

Cultural Domestication - Instinctual Desire: Interpretations and Insights

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Themes in Dynamic Affirmations of Culture

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We sometimes express the “postmodern” world as a decentralized cultural field, a web of influences, wherein historically major cultural actors must respond to disruptions from the periphery—the reactions of traditional cultures caught between heritage and the unwieldy complexity of social giants. In the postmodern world, the fringe factors—including hostile detractors, pop-up web ads, email spam, electronic and biological viruses, and terrorists—are all too important to dismiss. These make the people who participate in the “core culture” feel very much united in experience. Yet the deepest insights about this world derive from the quieter appropriations and assimilations of artists and critics, via representations that may be celebrated or eschewed, but which expose nonetheless the phallogentric, and xenophobic, racist, and ecologically short-sighted tendencies that remain in contemporary mass culture.

We should recognize that not everyone lives in a postmodern world, inasmuch as cultural constructions allow some people to define themselves in classical or modernist terms. Some people may even emotionally, intellectually, or physically insulate themselves from external disruptions. But the conventional core is not where the action is. The USA. The EEU. Russia. Western or Eastern Europe. Capitalists. Communists. These are not only anachronistic terms of the Cold War, but also “modernist” reactionary structures among such emergent phenomena as “solidarity parties,” “UN peace-keeping forces,” “liberating coalition armies,” “insurgencies,” and “terrorist sleeper cells.” This is not to say that mass institutions don’t matter, but only that their cultural conventions don’t “count for much” as impetus for how most people around the world define the world or resolve the personal problem of living with contemporary technology and polity. Most people, whether inside or outside of the great “establishment” of postmodern culture, remain peripheral to any promised benefits other than a relative anonymity.

You are reading this as part of a consideration of the work of six Czech artists drawn together by the themes of *Cultural Domestication and Instinctual Desire*. The title of the show expresses some of the irony of the “Central European” situation. Unfortunately, modernist terms like “Czech artist” offer an inadequate identification of these subject actors, because the operative categories of art production and community within which they operate are still coming into being. For example, though the label “Czech” consciously excludes the “Slovak” ethnic component of the recent political order, it is still laden with anachronistic meanings that conjure by reference to geography some Cold War sense of “Eastern Europe” and, earlier, the tumultuous boundary between Germanic and Slavic peoples. When such elements as nationality, ethnicity, gender, and generation combine to create the “niches” through which people become “tokens” of “types”, thinking actors become automatons. Colonies. Satellites. Blocs. From the “mainstream” perspective, are not these the terms that identify groups as tangential and, potentially, inconsequential?

Should we not better identify the part of Europe in which the Czech Republic is situated as “central”—isn’t Prague west of Vienna, due north of Naples, and almost due south of Berlin? Isn’t it closer to London than it is to Moscow, Kiev, or Minsk? More importantly, from a postmodern perspective, the “subject” experience of people who have lived in what is now the Czech Republic has remained remarkably “central” to Europe’s definition and direction. Because of geographic centrality to events of the past hundred years, the Czech people—with most of their immediate neighbors—have been continually colonized, suppressed, situated in conflict, and politically marginalized. Central Europe has remained a “margin” of the great 20th century powers of “East” and “West.” But the edge is a true reflection of these opposed “systems,” like a mark on paper defining negative space, this “most central” Europe possesses an authentic experience of the “big picture,” an ironic lens facilitating postmodern aesthetic.

Thus, we encounter in the works of Jiří Černický, Milena Dopitová, Zdena Kolečková, Alena Kotzmannová, Ján Mančuška, and Jiří Přihoda an opportunity to explore and critique a number of globally “received” and “normative” symbolic viewpoints. To the extent these artists present a “Czech” art perspective, they manifest also a more general appreciation of Central European cultural premises—a cultural “edge-effect” that sustains diverse and revolutionary expressions of individual vitality. The works pro-

vide, not surprisingly, shifting perspectives of microcosm and macrocosm. At the same time, there is a remarkable consistency of focus on “semiotic process” (i.e. formal reflections on experience through signs) achieved by a simultaneous engagement with personal identity and connectedness to more general human experiences.

“Transition” is an evident feature of all the artistic portfolios presented here, though the treatment of change is quite varied, subtle, and, at times, haunting. Consider the photograph entitled ‘ from Alena Kotzmannová’s series *Z místa ne místo (Station to Station)* as a first example.

The composition invites comparison of its two main elements—a subject in introspective thought opposed to an incomprehensibly racing exterior world. Both the subject and the blur of motion retain a stark reality, while suggesting layers of metaphor that move far beyond that of the visual icon. We “know” that closing the eyes does not stop the mind. We “know” that the sense of the world moving is a pure reflex of the senses. Some might be reminded of the mind experiments that led Einstein to articulate relativity theory, a deeper appreciation of the “facing realities,” which can blur the boundaries between identity and context, self and other, or presence in time. What is more important in Kotzmannová’s work is the implication of narrative, including all the elements surrounding a moment that could be discovered—historically or in the unfolding of events—yet which also potentially exists uniquely in the mind of the “subject.”

Famke presents one of Kotzmannová’s most direct approaches to “portraiture”—in that sense, it is atypical of her wider body of work. Indeed, her placements and treatments of figures are almost always fugitive, appearing incidental if not interruptive to the context. Such elusive subjects make more sense when we understand that Kotzmannová offers a photographically self-reflexive presentation of understated potentials in the everyday world. Kotzmannová’s flare for understatement also fits within the powerful emergence of a generation of women artists engaged in the deconstruction of both phallogocentric and xenophobic effects of history and the current European transition.

