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Three Czech Postmodern Artists

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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.

Ludvík Hlaváček

Three Czech Postmodern Artists

Sometime in Spring of 1990 Vera Chytilová in a radio interview defined the task of art approximately as follows: "Art often depicts what already exists in the world and is common to all. People understand it and like it. The real art, however, must depict things in the stage of birth as they are acquiring meaning in the depth of personal experience. Only in this way man can extricate himself or herself from his/her placement in the mechanism of what merely exists and come to awareness and meaning."

Since the beginning of our century we find variations of this idea in the programmatic statements of the artists who we call modern. This art springing out of the source of personal experience of a free individual is often characterized by moral responsibility. The measure of the moral responsibility that modern art attributes to itself nothing else than this very art. This art does not allow a different yardstick, and actually it cannot, because once it moves in the absolute of the non-articulated focus of birth of meaning, everything outside of this focus is only accidental and secondary.

On 19 September 1990, Prof. Dr. Zdeněk Mauthauser read an interesting lecture called *Hermeneutics and Semiotic* at the Cybernetic Society. To heighten the clarity of the elaborately structured lecture, he used an explanatory model of a room. I would like to use his model to clarify my own theses, even though they stand in opposition to his conclusions.

The room where I stay has a window and a door. They represent two possibilities of my contact with the world. The window enables me a

"window vision" that informs me about the existence of things outside of the room. It shows me many things, clearly differentiated from each other by mutual dissimilarities. The door, above all its doorsill, symbolizes a quite different reality of the world. By stepping over the doorsill, I have entered the room and I have an undeniable experience of my being here, in the room, without any need to utilize the "window vision." The doorsill makes it possible for me to live through the ontological experience of my being. After going through the elaborately thought-out segment of a semiotic analysis of works of art, the lecturer came to the conclusion that the ontological experience symbolized by the door of my room remained decisive in art, in spite of the fact that many things and meanings equipped with the differentiating "window vision" are very important.

I think this conclusion tautological because it is contained in the premise represented by the model of the room. If my existence is modelled as a stay in the room, then the door must be necessarily more important than the window. But I can step over the doorsill in the opposite direction and leave the room. I did not cancel out the priority of the ontological experience during my stay on the street, but I left it at home in the room. On the street, I am one of the things I saw when I stayed in the room, which were accessible to me through the "window vision" and which were mutually differentiated only through the visible differences. Every evening, after a busy workday, we return home into the room. However, can this return home be understood as a model of priority of ontological experience? Can my stay on the street be viewed just as a temporary stage of my existence that I fulfil only by returning into my room?

I can, of course, invite other people into my own room and share with them the same ontological experience. This rare communication of ontological experience occurs when perceiving a modern work of art. It does not change the fact that the street before my doorsill is full of people and I have to step out to the street the next day. Can we decide with final validity about the priority of the existence in our own room and the ontological experience pertaining to it and degrade the experience on the street and the differentiating experience that belongs to it?

The young generation of Czech fine artists, the generation which, I think, we can call, despite the ambiguous meaning of the term, postmodern, radically rejects such a decision about the priority of existence in own one's room. The interpretations of the works of three members of this generation, Jiří

David (1956), Antonín Střížek (1959) and František Skála (1956), is an example of it.

Jiří David

David's early paintings of the so-called "expressive" period are reminiscent of paintings of his generational peers as well as the style of *New Painting*, works of Enzo Cucchi and others. (Even though David claims to get acquainted with *New Paintings* as late as 1984.) His paintings are made with wide, casual strokes; his brushwork expresses a striving for a spontaneous uncontrolled expression of inner feeling. The intentionally haphazard organization of the brush's traces testifies of an intention to nip any kind of autonomous aesthetic pictorial quality in the bud. The formal relations are interlaced with narrative elements, and every relation of only a formal balance is destroyed by intrusion of some information. Typically, "expressive" values are organized in a precipitous rhythm. The content is always ambivalent. There are masks, indefinite faces, and the bodies are taken over by the power of inner strength. The space is mostly illusory, but its unity is always shattered, and it capriciously alternates with signs of pure drawings. The linear perspective is combined with a space-creating quality of colours, again in contradiction to the natural law of aesthetics.

