

Jiří Ševčík - Jana Ševčíková

Painting of the 1980s in the Czech
Lands

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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.

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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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Painting of the 1980s in the Czech Lands

A broader confrontation of young applied art, arts & crafts, design and fine art has indicated deeper connections. The common denominator of the above-mentioned spheres is a similar approach to the reality of life, similarly posed questions of their functions at the present time, and a similar relationship to the tradition and modern culture. The applied art sphere is the closest to everyday life, enriching it in a natural way and transforming it into an understandable form of the lifestyle. However, the multifaceted whole of visual culture is still hardly tangible and does not provide an easy survey. This makes attempts to explain one sphere through another one quite useful; for example, architecture through visual art and vice versa. Fine art, i.e. painting and sculpture, enter a colder conceptual stage today, often using simple utility objects as means of expression. We can say that art contains distinct aesthetic qualities where it pretends to be interchangeable with ordinary reality. However, the relations are rather complex and mutual borrowings and mystifications know no limits. Young Czech painting is well known today from many confrontations and foreign exhibitions. There are numerous cases when it is sought after as a welcome partner of exhibitions of design and mainly as a new partner in architecture. Below we will deal with it in more detail and try to outline its starting points.

Revamped Stories

(Falsifications and Mystifications)

When paratroopers were sent out, they had to learn cover-stories with enough truth in them to be checked. At least for a while they deceived the

enemies. When openness is being forced, cover stories are made up and imagination is let loose in order to maintain the necessary time limit for keeping something confidential or lying about it. After it expires, everything can be spilled out. This applied theory of mystification is mentioned by Graham Greene in his short story *Under the Garden*. The main protagonist is reconstructing an old story made up many years ago, remembering the real one. In the past, he retold real or maybe just dream experiences, polished them up with a moral lesson and published them in the form of a short story in a school magazine. He destroyed everything by imitating a second-hand narration. The real story was different, and it did not need the props of adventure literature: A little boy goes through a long narrow passage underground as in a phantasy. Below the ground he discovers a one-leg big old man, Javitt, and his mate, the squawking old woman Maria. The old man, enthroned on a toilet, tells him many important things. The underground Nestor--perhaps God himself--pronounces life truths in his general statements. He reads half a century old newspaper, knowing that news is news however old it is..., that news never smells however long it's dead. News keeps. And it comes around again when you least expect. Like thunder. The main thing was that the boy has heard for the first time that no name is the real one, that these are only sounds we answer to. We do not think that what such a name signifies is actually represented by the words or looks like the words. The real name given at birth must not be pronounced. He who knows it has a power over you. The other substitute names mean just a little.

Greene's short story is still a very modern, yet a very old attempt to get to a sense of reality (this is the title of the collection of short stories from which the short story *Under the Garden* comes). The story is maybe a theological symbol, maybe a dream, maybe an absurd paradox of existence with an ambiguous humanist mission which we so gladly appreciate. What we like the most about Greene today, however, is the motive of the revamped story, the motive of the recurrent "old news", and the real name which has to be kept secret, while the cover words, names, signs are interchangeable. The sense of reality has changed very much in the meantime, and fictitious stories of someone like J. L. Borges are closer to the truth. They do not necessarily have to be an allegory of truth with a moral mission nor a cover story which is to be improved. What is here to be improved, and according to which rules, when all the stories today are almost of the same importance? Some of the fake ones were actually verified with such a certainty that we believed them for a long time, that they took total control of us as if they were really a reality.

At the first stage, the youngest generation of Czech painting went through a tunnel" under the garden". Maybe also because it wanted to avoid those completely fake stories which were declared to be truthful by those at the top. The painters were almost at the verge of believing that they would find more profound and truthful ones. Jaroslav Róna's paintings contain old creatures, places of sacrifice, idols and forgotten fortresses. We might know them from Zdeněk Burian's paleontologic illustrations or the "reports" of missionaries who described the mores of unknown tribes, their fight with anthropoids, the exotics of strange countries. According to one of those reports, as told by Borghes (of course, it is a truly fictitious Brodi's account), the remote civilizations represent culture as much as we do and must be respected in the same way. Among prehistoric creatures and primitive nations, there was a child to be found from time to time, Róna's Little Naughty Boy. Together with the film director Vorel, Róna wrote a feria about this Little Naughty Boy having the same title. The past time was unbelievably intertwined with the present in it and the immortal infantility traveled through all pictures of the story as Voltaire's under-age Candide.

The infantile microcosm of primitive stories recorded in simple signs was painted also by Jiří Kovanda. This also represents a tunnel of the subconscious, but we cannot explain it just by Freud or Jung and his collective memory. Magazine pictures, symbols of mass culture, little flags and toys are mixed in the tunnel with subconscious mental images.

