

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN ART

The Situation in Our Country

The position that art holds in the overall spectrum of Czech social life seems to be more than a little different from that it has in the countries of western Europe and indeed in the world as a whole. This may be due to the relatively recent emergence of the modern Czech nation, and it may all too often have been seen as policy and all too often a crutch to help us survive in the most difficult moments, representing a degree of freedom in unfreedom. This "official" and at the same time deeply existential self-limiting feature of Czech culture has helped make the modern art scene here somewhat monolithic. While it may be rich in variety, it is nonetheless focused on itself and very sensitive to any penetration of its defences by the world around. This artistic solidarity comes from the tendency of most Czech artists (both recognized and emerging) to stay on the personal level basically in the position that can be termed *l'art pour l'artisme*. I am not using the term art for art in a negative sense, but rather as a comparison to a whole range of excellent artistic works within the realm of general artistic culture or philosophical inquiry into various problems, but always closed into a certain type of personal seclusion.

Art in this country is undoubtedly still marked by a strongly romantic approach to creation. Individual artists set themselves apart from the universe and from nature, experimenting with various approaches to art and to means of expression, describing, stimulating, and so on. Only very few are concerned with concrete questions about the state of society, and only a few use art as a language to help articulate certain social problems more clearly. In Jindrich Chalupecky's words: "In this country form and artistic structure are not a means to express something that has been thought out in advance, but a way this structure can attain a certain important meaning, which people could not otherwise reach."¹ This disregard for content and social context has reappeared again and again in the major "program" exhibitions devoted to contemporary art that have taken place since 1990 and this has been borne out by various meetings of expert critics.

Personal Mythology and the Return of Painting There was for some time a primarily personal mythology in thematic circles (in a direct reaction to the increasing freedom in society). Its foremost expression was the exhibition "Between Aesop and Maugli" held at the Vaclav Spala Gallery in Prague in 1992. In the catalogue one of the curators of the exhibition, Milena Slavicka, aligned herself with the romantic tradition and described its contemporary form as "... an emerging individualism which does not wish to protest, fight or revolt against the objective world, or the social system, unjust relations, tastes and morals that lie behind it..., but at the same time does not wish to identify with this objective world. It is a sort of noncollective, non-public, intimate and diverse activity."² Later problems related to the renaissance of painting or the so-called new abstraction came to the fore. It is still uncertain to what extent the renaissance of this thematic and expressionist circle on the Czech scene is linked with the dogged attempt to make contact with certain exclusive currents in the world today.

Different ideas on these currents in art were summed up during the discussions around the symposium on the form and meaning of painting in contemporary art at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts in 1994. The former rector of the Academy, Milan Knizak, said in his address: "The entire wave of so-called new painting is more concept, protest and illustration than actual painting. This is the

reason that contemporary painting is returning (and wishes to return) to a form of normality... We are again looking at the picture which is simply that and neither has nor wants anything more."³

The only venues which have at least partly recognized the social element of artistic work were the annual exhibitions of the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts in Prague, in relation to the idea of the so-called open society, which is the basis for these centers throughout eastern and central Europe. The first such project was in 1993 under the title *Krajiny* (Landscapes), but the approach to the subject was generally rather Romantic. The phenomenon of the industrial landscape, for example, was entirely overlooked, although it is a very painful one in the Czech Republic, as is the question of so-called urban landscapes. The second exhibition in 1995 was devoted to the infiltration of technological media (video, computer, virtual reality, etc.) into the life of the society and into artistic work. As its third annual project, the Soros Center supported the 1996 biennale of young artists "Zvon" and it is only with the fourth exhibition, which has taken as its theme artistic work in public space, that the relationship of art and the social context is really being addressed. It must however be added that a large part of the projects submitted have taken a very traditional approach to the subject and suppose that the sculptures or other works, sometimes amusing, sometimes blazingly modern and sometimes heavily historical, will be placed in a sensitive symbiosis with their surroundings.

Another exhibition which contained a degree of surprise was the 1995 "Zkusebni provoz (Trial Run) in the Manes Gallery in Prague. There mostly young artists (mostly still art school students) presented a whole range of socially motivated works (Jiri Cernicky, Pavel Kopriva, Pavel Suba, Kristof Kintera, Zdena Kolečková, Petr Lysacek, Jiri Suruvka, Stepanka Simlova), even though this was not the original idea of the curators (Jana Sevcikova and Vladimir Skrepl). It became clear that Czech art also included a lively trend towards communication with a context beyond art itself, a tendency to look at environmental, political, social and race issues, etc. Marek Pokorny commented on this in his introduction to the exhibition, where he wrote, "The form of the Zkusebni provoz (Test Run) exhibition is precise and free of prejudices and precedents in the context of Czech visual culture. It looks at what is happening around it (and which cannot be seen just as art), and it provides what is in fact a semantic self-reflection by the youngest part of the Czech visual arts scene in the last ten years."⁴