Overall, it can be said that the paintings express the effort to shatter not only the elegance of aesthetics, but above all the entire formal individuality of the language of art. Here we feel a forceful effort to give the artistic means into the service of communicating specific contents. These contents are from the sphere of a vague inner feeling of the artist, but they are at the same time materialized in a form of the definite communicative action. The paintings do not speak in an autonomous language of art, but in a general language. Their elements are bodily forms, landscape, fire, a thundering sky and geometrical shapes; and even purely abstract elements are organized as specifically targeted movements. Purely personal feelings have a specific generally communicable character. The painful feeling of anxiety found has its realization in the meeting of a robust man leading a little girl.

It seems indisputable from these facts that the important thing in this "expressive" period was the spontaneous personal expression, albeit within the framework of a more fundamental program which was the freeing of fine

art from its silent individuality as well as self-sufficiency and engaging it in the service of lively human communication. Jiří David explains his ideals of that time with the following words: "Perhaps the most powerful impulse for the forming of our view was the negative influence of the artists of the preceding generation. The world view that spoke to us from their works was so fundamentally unacceptable to us that we saw as our most important priority to do something completely different from what they did. We understood their world view as a modernization of the existential feeling of frustration, uselessness, and destruction of anything positive, common and communicative. We suspected contents in their works that were as purely personal as official and conforming to their times. We perceived their artistic form as self-serving. We believed it possible to create or make visible the sphere of understandable, legible and important contents which are completely indifferent to the morass of life under the communist rule. We wanted neither to conform to the power nor to exhaust ourselves in the opposition. When searching for such contents, for example, I turned to the Bible, though not as a believer, but in a hope of finding in it some cultural contents which were timeless, general and communicable. Of course, I understood the biblical stories in my own way. For instance, I understood the fight between Jacob and Angel as a conflict between the body and the spirit which was taking place inside of me."

David's large painting of *Tower of Babylon* is the summit as well as the end of his "expressive" period. The painting is a spontaneous testimony to the artist's feeling about the type of the current cultural situation in the Czech lands. The huge tower of incomprehensible construction is built into the Czech landscape. In accordance with his right to poetic license, David did not use this symbol in the biblical sense as an expression of sinfulness, an effort for a mechanical contact with God, but as an expression of the concentrated cultural and social activity in line with the spiritual center.

In addition to the Bible, David's source of general contents was for example the literature on Cabala, the signs of which appear in his paintings from that time. After the *Tower of Babylon*, David's expression became more compact and focused on particular specific shapes. *Labyrinth in Blue* and *Great Work* contain a vague mythological architecture. In 1986 he painted *White Series*. In the painting *Cross*, next to the Christian symbol there are signs that indicate washing instructions on clothes. The mystery of the relation between the experience and a general code is already present here, which would become the theme of many following works. (This occurred for the first time in the paintings of the *Black Series* in 1987.) A personally

embraced theme executed as a skillful illusory painting is here in tension with the existence of cool, impersonal drawing signs and symbols from all walks of culture: geometrical drafts, algebraic equations, diagrams used in physics, hieroglyphic script, etc.

The painting *Mělník – My Father's Hometown* contains an already completed fragmentary synopsis. In three clearly separated layers, there are mathematical symbols, national embroidered ornament and painting of the Mělník castle side by side on the box of the cube sugar. Elements meaningful within their own context are taken out and presented with an implicit emptiness of something which only exists and does not communicate inner relations. The Baudrillardesque hyperreality of a freed sign is spontaneously understood here as a cleansing cure deconstructing the myth of inflation of the meaningful connections and identification of personal experience with the truth. This tension between personal experience and the level of public generality becomes a theme of dozens of paintings. In them the artist tears apart the meaningful contents which had been spontaneously established into the socially codified schemes, and creates new connections, heterogenous, harshly bumping into each other, combining "serious" and "banal" things, such as the above-mentioned combination of the Christian Cross and signs of washing instructions from clothes. Elsewhere he uses characters from T.V. tales, a picture from a cigarette box, as well as national symbols, which however, represent a separate thematic area in David's works.

In 1988 and 1989, he painted within the framework of fragmentary objectivity a large series of paintings that he comprehensively called *Home*. His coming to terms with the issue of home here is a realization of the above-mentioned tension between the sphere of personal experience and the sphere of public convention. He painted national symbols, little maps of the Czechoslovak Republic, tricolours, little lions, coins, Prague motives and other frequent symbols, and he reflected on the fact that we encounter them like trite picture in the midst of everyday rush, and yet they were symbols with deep meaning.

