

Igor Zhoř

Young Prague Artists

[Baèkovský, Císaøovský, David, Diviš,
Gabriel, Nikl, Placht, Rajnišová, Støíček
Brno, University Club, Na bidýlku, June - July 1986,
text from the catalogue]

[1.389 words]

Czech Republic



This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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World art has been flooded by the wave of predacity. We haven't awoken from the spell of objectless structures, we haven't completely accomplished concrete sensuous figuration and we haven't explored the possibilities of "mind art" - and something new is coming, something we don't fully understand: it seems that the short link between art and life is to be even shorter. Painting (and sculpture) has been dominated by an urgent need for expression, a need which is direct, unsublimated, uncultivated, impertinent. The ancient longing to find order in painting, represented mainly by Cézanne in this century, has been put aside. Painting no longer represents a gateway to harmony but an entrance into a steaming volcano. Restrained emotions have been replaced by passionate subjectivity which has shaken even the noble skepticism of Duchamp and the hermetism of his myths. This is no more mere skepticism but an outspoken indifference to the wisdom of history and deliberate irresponsibility towards it, however far it is from being anti-artistic and iconoclastic. It is even their paradoxical opposite: a trusting reliance upon the possibilities of brush, color and canvas (often replaced by paper). This trust is expressed by tremendous size, tremendous diversity of colors, and an abundance of gestures, forms and motifs.

New artistic trends used to express a reaction to the tendencies which directly preceded them. Today, in the pluralism of positions and forms, something else is significant. Denial and rejection has been replaced by a different accent, something different is stressed with vehemence. What is finished, does not necessarily have to be rejected; the new wave goes its way and floods everything that moves slower. It carries to the surface artistic expressions it likes, not to admire them or cringe before them, but

to take unscrupulously what it finds useful. Ensor, Munch, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner have been modernized in this way on the “high wave” together with the younger Jean Dubuffet. Even Karel Appel, Antonio Saura, Willem de Kooning and Francis Bacon were suitable.

It is said of the young representatives of the Czech New Wave that they are not original, that they find sources for their work in foreign catalogues and magazines. They allegedly know the work of David Salle, Sandro Chia, Julian Schnabel or Remy Blanchard only from reproductions. But the same things were said about the members of the Osma group, about Filla or Kubišta, and still nothing has changed about their position in our art. Anyway, these young artists are indifferent to the rebukes about being epigones. This concept means nothing to them, because they don't see eclecticism as a bad quality, but as a possibility which they don't reject.

They have their predecessors even in Czech art. If we wanted to find them, we would have to start from Munch's expressionism and also to mention those who considered expression more important than structure, orderliness and the discipline of the work. We will definitely arrive at Jan Bauch and his vehement protest against asexual painting. However, we would have to look for the forerunners of today's wild ones in the circle of the Sursum association, mainly in Josef Váchal, for whom a deformed shape never represented an aesthetic stylization, but an outcry calling for meaning. Váchal's search for a graceful shape failed most often when he was very serious, when he was undergoing his struggle with the angel, whom he forced to reveal his divine substance.

But there are also closer predecessors, though not many, mainly because the tendency to vehement, temperamental creation and to rough sincerity is incongruous with the Czech temperament. We have always been taking the edges off, refining and cultivating all tendencies, while we feared the more radical ones. When we started to follow them anyway, we have moderated them by our fine sensitivity and sophisticated sense of tenderness and poetry. We have always been good at making things, at rounding them and metal-chasing them, so that they deserved admiration, but only very rarely have these things been able to scare someone. I think, that there have been only several personalities who have stepped out of line during the past few decades - Jitka Válková, Karel Nepraš and Jiří Naèradský, for example. These people represent an example of expression without sentiment and self-respect, expression which bravely declares even its own impotence, people who are able to arise from their own ashes.

Movements in art have their own rules: although they seem to recur, they always reveal something so far unrevealed. The new wave has brought the spectator a special mixture of art and literature, colourful gesture and esoteric allegory waiting to be interpreted. Until recently we haven't accepted this kind of literalness in artistic expression. Despite all the overlapping tolerated of these media we preferred the so-called purity of expression: shape was to talk through shape and was to remain shape. New paintings, however, stress things lying outside the canvas, new sculpture talks about unsculptural things. New art aims to be an art of meanings, messages and illusions; glowing, desire, openness and identity are significant here. Let us quote from Sandro Chia's letter to Andy Warhol: "I force these paintings and sculptures to dance on one leg on my music and for my pleasure...I am here, inside the cave-labyrinth, and I think that the painter is like Theseus. I chase shape on canvas as if I were chasing an animal, which I saw only in one of my dreams, and the smell of which I can hardly remember. I proceed almost randomly, prepared to hit a moveable and unpredictable target."

It is not easy to tell what young Prague artists express. Although their vehemence might sometimes pour out, in fact it represents a search for humanity, calling for a balance between man and man and a balance between man and nature and cosmos. Sometimes it is expressed directly, sometimes indirectly, by a symbol or in a roundabout way. The choice of means forming the spiritual message of this painting is abnormally wide. This is related to what has been already said: to the exploration of every possible means. This creation is a creation of free reminiscences of the past from which it most often quotes the expressionists (including the abstract ones) and romantics of all forms, namely their struggle for spontaneity, openness and unsuppressed eroticism, and their fascination with dream.

It is easy to write but more difficult to paint or sculpt. And again, our specific features are important: we have always been a bit more serious than others, and we have always been worried about the accountable meaning of things. (It might be the reason why an authentic dadaism couldn't have come into existence here, as we've never trusted in the purifying effect of nonsense.) The new painting has many forms here and it surely is kind of special. But there is one thing which we can hardly achieve: it will never become a commercial product as it already has in other parts of the world. The participation in the New Wave movement will always remain connected with a position at the margin, and thus with minimal publicity and zero profitability. And thus the New Wave will be sorted out according to aspects which are almost contradictory elsewhere

- aspects of personal morality. We have already learned that this kind of painting requires stronger character than any other type of painting. But this grants the painting (not deliberately) special features which seem to be in contrast with its substance: endurance, will and steadiness in faith are standing against spontaneity and light-minded irresponsibility.

The New Wave is thus a creation without a unifying order (or rather it is a creation the structure of which we still haven't found) but it is not a creation without a message. By now the messages about the personal lives of the painters have prevailed - which is more than natural regarding their age. But it seems that this exhibition shows at various places that a new criticism is also coming into existence which we can call social. The new subjectivity doesn't want to be aimed at the "lucky minority of the well-informed". It senses that private feelings are always related to collective problems and that any art which changes the artist signals the necessity to change the world at the same time.