

Sculpture and the Town in the Liberec Gallery 1969

After the deep silence of the 1950s, the 1960s brought the first glimmers of light for the Czech avant-garde, although these were more frequent in the regions than in Prague, which was still fixed by the sharp eyes of censorship. Liberec, for example, although it was not at that time one of the most attractive cities in the country, had a notably open cultural atmosphere, enriched by the programs of the Municipal Theater and of the newly founded Ypsilonka, by the work of the young architects grouped around the Perret Prize-winner, Karel Hubacek, by exhibitions of the painters, sculptors and graphic artists of Skupina 7, and by people from the Museum of North Bohemia, the regional publishing house and broadcasting, who had a lively interest in culture. The Liberec Gallery played what was, in my opinion at least, a very definite role in this revivification of the city. In 1964 it held the Socha 64 (Sculpture 64) exhibition, which was the first exhibition bringing together the work of both young and more experienced sculptors active since the war. This was followed by exhibitions of Austrian sculpture (1965), of Slovak sculpture (1966), and the work of Vera and Vladimir Janousek (1967), all held in the gardens of the Liberec Gallery and the Botanical Gardens. In the conception and preparation of these exhibitions I worked closely with Dr. Lida Vachtova from Prague. The exhibitions helped bring sculpture not only to those who frequent galleries, but also to the more general public. Architecture too was a matter for public discussion, particularly after the city hosted the International Symposium of Young Architects in 1967. Thus it was relatively easy to begin the project of "Sculpture and the Town" at the end of the 1960s, in a move to offer a new and more up to date view of sculptural works. Preparations began in collaboration with Lida Vachtova and other colleagues from Liberec in 1968. It is also worth remembering that the exhibition would have been impossible without the enlightened support of the Mayor of Liberec, Jiri Moulis.

Our starting point was the idea that the usual presentation of sculpture in exhibition halls or sometimes outdoors was well-tested (as, for example, with the regular review exhibitions of sculpture which the Olomouc Gallery had been organizing since 1965), and that while sculptural symposia both in the Czech Republic and abroad provided an opportunity to create large works which would otherwise have been virtually impossible, they did not offer a solution to the vexed question of the relationship between sculpture and architecture, while in the 1960s the former had frequently become a form of "make-up" just added on to a building.

The idea followed in Liberec provided sculptors with a new opportunity to integrate sculpture into the fabric of the city. It was based on the assumption that a sculpture should not seem accidental but should find an integral link with the place in which it stands. In a city which the writer Frantisek Smejkal described as "basically ugly" (*Vytvarne umeni* 1969, p. 470) this task was not immediately easy, but it did offer connections which were more susceptible to treatments of the issues of the day than would be available in the historical centers of those far more beautiful medieval and Renaissance towns.

Thirty sculptors were invited to take part, some of whom could not or chose not to participate, and others who volunteered and were welcomed. They were by and large born around the year 1930, including Miloslav Chlupac, Vera and Vladimir Janousek, Zdena Fibichova, Vladimir Preclik, Eva Kmentova, Karel Nepras and Jan Hendrych. Sculptors were first invited to discuss the project and to visit the city, and then to choose the place where they would like their completed works to be exhibited, or in some cases to create new works for the site. It was a complex project to organize. Although the city provided relatively generous funding for the period, the work was carried out in virtual field conditions with, for example, the Liberec army garrison and the employees of the North Bohemia Stone-Working Company collecting the works from the artists' studios and installing them on the chosen sites. The events of August 1968 cast a shadow of doubt over the project, but the city governors decided that the planned cultural program would continue under the new conditions. By the time the exhibition opened, however, there was a new mayor and a new atmosphere in the city than when the project was first planned, and in a certain way it became a stubborn manifestation of the situation "before the invasion."

The sculptures occupied the city in their many and varied configurations, some of them complete in themselves and others making use of public spaces and parks. The local people came across them in seemingly chance and hidden places, as with Zoubek's sculptures which were placed on the pavement of busy Saldovo namesti. The Chlupacova Dvojice (the Shaggy Couple) found its natural home on the banks of the Liberec dam and Eva Kmentova's Brana snu (Gate of Dreams) was set together with Jiri Novak's Motyli kridly (Butterfly Wings) in a busy part of the Liberec Trade Fair, while Seifert's Plague Column was placed by the church in the square of the Ceskych bratri, which was later to be demolished. Pacik's marble statue Meniva pritomnost (Changeable Present) sat quietly in a corner of the decanal church. Ales Vesely placed his seven-meter statue Modlitba za mrtveho (A Prayer for the Dying) out of the center, thus throwing greater light on the work, which fitted into its surroundings, and let its silhouette form a background for the panorama of the city. Some artists chose sites which complicated the message of their works, as with Jan Hendrych's polyester figure - a red and white figurative symbol - set against a half collapsed wall with a sign saying "Zelenina" (Vegetables). Vladimir Janousek's Reed-warbler's Nest jutted out from the ramp under the city chapel, while Nepras' bright red composition Racte tocit II (Please Turn II) formed a sharp contrast with the pseudo-historical building of the Liberec museum. The results were judged by an international jury which included the now-legendary Swiss expert on modern art, Carola Giedion Welcker, the sculptor Mark Macken from Antwerp, the scholars Adolf Hoffmeister, Jiri Kotalik, Jiri Masin and Jiri Setik, the architects Jiri Gocar, Karel Hubacek and Josef Patrny, and a representative of the mayor. Cecil Goldscheider from Paris was forced to withdraw due to illness. The jury awarded first prize to Ales Vesely, second prize to Josef Klimes and third prize to Olbram Zoubek.

The exhibition was not just a fascinating presentation of a complex concept of sculpture within the fabric of a city, but also had its sociological repercussions, as it opened the way

for a public debate, a process which was somewhat risky in 1969, as the country moved towards "normalization." At the time it seemed quite normal that a large percentage of the public who were greeted daily by Zoubek's naked figures in Saldovo namesti saw them as provocative. Children, however, loved them, as they did Klimes' Moon, around which they could play. In some places, such as around Seifert's Calvary in front of an abandoned chapel at the Church of the Holy Trinity, young people gathered, clearly sensing that this was something that they would rarely see. The local party withheld its negative criticisms, doubtless out of respect for the international jury and its very positive assessment of the exhibition. This even made it possible for the town to purchase some of the sculptures (including those by Slavoj Nejd, Miloslav Chlupac and Alena Kroupova). It was only later that criticism of the entire undertaking emerged. It was the end of the 1960s.

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