Within the framework of the *Home* series the minimalist creative methods are gradated, creating the neoconceptual character. Above all I have on my mind the series of paintings that mechanically copy the house-painter's way of creating the so-called lino-crust that covers walls of dirty hallways of Prague apartment houses. The neoconceptual works are assembled from

found objects of a mostly provocatively trite character, which are in some way, though not simple, typical of the empty life in our society. However, they are far from speaking in a critical language only. Again, they expose both sides: the emptiness in middle of life and life in midst of emptiness.

When the artist prepared another conflict of heterogenous semantic relations in the period of fragmentary objectivity, there occurred the experience- like value of meanings, opened in personal experience, as part of an object from the outside. David's personal experience is thus offered to be used from the outside. As if his personal experience were presented in the parentheses. The lino-crust paintings are probably the culmination of this technique. They work with something that can be called a publicly existing experience: they rely on the notoriety of this environment, which every inhabitant of Prague carries in himself or herself in the intimately non-thematic experience with these hallways.

The following works are created in this spirit as well. They are assembled mostly from photographs of housing estates and other socialist achievements. Tension between convention and experience, between topical reflected attention and ontological experience of the situation is at work here. We can see in the paintings the hopelessness and impersonal character of life in the socialist environment, but at the same time the intimate experience is updated here: this the truly real habitat of our life, which we have not chosen, but with which we are nevertheless connected through myriads of inner subliminal experiences.

Antonín Střížek

Since the years of his studies at the Academy, beginning from 1983, Střížek has come through the same atmosphere of "Confrontation" as Jiří David. However, he abandoned the "expressive" period very soon. At the "Confrontation" at Svárov in 1986, he exhibited *Romanesque Chapel* and *Hinds in the Forest*. These audacious realistic paintings made a quite favourable, if somehow bewildering, impression in the open context of the exhibition. They were placed there with a bit of irony, as if playing with kitsch. With a shy smile, Střížek objected that he did not mean it quite so ironically. I do not know where the artist found the need and courage to create a painting as an impersonal depiction of a given thing. Střížek himself

explains it by the concept of artistic freedom of that time: if everything is allowed, why not this?

At the beginning of this path Střížek still relied on subsidiary intellectual stimuli of absurd motifs (he is convinced that there is no Romanesque Church which would have three apses), ambivalent meanings (the trunk of a tree with a perpendicular board symbolizing the cross), play with the *Kitsch* (*Hinds in the Forest*). Enchantment by Carl David Friedrich and by the advertisement from the era of the inter-war Czechoslovakia are already the stimuli that are in full balance with full-fledged meaning of the picture as a depiction of something. Střížek is quite sure of what his task is. He knows that to paint a picture of a thing that interests him in some vague way is an immensely rich and inexplicable process.

Such a picture comes into being by the artist's careful collecting of all contexts, finding and respecting the laws of all meanings that are at play, without classifying them *a priori* by an ideological yardstick. The result is a painting, representing a mysterious new reality is unprecedented and cannot be compared to anything.

In paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, whom Střížek admires, the objective illusory part is covered by a layer of autonomously organized means of expression that reveal a spontaneous dynamism of the artist's individual soul. Since that time, over the entire modern history, the formal aspect with its specific semantics dominates in art over the illusion of an objective thing. It becomes only a sort of a "material" of personal understanding. In Střížek's case I suspect a major turning point in the ratio of both aspects that reach a completely new, though not quite simple, balance. I think that this is the reason that Střížek's apparently simple paintings excite us by their deep, though decipherable, secret.

Střížek's painting is a continuous process of building a painting, during which all preliminary ideological stereotypes, all decisions, understandings, holy convictions, personal sentiments, simply all completed models of reality that could be responsible for the final result beforehand, are eliminated. Střížek's painting is an attempt at an unprejudiced reconstruction of the act of understanding the meaning of things and their contents.