Jiří David, on the other hand, painted a garage in Kladno at one of many confrontations of young painting. The garage was his cave and corridor "under the garden". We read in it as in a legend of a mysterious cult. Some figures can almost be recognized as coming from well-known myths; we have met them before, but the whole was like a forged manuscript, undated and not providing a possibility to verify facts. A revamped Old Testament story? Or a cover story intended to deceive? It was hard to decide. At the moment when the painting came into being it seemed that genuine legends were just beneath the surface. Those who risked to live through the beginning of New Painting trembled over their discoveries. It seemed that any moment we would be able to verify what was a real event; that we would remember the real names which had the power over men and things and that time would take a different course from the one it had been previously following. However, no miracles took place. Artists made their paintings just so no one would have a power over the real images, that no one would be able to capture them and transform them into an eternally binding

metaphysical truth. They changed the images like the underground Javitt every other moment and gave them various names to cover all traces. At the beginning, it was often done subconsciously.

Many other artists similarly felt the synchronism of the time of the past and the time of the present, that terrible delay of the present and the confusing presence of past paintings. They painted seemingly expressively fast codes of figures in basic positions of yoga, in the spiral, in sexual action. Simple life events, not experienced as subjective traumas and heavy existential problems, were something absolutely new, since they did not want to provide an overall explanation, but be a simple image, a direct basic statement like those made by Greene's Javitt: There are two sexes. Don't try to make more than two with definitions... Sister, wife, mother, daughter, what difference does it make?... There is a good or an evil fate, there is no other kind... This is an underground fate we suffer from here, and that was a garden fate--but it all comes to the same fate in the end. This news was a real piece of news, however dated. Therefore artists, like Javitt, endowed all news with basic trivial meanings. Complex or simple, what difference does it make?

Orbis pictus--Second Stage

Jiří Kovanda in his Disturbing Painting of 1987 repeated Josef Èapek's painting from the "Fire" series. He only added a figure of the mole from the TV series. It has a bubble with an English caption carrying an urgent message: "New Wave is dead." The talking mole is at the same time a replica of Jiří David's painting by he contributed to the unpleasant domestic polemics about Post-Modernism. With Kovanda, the comics culture calmly converses with the avant-garde and transavant-garde (as New Painting called itself at the time). Three images talk at the same time; the subject matter is not a latent reality and its fictitious presentation, but only different sign systems: art and mass culture in an absolutely equal position. The time of stories and their improvement is over. The picture is a field of signs placed side by side and overlapping each other and their meanings.

Earlier in his white and black series, Jiří David combined cabbalism, alchemy, Christian iconography, special languages of finger writing, as well as technical symbols, etc. in his complex pictures. Thus, he has opened

possibilities of new sources and forgotten languages. Most young painters at the preceding stage unconsciously inclined to the creation of an alternative in mythologies, to the path “under the garden”, to corrections of cover stories. The more conceptual, seemingly more rational period has gone farther. It does not close itself in stories which can easily succumb to the temptation of a too much completed statement.

Paintings made in recent years seem to fulfil again the encyclopaedic (and linguistic) ideal--Orbis pictus. They include all the knowledge, ethnography, geography, teachings about nature, celestial and terrestrial phenomena, revelations as well as sensual knowledge, science and extrasensual sources of consciousness. At the background of the old Orbis pictus there was the integrating creator's work, the ideal of omnirectification and omniwisdom. Paintings were, however, rendered also piecemeal, in a pedagogical way, comprehensibly, so as everyone could be democratically educated. The new Orbis pictus is fragmentary since the great story is no longer intelligible or credible. It has disintegrated into small parts, making it very hard for us to find their final interpretation. The funny thing is that we still move within rather understandable, common cultural languages, but often they are not familiar to us, especially when painters dig them from all kinds of secret doctrines and cosmologies. However, the strategy is clear--to show just a fragment, since the whole remains out of reach. And above all, to show it by a shift into another context.

Let us see what the other paintings look like. Antonín Střížek coolly paints his Orbis pictus according the Orbis pictus. It includes news about the appearance of Halley's Comet, expeditions to Antarctica, animals and landscapes, old and new cultures. He has painted them directly as a textbook of omniwisdom. We learn from it the basics of language and knowledge. They are, however, mostly “old news” which struck like a thunderstorm when we expected it the least. And since in contrast to the old systems they are torso paintings, they give impression of strange loneliness. In Střížek's still-lives things stand side by side in a very simple fashion, representing only themselves; they do not presume any formal or metaphysical compositional principle.

Tomáš Císařovský complements Orbis pictus with paintings of legionaries from their Siberia anabasis. The Czech environment will tend to perceive them nostalgically and see in them a correction of our historical story. But, beware! Císařovský's romantic exoticness keeps its distance and has no

common denominator with politics! History is ambiguous and paintings are a language, not a reality. That it enriches a blank place in our memory is pleasant.

Stanislav Diviš borrows from science for a change. He paints symbols of physic relations and processes, density of mass, optics or Mendel's principles of heredity. His scientific realism depicts action in the moment of freezing, of neutralization of live thinking, fixation into a sign which we consequently learn at school as a convention. Diviš has cast doubts at the scientific sign picture of reality, endowing it with a new content--language of art. He actually carries out an amusing false equivalence between an abstract scheme and aesthetics.

