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Fragments
Slovak Art of the Nineties

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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.

Mária Orišková

Fragments Slovak Art of the Nineties

Finding the right word to describe the present situation of art in Slovakia is by no means an easy matter. This state between past and future - in the cultural as much as in the socio-economic sphere - is an interlude in which the "old" has not yet withered and the "new" is still to emerge. It is a confused, perhaps even chaotic, situation in which the new should be positioned on the collapse of the old. The concept of fragment- understood as the product of disintegration - and, more generally, fragmentation is the one I have chosen as the present exhibition's theme and title because it probably most aptly reflects the situation, we find ourselves in today, in the last decade of the twentieth century. The fragmentation of the world of culture, ordained by the collapse of ideologies, is still continuing, and as yet we have little idea of where it will end and what new contours will emerge. The state of collapse persists, and questions continue to be posed. Tradition - to which we would turn for support - can offer no certainties worthy of trust and it is, rather, in the company of uncertainty and searching, loss of illusions and destruction that we live our present. Our history and cultural heritage are full of rupture and brutal upheavals, and a repeatedly renewed search, for identity. Once again Slovakia is at a "crossroads of culture", at the meeting of the Eastern and the Western world in Central Europe. Here numerous layers of culture form a hinterland, a tradition full of fragmentariness and repeatedly sundered human identity.

The cultural context of the 20th century - and particularly in the countries of the Eastern bloc in the latter half of the century - is marked by the political divisions following the Second World War. Official art, dictated by the dogma of socialist realism, elicited a reaction in the shape of "underground streams" of alternative art, appearing, for example, as various forms of

conceptualism, itself often a political act. The paradoxes encountered daily, both in experienced reality and in art, not only brought a sense of being "on the edge, but also prompted individuals to internal dialogues and intriguing attitudes. There is, however, no unifying line of development, no unequivocal definition or synthesis. The issue remains, rather, that of a new reconstruction of identity.

The changes in temporal, spatial and aesthetical horizons can doubtless be viewed in positive terms from a postmodern perspective that gives a (perhaps no more than apparent) chance to both centres and peripheries. Postmodern plurality has - through the "layering of value rasters" (Wolfgang Welsch) - made the marginal acceptable. Postmodern works of art invest their energy in disintegration rather than in synthesis, their interest is in producing discontinuity, rather than in the creation of homogeneous trends. The postmodern acknowledges the disintegrators of a world that was, the disintegration of paradigms that until recently held sway, it acknowledges amnesia, the search for new identities, the constant shifting and modelling of boundaries of aesthetic perception, the co-existence of the heterogeneous, hybrid form and ambivalent substance. Global changes (of which the collapse of the Communist bloc was a part) have introduced new concepts of pluralism and multi-culturalism, in terms of which smaller cultures and regions are also part of a new situation, a new movement, and also a new fragmentation. But none of this changes the basic question, which remains that of the capacity to define oneself again in a new context, to re-define one's identity and engage in dialogue with neighbouring countries.

The „Fragments” exhibition for the Heiligenkreuzerhof in Vienna is intended to relate to more than the situation so far described. The individual perspectives of eight Slovak artists closely bound to a specific historical space represent contemporary Slovak art. The exhibition, that is, brings together the historical space of the former Prelature, with its paintings and architecture of the baroque and classicist periods, and the contemporary testament of these Slovak artists. This encounter of the historical and the contemporary - the mutual play-off and gloss - assumes the character of a dialogue between history and contemporary media.

Symbol Fragments / Rudolf Sikora

The vision of collapse, of diffused motion, of fragmentation is one of the themes that engage Rudolf Sikora. Though these days his prime

preoccupation is with the specific idea of the collapse of former territorial entities and their political symbols, the wider theme is one that has deep roots in his work. Maps, coats of arms and triumphal arches scored with fissures incorporating disintegrating symbols of the distant and more recent past- these are, as it were, the successors to Sikora's primary signs of birth, existence and death.

Sikora's present work is one stage of what is an exceptionally purposeful cyclical development. Since the 1970s, when he was one of the leaders of Slovakia's alternative art scene, his attention has been devoted to conceptual art in the widest sense of the word.

His use of non-traditional media and search for the meaning of art predominantly in relation to science and philosophy locate Sikora's work somewhere between the utopian modern and the wide current of postmodernist thought. His personal mythology or "model of a private universe" is a pregnant fiction seeking through art to unite man, nature and the whole universe. The projection of man (or the artist himself) into the cosmic and the mutations of energy constitute one of the variants of conceptual art in Slovakia.