The reconstruction starts at the ground point zero. This is where that bare thing stands, one of those numerous things that surround us in the outer common world. Such a bare thing can be, for example, a faded snapshot of an orchid on the bonbonnière Rubín. It is a notoriously known thing that we have seen many times in the shops. This found object cannot be an object of a Duchampesque image for Střížek. It is only a beginning and cannot be presented for the viewer to understand, because this individual understanding by the viewer is not relevant for Střížek. It does not exceed the subjective self-assurance and does not realize a real contact with the outside. However, this bare thing is a real point of departure for an infinite number of acts of possible understanding which it endows with life -- that is, it acquires a firm semantic context that it concentrates around itself in infinite perspective. The real shape of things on which identity is based is binding, but for its so-called realistic reproduction because such reproduction is one of possible interpretations that a bare thing offers but does not impose. For Střížek the decisive point is that no matter what path man chooses out of many, it is necessary to walk upon it carefully bearing in mind what this path requires. Man must not "make a mistake" on the chosen path.

Střížek's path, which he picked from the ones that offered themselves and on which he walks with heightened attention, is the path of building a painting through painterly means. He draws and models the shape and applies the colour, and while doing so he carefully follows the laws ruling this process. At the same time, the building of a painting, the brushwork, is in Střížek's conception always an understanding of the thing, that initially bare, new and unknown thing. Střížek is a painter and does the work of a painter, but what he thinks in a painterly way -- we can say that what he thinks through his brush -- is not painting and its special laws, but the thing and its place in the world.

What is typical here is Střížek's concept of freedom, which is in a direct opposition to the modern concept of freedom. Whereas the modern painter demanded for himself to have a freedom from the outside, from conventions, from the objective logic, simply freedom for its original individuality, Střížek demands above all freedom from himself, from his very unavoidable individuality, from his inclinations, certainties, opinions, desires and already achieved understandings. He views the positive aspect of his freedom as a freedom of his brush, which liberated itself from the tyranny of his hand that forces on it the gestic spontaneity of the inner unreflected impulses.

No matter how much Střížek strives to achieve objective validity of all his decisions, or perhaps because he strives to achieve this, the limits and setbacks of this effort are apparent at every step. It is especially obvious in the entire character of his paintings which evoke the impression of being unfinished in a certain way, or more precisely, being completed at a certain, haphazardly chosen place. When the artist is building his painting as a harmony of general elements, he creates a general harmony and there is always a certain experience-like leftover that cannot be incorporated into the painting. (From the point of view of philosophy, it is probably like that Derrida's "leftover" from the transcendental denominator, similar to David.) The point where the harmony of the painting stops is the borderline of artist's understanding of the thing which he paints. The result of the effort for the objective validity of the pictorial language and of all meanings contained in the work is therefore the limit of the artist's personal experience beyond which he cannot go. That cannot be understood as Střížek's failure to achieve objectivity. As it has been said, the goal of this effort is not to overcome the mystery and the transcendental dimension of life by objectivity, but to assign the space to the secret which is adequate for it. A space in the background of objectivity, a place where the mystery cannot be grasped, communicated, broken by any process of understanding, a space which is authenticated by our ignoring it, even though we are evidently aware of it.

The fact that Střížek is well aware of that the eternal world is pervaded with secret and inner uncommunicable experience, is confirmed by the principles by which he defines his work. The first is the requirement not to violate the laws of the pictorial language. The second, however, one is the understanding that he can paint only what he enjoys, what he likes and toward what he has a strong, purely personal relation.

František Skála

At an exhibition in the Macromolecular Institute at Prague-Petřiny in 1986, Skála, apart from other things, showed his sculpture *Butterfly*. I recall that I admired it as a work remarkable by its originality of view and maturity at the same time. The *Butterfly* consisted of a bent rod and its body laid on the stem of a flower which the butterfly carried with it along with a small vessel

with water which nurtured the growing flower. The whole, including the flower's stem, was colourfully painted. In short: the biggest nonsense that one can imagine in connection with the greatest sensitivity and consistency in working-out of the form and content. I am tempted to say that this characterization expresses everything important that can be said about the artist. Not because he would have such a limited *Weltanschauung*, but because he has always been so definite in his entire development. This has its natural causes in the style of his creative approach to work.

Skála is careful to give anything a name. For him, when a thing gets its name, it loses its life, its relations, so manifold, muddled and hidden. Giving something a name cuts the arteries on all its sides through which it is connected with the world. In this sense, Skála is a great sceptic in the relation towards any new cultural definition. And for that reason, one is prone to come with the rash judgement that he escapes to nature. However, this is not true at all, because Skála does not escape to nature. Nature in his work is not a refuge, but a source of inspiration which is under his full control. Skála's relationship with nature is not simple at all.