The Center and the Periphery

Another sensitive moment of Czech art today emerged from this exhibition -- the relationship of center and periphery, of Prague and the country. It is of course important that art on the edges, in the raw industrial agglomerations (the region around Ostrava in northern Bohemia) tends to be more communicative than that of the elitist atmosphere of the superb works from Prague. This art from the periphery is a sharp observer of the human longing for beauty, although at the same time it has absorbed the impersonal nature of the industrial landscape with its social and environmental dangers. It is looking for a new and up to date language pervaded with paradox, which will bring life to these areas. This language naturally uses visual symbols and different common technological media, but first and foremost it raises concrete questions (the presence of violence, the boom of drug dependency, the research into the peripheral strata of society, feminism, the power of the media and of course environmental problems). Ludvik Hlavacek noted the very special approach of the most notable/marked representatives of this "industrial" current, Jiri Cernicky and Pavel Kopriva, in his review of their exhibition at Klatovy: "Both the private sensitivity and the social interest that

are to be found in the works of this group of young artists from the area around Usti nad Labem, seem to be a certain form of response to the unhappy state of nature and human society in this industrial region. Jiri Cernicky and Pavel Kopriva are a part of the national and indeed international art scene today, but they have not rejected their origins in the industrial regions of northern Bohemia."⁵

So here artistic expression has taken on an extra dimension, which is sometimes seen as an innovation, but in fact is just a return to its earlier situation. Looking at the history of artistic forms it is clear that they were always closely linked with the life of society. This return does not and should not cast any doubts on the individuality of individual artists -- without them art could not exist -- but it still points to their reflective nature. In her essay *The Crisis of Culture* (1954), Hannah Arendt wrote about the relationship between art and public life: "In common terms, culture means that part of the public sphere which is politically ensured by people's actions which offers a space for the presentation of those things, of which the fundamental fact is their beauty. In other words, culture shows how art and politics, regardless of their mutual bonds and tensions, are interlinked to the point of mutual interdependence."⁶ She pointed out art's unique ability to exist within society, to experience its everyday life and at the same time to create the conditions for moving out of the stream of practically oriented life.

Developments in the World since 1945

It is this that has significantly influenced artistic creation since the Second World War. Artists have/were cut themselves off/set up barriers between themselves and the world outside. After the sterility of the existential gesture of the informel which was a reaction to the post-war crisis of traditional values. The next step was American Pop Art in the 1950s or the European movement of the New Realists. Both trends placed the sphere of art against the constantly expanding realm of mass production and pop culture. This clash was not however an end in itself but rather an attempt to shake viewers out of their complacency, make them question the products, develop a more precise concept of the dangers of excessive production. This was to be achieved through the anti-image, the icon of industrial objects or media idols.

Those artists with a more traditional view of art reacted differently to the threat to society posed by the growing demand for uncontrolled consumption. Their works looked at the question of the relationships between works of art and the art market, as the realm of people's natural existence in the world. Some of the representatives of action art and land art (Chris Burden, Hans Haacke, Mike Parr, Richard Long, Daniel Buren) went furthest in this direction. Their work "is ultimately a political act, even when it looks at things which seem totally unrelated to politics" (Suzi Gablik).^{7,*}

The high point of these attempts to break down the barrier between life and art was undoubtedly the ideas and work of the members of the international group, Fluxus, which was active in the 1960s and 1970s. The German, Joseph Bueys, one of the foremost representatives of this movement gradually moved towards a position in which he brought together his undoubted artistic sense of composition and material with a special talent to follow unconscious currents and also the ability to disrupt the static nature of social reality with his art.

The Artistic Repercussions of the Secularization of Society

This society is marked by the increasing globalization of the world (with the appearance of the concept of the global village) and by the parallel spread of secularization and atomization of

individual strata. This has of course had its affect on artistic creation. The composition of society is decided primarily by economic, race and sexual differences, and this increasing diversity is most marked in the multi-cultural environments of North America and parts of Europe. The spread of traditional ethnic and cultural communities has produced a dramatic change for the long closed western model of artistic creation. Even if concepts from other cultures have always had some impact on European art, it was formerly limited to the formal side of artistic expression. Now there is a deep-reaching diversification of ways of thinking in art and a new definition of its position in everyday life. One of the reasons underlying this transformation is certainly the greater openness to ethnic roots from outside Europe, which are more closely linked with the natural world and have a greater respect for the sacredness of myths, and by no means the least for which artistic work has a much wider dimension.