Following his dark teachings, Jiří David has revived the familiar language of national emblems, tricolors, lions, linden sprigs, and the national ornament. These are also images which have lost their authenticity by their perpetual repetition. Their social paleness, to use Jiří David's term, is the situation in which we currently live. The government of fake names which has lost power over things. In the situation when the substance is buried under layers of archaeological deposits, there is no reality other than these torsos of images and symbols, there is just a substituted reality. And we must accept it as the only reality.

Therefore, it is not necessary even for the genre realists such as Střížek to paint a landscape directly in the open air. They will rather opt for a model, a reproduction. They will paint a reproduction as the real landscape or they will repaint a reproduction and will "revamp" it (Diviš). Not into the form of a better story, but they will leave only fragments or a mere outline from the original picture. The nature today is quite unattainable in its changeability. It is more faithfully accessible to us in a reproduction, scientific description, traveler's report or scientific scheme. The naturalness of paintings of images is more acceptable; we happen to move within them as a fish in the water when we browse through magazines, read books and watch TV. In mass media, everything is present immediately and from all points of view, no matter how distant the things are. In front of nature, on the other hand, we succumb to chaos and the confusion of our subjective sensations. Only the mirror is the main instrument today.

Vladimír Skrepl has adopted the torso-like quality in a slightly different way. At present, he arranges his paintings into larger installations which function as signs placed side by side in space. Although they use an abstract speech or, to express it more aptly, they expertly quote modern abstract art, they are unpretentious and prosaic. They are an image and object at the same time and their ambiguity is confirmed by their titles: Pharmacy, Radio, In front of the Blackboard. They have consciously taken a position at the border of two spheres, art and objective reality, representing both sides. Something similar to scientific realism, genre realism and social paleness is taking place here. Nothing corresponds with the absolute truth outside paintings, everything is a mere language.

For many other artists, the rhythm of a speech, pronouncing the simple structure of a language is more important than the content itself (Jan Vaník). An abstract speech is used only as a quotation or ornamental rhythm. Nothing can be connected with a pure abstract order or aesthetic formalism. It is always mixed with something or tainted by its previous use.

The return to a greater conceptualization and abstraction is also a consequence of the fact that experience which is too individual is less comprehensible today and less communicative, just as the naive faith that I can replace one fake story with another, more truthful one. The contemporary young generation accepts the story of its life and its nation, but it knows that it is but one of many possible forms of reality. Thus the difference between the official and unofficial, realistic and abstract, internal and external has disappeared. All stories are used, all are equally uncertain. We all have a more neutral relationship with them, something like with discoloured symbols, frequently repeated genres of painting or significant works of culture. They have been repeated and reproduced so many times that we no longer need the original; they are present every time and everywhere.

Doubts about the possibilities of knowledge and the existence of the substance, the truth and the beginning are also represented by those young artists who are interested in the spiritual sphere of truth. Just as anywhere else, there is no place in it for an unambiguous statement. Let us, for example, have a look at Jan Merta's paintings. In them, he is very sensitively and slowly searching for an abstract shape. He is trying to give a form to something which appears spiritually, but also has a sensual face. The paradox of a spiritual body. Jan Merta's paintings are above all receptacles,

bodies, and they should hold a place for something which we do not understand and about which we do not know much. Weak, hardly legible objectivity of the receptacles mixes with abstract colour meanings, casting doubts at the sense of it. The painter has devoted a lot of effort to the careful definition of form, but it remains unfulfilled in the end. Only the rhetoric of the realization belongs to the spiritual world.

Jan Pištik has transferred serious cosmic themes to poster spatial paintings of day and night. In the end the magnificent nature is present only in graphic signs, used in the weather forecast. Large formats are important like with other artists, because whether they contain a landscape, a republic or meteorology, they push conventional signs out of proportion and emphasize their non-reality.

We must not forget yet another form of New Painting. Vladimír Kokolia has drawn absurd stories and jokes. By themselves, they could become a rather personal, anxious or ironic vision, and we could simply interpret them as an allegory of our reality. However, as soon as he situated them on a surface and repeated them as a textile decor, they became a language in the real sense. A repeated image of a man with his head in a lion's muzzle is not perceived as a threat. The ornamental arrangement halts individual imagination and does not impose an easy symbolic interpretation on us.

Kokolia's paintings point out another specific feature of New Czech Painting. In Central Europe and in our context, a totally free play with signs and pure self-reflection of language is hardly conceivable. There are constantly some allusions to history and the landscape which are never made absolutely dubious. We go through the *Orbis pictus* and even in the most dilapidated presence we can still find a bit of common valid values. Perhaps Kafka's *most serious and most alluring wish has come true, namely to achieve such a view of life... in which life would preserve the weight of its falls and rises, but at the same time reveal itself no less clearly as nothing, a dream, a floatation.*