These notions of opposition, duality, and social homology arise both from the experience and intellectual heritage of Central Europe in our time. After all, early in the 20th century, the Prague “circle” of linguists, with their “systematic approach to speech,” grounded the philosophical



FAMKE :: 2000 Silver Gelatin Print 4.2' X 2.5'

tradition leading from language description to “deconstruction” and other post-modern notions of culture. And the constructions of Central European art today, through the manipulations of symbols, iconic values, and basic qualities of form or texture, fall well within the foundation and developed spirit of this semiotic wellspring. For example,

Zdena Kolečková’s *Wen Trifft Die Schuld (Who Bears the Guilt)* project, employs artifacts of shifting German and Czech populations to illustrate how ethnocentrism and evasion of responsibility touch all peoples. Similarly, Kotzmannová’s tram stop installations, entitled *Shopping is my hobby...*, juxtapose a Czech national symbol against images of Europe’s great cities, simultaneously calling into question the unbalanced consumerism and gendered political-economy that accompany the new European emergence. Both Kolečková and Kotzmannová have created highly public art projects that challenge everyday activities and viewpoints, especially as they relate to the old “West” bloc’s politically “received” interpretations of the world. The feminist element of this work explores not only the blindness of extant political perspectives to women’s social presence, but also the connection of such phallogentrism to Czech engagement in international political discourse. Kolečková especially questions the oppressive impacts of a Euro-

pean heartland spoiled by industrial pollution, using visual appropriation as a means of escaping new forms of subjugation.

Milena Dopitová’s *Sixtysomething* series takes a very different semiotic inspiration. She explores time as heritage, projection, and introspection. Through images of herself with her twin, she conveys a paradoxical sense of “future nostalgia”—projections of parallel, emergent and novel identities linked firmly to tradition and heritage. As part of the same project, these ideas are symbolically evinced through a series of chrysalis icons. Dopitová’s metaphor of twinning, almost in the sense of cultural cloning, seems to me also to connect “past” and “future” as tokens of a cultural type. Though not as explicit as Kolečková’s questioning of “salvation,” Dopitová also leads us to the potential sameness of historical outcomes separated in time. Culture “re/forms” itself because the conditions shaping historical sequences are grounded in common conditions. Yet there remains the je/tu contrast, even within the sameness of nous applied to sisters, generations, or stages of cultural transformation—difference in sameness.

Something similar results from Jiří Příhoda’s exploration of the “Klein bottle,” a form in which interior/exterior is imbued with topological unity. But Příhoda has us enter forms to encounter them through qualities that cannot be sensuously apprehended all at once. And the process can be elaborated to the levels of language, as with the shifting textual perspectives of Ján Mančuška’s *Jana’s Story*, refractions of a rape story—an installation in which the “perspectives” of the story are not simultaneously



Shopping is my hobby ...

WEN TRIFFT DIE SCHULD :: 1998 - 2004
Digital prints
15.75" X 23.6"

SHOPPING IS MY HOBBY... :: 1998
Poster for advertising lightboxes at tram stops.

Sixtysomething :: 2003
Digital prints, video projections and sculptures
Variable dimensions



accessible—or Příhoda's *Nosferatu*, which plays with the idea of "temporal space." Typically, structures of language and behavior interrupt and then redirect the gestalt process of ordinary experience. The world may be "acquired" through the primary iconic system of human visual and auditory senses, but symbolic conventions "cover over" the vast richness we encounter. Mere words force us to selectively attend to qualities in order to construct "types" that are usually a matter of narrow convention. Our language-centered nature leaves us with "forms" and "phonemes" removed from the whole potentials, of which they are a part. Příhoda and Mančuška thwart complete symbolic intervention by reminding us that "complete experiences" are only partial constructions, and that they cannot in any event actually be "symbolically shared." Language is, at best, a secondary system for human experience.

The art of confrontation and introspection-of resistance to cultural domestication while embracing instinctual desire-leaves us on solid ground to encounter an original understanding of the human condition. The question is whether art can accomplish this without conceding the "conditions" placed on humanity by centuries of "civilized" cultural development. Jiří Černický's practical and horrific directness in these matters is a refreshing take on the world. The "way the world is" and the "way the world is defined" are the nearly inscrutable inside and outside, the je/tu, the twins, the facing realities that Černický captures when confronting war while wearing a burka, sewing and pasting horrific exvotos of nuclear terror like *Fashion Explosion*, or deconstructing the passion and perfection of the

Happyeend American cliché. The bewildered people who today live on the edges of the new order and who witness postmodern terror first hand—the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, for example—have much to gain from the explorations of post-modern aesthetic offered by Central European artists. The continuing "Czech" examination of intimate details, difficult connections, and, most of all, the limitations of space and time, certainly "reflect" upon more endemic cultural issues. Art may not actually stop conflict, pollution, or the pornographic commodification of practically everything, but it can help individuals make the choice not to participate in the devaluing of the earth and most of its inhabitants. Indeed, through all these artists, we may find ourselves within the figuration of the whole, the nous, the mother, and the discourse of the acting subject.

NOSFERATU :: 1998 - 2000
2X video project of edit 1979 film.
Room size 150' X 150' X 200'.

FRAGMENT OF ASYNCHRONIES HISTORY, TRUE STORY - JANA'S STORY (installation view) :: 2004
Laser cut aluminum, steel cable.
Variable dimensions

FASHION EXPLOSION :: 1998
220x120x120cm polyurethane, silicon, Damascus lace, plastic, pearls, artificial fur.

HAPPYEND SHOES :: 2000
40x60x25cm, leather, electro-installation, light