With Skála, we find the same reverence for the given superficial existing world as with Střížek. His world as a given, incomprehensible universe of an infinite number of contexts is endowed perhaps with even greater authority and reverence. The artist's relation to it is close to a certain kind of pantheism, of course accompanied by a scepticism toward possible definition of values. Every semantic sphere which the artist updates is a part of that given and intransparent universe. Not even the nature here is an explicitly defined category. Due to this fact he could paint over the flower under the *Butterfly* without any scruples. Skála's landscape is a place of lively cultural contents (in a close vicinity to his weekend house at Dřevíč there are remains of a prehistoric settlement and its sacral nature radiates from the landscape.) Every natural form is a face of an unknown spirit, of infinite dependencies which have their own inner laws. We can interpret it either by physical determinism or by organic laws of biology, without explaining it, or we can view it with irony and build above it segments of captivating narratives. The natural thing is here in lieu of Střížek's "bare" thing which is at the same time a trite given fact as well as a true focus of infinite, incomprehensible, albeit living contexts. Only through the process of artistic creation and in the conversation with the spirit of the thing the articulation of potential meanings take place. In this conversation, however, the spirit of the thing remains closed into itself and there is nothing else left to Skála than to try to get to know his partner in the conversation in a small

talk through carefully asked question, so as not to rise suspicion that he is in fact after the Holy Grail and not be driven away from the journey to the great mystery. *Great Woodpecker, Lesojan, Commander Cane, Arrow, Old Silver* and other participants of the stories of Messrs. Vlas and Brada narrate captivating fairy tales and at the same time they stay here with the seriousness of cult objects, which are more credible, the more they hide their seriousness.

Perhaps the seriousness of these works stems, by the simple logic, only from the care the artist pays to their processing. He processes his things, found roots, branches and other object with the sensitivity for ordering the meaning which floats around objects and which compares in its sensitivity with the medieval goldsmith creating a sacred reliquary. Perhaps this is the source of the personal perspective of joyfulness and seriousness. Seriousness does not come from artist's decision, but from the adequate processing of the thing accessible to this processing. Only this objective adequacy, if it is fulfilled, opens the boundless mystery that cannot be immediately addressed. Skála's playful works offer many a secret of their stories, but the real mystery opens itself only after stepping over the boundaries of articulation, stories and the immediate topic. I said that Skála does not give names to things. But he articulates them far more precisely. To give something a name means to give it a interpretational context. To articulate it means to give it an exact shape that is its own.

Skála's concept of creative freedom is again illustrative. Skála puts into opposition freedom and building of one's own personality: "One has to build a certain personality, but only so far that it would not constrict his freedom." Thus again, as with Střížek not the Modernist freedom which an individual reserve for himself or herself, but freedom from one's own individuality, opening human being to lively contacts with the world."

Throughout the 1980s, František Skála narrates rich tales in a rich language, systematically articulating the story and the form of his messages; he plays with thrilling fates of his heroes to reveal through these small secrets a view of real mysteries of human life which -- as is the case with the most of artists of his generation -- lies somewhere on the outside, before the doorsill of his own "room," in the between-space of the social and cultural existence. In those years, nature played the role of the mediator through which the artist could get closer to the mysterious outside. Only in recent years, the topics from the urban area and the civilization myth have begun to appear.

Skála loves his stories and his work, "he enjoys" it perhaps even more than Střížek does. He is tied to his work by firm bonds of a purely personal intimate experience. However, this close relationship between the internal personal experience and the outside thing takes place through artist's putting his personal experience in the outside things, not the things into the personal experience. He builds his stories as systematically as possible. He gives them autonomous life, disseminates in them his own individuality and in the stories themselves he actually meets himself. He finds himself in the variety of things, in the context of the stories, achieves an objective relationship toward himself, finds himself ordered into many of these relations within the framework of many contexts which are at play. This it is not so that he would project the variety of things on the background of his own experience, his Cartesian undoubted I. Skála is aware that in his "room" he has the certainty of his personal experience, but he leaves the "room" and goes onto the "street" where he lives without certainty, closely attached to contexts which he did not design, but found and entered them. The immediate expression of this tension between the "room" and the "street" are Skála's actions, where self-mocking plays a certain part. The artist plays with this tension between self-confidence and direct classification into certain contexts on one hand and the outside view on the other hand that discloses the inadequacy and painfulness of this self-confidence.