Since the beginning of the 1980s Sikora has been minimalising his signature and uses very strategically the symbols of birth, existence and death in many of his projects. The end of the 1980s witnessed something of a watershed in his thought and work. He began to paint large-scale asymmetrical canvases - pyramids, tombs and tumuli - in which, however, a concept is always present. The idea of the pyramid as a symbolic expression of a hierarchical arrangement of the world and society - as Sikora had already perceived it in the 1970s - gives rise not only to a new aesthetical dimension but also to a new formulation of the concept of disintegration in the shape of demolished, crucified and imprisoned tumuli. The polemic with the contemporary world now endures in coats of arms and triumphal arches, where the erstwhile unity of man and the world dissolves into fragments which regroup in new, hybrid wholes to initiate a new cycle of birth and decline.

Transformations of Codes/Jana Zelibská

From her very first works in the mid-1960s, Jana Zelibská has subverted the conventional image of the female world and female creativity. Without explicitly wishing to formulate a feminist - or,

indeed, femininestance, she presents a personal world in which the dominant elements are woman's body and thoughts. On the one hand, therefore, she has her female world (and it is one which she does not renounce); on the other, she is no radical feminist, merely an artist who casts doubt on the traditional model of society.

Traditional female sensibility, with its romantic charge, has always been a target for Zelibská's irony - since her early objects using soft materials (textile, lace), artificial materials and mirrors. Not content to remain with objects suggesting ambitions to environment art, she varied her themes in the happenings/celebrations of the early 1970s where she found a consonance of the natural and the mystical with the human and erotic. In other open-air actions she incorporated elements modelled on the phallus and the vagina, as if she were authenticating sexual symbols in nature. The action aspect of her work and the use of the object (both natural and industrial products) have placed Jana Zelibská within the art of so-called "other" creativity. The artist never expresses herself through traditional media and her pieces are often created on site in both exterior and interior settings. In the 1980s in particular, Zelibská frequently favoured the installation as the particular form which (in combination with setting and, possibly, sound or action), enabled her to reflect metaphorically, and with some detachment, the central theme of woman and woman's codes. In contrast to the early objects and environments, she now works with cold, depersonalised elements (metal, stone, neon tubes) and with photography, video recording and sound. Her ironic imagination - once generally smiling, now cold and minimalised - is once again directed impersonally against pseudoromantic fictions.

Open Cognition / Dezider Tóth

The work of Dezider Toth is often associated with visual poetry - the result, no doubt, of his exceptional ability to manipulate visual reality as if it were a literary (poetic) text or, indeed, language itself. Tóth uses meanings to effect his poetic games, removing the familiar into new contexts which then acquire new, unexpected substance.

Tóth's work does not adhere to any trend, and if some affinity with conceptualism might be suggested (particularly in the 1970s), this is not the linguistic exploration found in the work of orthodox conceptualist artists, but rather metaphorical games with concepts. Nonetheless, his early works do display tautologies which are a part of his lyrical games in nature. Nature

itself is, in fact, one of the most significant orbits of Tóth's work, where he juxtaposes, in poetic rituals, the human and the natural and underscores, above all, the phenomenon of vulnerability and fragility. His way of thinking as metaphorical reflection is also evidenced in other thematic orbits where he deals with the phenomenon of fire (works using matches), wounds (works using bandages) or silence (notations). The results are, for the most part, work on paper and objects which all have a common denominator, they are a materialisation of the ephemeral which is just as minimal as the concept itself. Tóth's interventions, adjustments and commentaries then become the projections of ideas.

The theme of the latest chapter to date in Tóth's oeuvre is the book. It is a theme which has engaged his attention since as far back as the early 1980s. His present work "Reservations" takes the form of painting on books stripped of their essential function. The content of the book - a compendium of information - and the reading of it are precluded and demythologised and the book functions as a support for the painting of aleatory ciphers, meaningless tables, illegible inscriptions and clocks without hands. Tóth converts the book into an ambivalent object, transforms monosemy into polysemy, undermines established certainties, displaces boundaries and asks unpleasant questions of the future.

