the center of the 1971 Attica prison riots in upstate New York.

³ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 20.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Jiří Černický can be found on his web-site; www.cernicky.com.

⁵ Jiří Černický, www.cernicky.com



SD Audio prosthesis is designed for a variety of applications. We would like to highlight here a few of the possible characteristics of prospective users:

1. Users who feel handicapped by the excessive amount of their own emotions and need to express this personal shortcomings through a substitute audio-prosthesis in order to maintain their own dignity and to control their behavior.
2. Users who feel the urge to express their emotions yet are not capable of doing so because their ability to express emotions has become degenerated, been blocked, or been otherwise suppressed.
3. Users who are compelled to express their emotions yet do not want to become exhausted and tired out by such effusiveness.
4. Users who feel the urge to express their emotions but whose effusions could weaken their social status as that would appear clumsy, undignified, pathetic, ludicrous, somehow lacking or silly, etc.
5. Users who cannot live out their emotions but would like to learn to do so.
6. Users who want to keep their emotions under control.
7. Users who are creative and who feel attracted to experimentation with their own emotions, the emotions of others, or with virtual emotions.

PANASONIC EMOTIONS :: 2002

(variable dimension)

SD Audio Player Panasonic, reproducers, mini-amplifier