The art of these societies is a constant activity of finding one's place in the world through initiation rituals. Looking at the contemporary art scene in North America, for example, you can find a whole range of different social-cultural currents (African American, Latin American, Native American, Asian American, etc.)

The situation is somewhat different for art which is closely linked with particular interest groups. These secular societies set up barriers against the destructive trends of mass consumer society so that they can draw attention to their special nature and often even use them as a means of exerting pressure in their political struggle. Such groups usually have a particular sexual orientation (feminists, homosexuals, lesbians) or are trying to resolve concrete problems (AIDS victims, environmental activists, etc.). Their long-term aim almost always lies outside the cultural context but their activities often have a significant effect on movements in the field of art. A typical example of this point of view is the feminist movement, which has been a considerable catalyst for changes in subject matter in art since the beginning of the 1970s. As far as the concept of women is concerned, women artists have brought about a shift of focus from aesthetic questions to social ones, so that "... a work of art was not to give a message (signifie) nor was the critic's task to examine its aesthetic effect, as much as to deconstruct it and assess its effects in the context in which it was set" (Edward Lucie-Smith).⁸ Artists who were part of this newly defined art include Mary Kelly, Hannah Wilke, Barbara Kruger, Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman and Lorna Simpson.

The Cultural Center

In both the above cases (ethnic and interest groups) non-artistic communication cultural centers which offer an open place for artistic and non-artistic communication have played a deciding role in forming individual social groups. Such centers are often established on the peripheries and contribute to their revitalization. Centers produce various forms of artistic activity (visual arts, performance, music, dance, film, literature, etc.) but also carry out cultural, social and education projects. Their structure and financial security allow them to contribute to ongoing generational change and in the long term guarantee the basic level of the programs on offer. The development of these centers in the 1970s and 1980s was made possible by generous support from a variety of sources (federal, state, local or foundation grant bodies) and it contributed to the partial liberation of individual artistic positions from the pressure of the art market.*

Reactive social movements in art are still some-thing of a problem in the Czech environment because of a certain historically based unease with this way of thinking, but also because of the still insufficiently developed civic society. It does however seem that artists and exhibitions interested in the social context are gradually beginning to appear. The time for founding independent, non-state and non-profit artistic centers is also approaching. Works by individual artists and cultural institutions which are pervaded by the social background will represent one of the most important steps towards overcoming the alienation of the senses between art and spectator. They should include a wider range of possibilities than "just" going to exhibitions, concerts, films or plays. Their task will be to offer islands of mutual understanding in the sea of a society oriented towards success, consumption and the media.

Michal Koleček

Curator, Gallery E. Filla and Professor, Usti nad Labem translated by April Retter

Notes:

1. Chalupecky Jindrich, "Nove umeni v Cechach" (New Art in Bohemia), Nakladatelstvi H + H, Jinocany 1994, p. 148.
2. Slavicka, Milena, "Mezi Ezopem a Mauglim", in catalogue for the exhibition Mezi Ezopem a Mauglim, Prague 1992, p.6.
3. Knizak, Milan, Libezne trauma (Sweet Trauma), in proceedings of symposium Podoba a smysl malby v soucasnem umeni, AVU Prague 1994, p.27.
4. Pokorny, Marek, "Tropismy", in catalogue for the exhibition Zkusebni provoz, Prague 1995, p. 32.
5. Hlavacek, Ludvik, "Poskrvnená zem", Atelier 10/10, May 1997, p. 5.
6. Arendt, Hannah, "The Crisis of Culture" (Czech trans. Martin Palous), Mlada Fronta, Prague 1994, p. 143.
7. Gablik, Suzi, "Selhala moderna?" (trans. Blumfeld, S.M.). Votobia, Olomouc 1995, p. 45.
8. Lucie-Smith, Edward, "ART TODAY". Phaidon Press Ltd 1995, Czech edition: Nakladatelstvi Slovart 1996, (trans. Jana Solperova), p. 460.

Notes:

*) On the American scene at the present time there are two systems of hierarchy in the artistic community, which of course directly affect and in a certain sense complement each other. In addition to the art market limited to the major centers (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago) there is an ever-wider area of non-profit cultural centers in the universities and in these special centers. The growing influence of this non-profit sphere is borne out by the developments in the most recent highly prestigious Whitney Biennials (1993, 1995, 1997), which have tended to concentrate on formerly unknown artists from the so-called periphery, who are often concerned with current social issues. (Here we should remember the major, if wasted, opportunity of the eventually unrealized project for an exhibition of the 1995 Whitney Biennial in Prague).