Paths to the Universe / Karol Pichler

Put simplistically, Karol Pichler's work is a certain kind of reflection on the world. His intense desire to plumb the absolute essence is accompanied by attempts to visualise concepts such as the universe, existence, faith, will, the fusion of antitheses, and so on through his own personal vocabulary. The concept of opened and closed space and the principle of the tetrad (including the number four, symbolising the four elements of fire, water, air and earth) have since the 1980s formed the point of departure from which Pichler's reflections develop. The symbolic opening and closing relate to the possibilities, will, faith or determination of man to approach the higher universal principle, to uncover the mysterious higher order of the macrocosm, one of whose parts is the "human microcosm". Pichler does not, however understand the absolute concepts with which he works as fixed philosophical categories, but as concepts which he himself may remove to new locations through his own meditation or mystic language of signs and numbers, thus further multiplying the possibilities of interpretation. The formal side of his objects and installations (executed initially in the soft materials of textile and paper and, later, in cold metal and

artificial materials) clearly points to a grammar of deconstruction. The departure point of minimal and repetitive rectangular forms, cold and impersonal, found its continuation in mysterious signs - ornaments created with small sculptural figures. Here Pichler is continuing in the formation of binary structures of geometrical rational form (paradoxically made from the human figure) and irrational, mystical and open-ended substance.

Metamorphoses of Fragments / Ivan Csudai

Ivan Csudai is of the generation who appeared on the Slovak art scene in the mid-1980s, and his work is, essentially, in keeping with the wide current of postmodern thought. Though initially he chose to work almost exclusively in paint and graphics, later projects went beyond the classic 'picture on the wall' and he began to exploit the possibilities of further media (shaped canvas pictures, installations and furniture objects).

Csudai's work as a whole contains elements of neoromantic retrospection, referring back mostly to the turn of the century and its art. His invocation of such "tradition" is not as inconsequential as it might at first sight appear, particularly if we appreciate the importance of the severing of cultural continuity in Central Europe these last decades. In Csudai's case, however, this inclination also comes from within, as if his personal introspection found just the right resonance in this particular period - a period not only of nostalgia and decadence, but of detachment and irony.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Ivan Csudai started using geometrical elements in addition to figures. He also sometimes relies uniquely on abstract signs - for example, when for an installation on the theme of time he aligns alongside or else another almost, but not entirely, identical signs. The principle of optical illusion is also employed in his latest work, where on round table tops, he uses intarsia technique to produce a series of metamorphoses of four basic figures/signs. Their mutual interplay produces not only new combinations of their fragments, but also new, hybrid motifs and a new relationship between motif and background. Through the use of mathematically-generated Escheresque associative patterns, he highlights the idea of the eternally reoccurring and yet, from another point of view, new, whereby he subscribes to the postmodern thesis of "inconsumable potentialities" (Jean Francois Lyotard).

The Redefinition of Spaces / Viktor Oravec - Milan Pagác

The current of conceptual and action art that operated beyond the structures of official art in the 1970s has its continuation in Slovakia in the art of the new object, installation and "other creativity" of the 1980s. Among the important artists continuing in this line are the team of Viktor Oravec and Milan Pagác. Their multi-media activities - in which the action-ritual is often an important component - were initially bound to space in nature, to landscape. Gradually, however, interiors came to dominate and installations became the normal form. For Oravec and Pagác, working on site means not only redefining space, but also appropriating it to create new meanings. Space thus assimilated becomes a semantic space into which the artists often make "autobiographical" interventions, using personal codes such as dates of birth, names and initials. Typical features of their installations include a minimalised approach to staging and the cold poetics of the new object, with frequent use of glass elements in direct conjunction with colour neon light. The post-conceptual approach is particularly obvious in those works where the artists are working with a text as in some kind of deconstructionist linguistic genre. Communication with the spectator, which in early works was affected mostly through action, is now concentrated in the context- the specificity of the place or the character of the space into which Oravec and Pagác project minimalised codes related to their personal histories.

Fragments, Finds, Relicts / Roman Ondák

The work of Roman Ondák provides a whole range of stimuli to reflection on the specific nature of art in the 1990s. In a context where pluralism is recognised and where the argument of modern versus post- modern appears overly limited, a new situation of re-evaluating the past decades with new conceptual strategies is created. Innovation in, and redefinition of, the work- product relationship (found object, banal materials) is here related to a new viewpoint, a change of stance, a new multiple coding. It is not the object itself but the idea (for the most part expressed through installation) which is decisive. In Roman Ondák's installations, banal, profane and anonymous objects create environments in which the artist is merely some kind of mediator or compiler who carefully composes the sought- out

objects/finds as if to subject them to scientific investigation. For Ondák the choice of certain objects (for example, books immersed in formaldehyde) is a choice of a code that operates in the collective consciousness and which the artist proposes to authenticate, to submit to analysis. Through often minimal intervention or manipulation - the choice of environment or inventory of objects - he shrouds the work in mystery. The paradoxical association of cold and exact external form with emotive content, spectacle and simulation, lend Ondák's works an air of complexity and ambiguity. A cold, analysing perspective and irony and detachment combine in Ondák's installations to question received values, certainties and truths.