Our Critic in Prague

Blank Czech

BY KIM LEVIN

Czechs, top, left to right: Vladimir Merta, Stanislas Divis, Tomas Cisarovsky, Jiri David, Jan Merta, Tomas Ruller, Stefan Milkov, Vladimir Kokolia, Michal Blazek, Margita Titlova, Ivan Kafka, Zdenka Gabalova (missing, Josef Zacek). Americans, left to right: Kirk Phillips, David Wells, Dawn Arrowsmith, Christian Mounger, Leland Means, Mark Cervenka, Deborah Lawrence, Karl Matson, (seated) Habib Kheradyar, Barbara Benish, Andrea Nadell, Robert Kingston, Kim Levin (not on trip, Kim Abeles, Jeffrey Vallance, Jim Ukekawa)

Artists and writers have a natural right to interpret the world in their own ways, to experiment fully and freely when exploring the relationship of man to reality and to what transcends it. In everyday life, the expression of truth should be a matter of course; in the creative life, it is a necessity.

Those words weren't provoked by the Mapplethorpe/Serrano furor, and this article isn't about the threat of U.S. government censorship of art. It's about a new, small miracle of free expression in a totalitarian state. I left for Czechoslovakia—just after Jesse Helms's spouse asked the Lord for mercy—to attend an exchange exhibition of emerging artists from Prague and Los Angeles that included two crowded openings, a three-day symposium, some remarkable performances, and much bonhomie. The above quote is part of the inaugural declaration of a free association of Czech creative artists called OPEN DIALOGUE that aims to break down barriers between the arts; the group was made legal only a few weeks ago. "We considered the situation in our culture to be rather catastrophic as to the bureaucratic procedures and as to dividing our creative artists into two groups—one which can perform, the other which cannot," explained Joska Skalnik, who read the declaration at the symposium. "DIALOGUE will not exclude by ideological quarrels. It will be democratic and polemic. It should overcome the boundaries that divide states and systems."

"Dialogue/Prague/Los Angeles," a first in a place where not even an art catalogue can be printed without official permission, was independent of OPEN DIALOGUE—and of an equally new group called Artforum, which has permission to organize exhibitions, concerts, and publications. A grass-roots effort, it was organized on a shoestring by two women, Barbara Benish (my student a couple of years ago when I did a stint at California's Claremont Graduate School) and Zdenka Gabalova of Prague. In spite of the 1986 U.S.-Czech cultural exchange agreement, "Dialogue/Prague/Los Angeles" had no assistance from either government. The 15 L.A. artists raised money by selling T-shirts and art, and the 12 who traveled paid for their own trips. Some, because of shipping costs, made their work in Prague and left it there. The artists, curator, and I were guests in the apartments of our counterparts in Prague.

"M-art," a new branch of the Socialist Union of Youth of Czechoslovakia, contributed a catalogue (L.A. artists only) and a bus trip to southern Bohemia, though at one press conference a small tug-of-war took place among the Czechs over just how much credit the Union of Youth should get—and whether the officials who donated the exhibition hall should be thanked, since it's the people's *right* to ask for use of the space. At the other press conference a Czech reporter objected not to the sprawling, wooden war planes in Californian Karl Matson's guns-and-butter piece, but to the slices of bread lying on the floor among them. "It looks like wasting, not respect for bread," she complained. Next fall, the Prague artists will bring their work to L.A. for the second half of the exchange: no funding for that catalogue (to which I'm contributing an essay) has yet been offered here.

It seems that when Gabalova went to

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the officials in Prague for permission for the show, they asked if it wouldn't be too controversial. Her reply: perhaps less controversial right now than an exchange show with Moscow. The exchange supports other ironies. In this country, some of the best new artists tend to politicize their art. There, where the official tradition is that art must serve the state, they refuse to be political. Insists Gabalova: "The art is apolitical. It is not fighting anything. Everyone is so disgusted by the government's attempt to introduce politics into art that they refrain from it, consciously or subconsciously."

"You can say whatever you want," she tells me. "Americans tend to censor themselves when they come here. It's not necessary." Yet there's a joke going around Prague: A Czech dog and a Polish dog meet at the border. Why on earth would you want to come to Czechoslovakia? the Czech dog asks. To eat, says the Polish dog, but why on earth are you going to Poland? To bark, the Czech dog replies.

A couple of weeks before the August 21 anniversary of the Soviet invasion, the populace was anticipating police bullets in Wenceslas Square; bad as it may have been, everyone expected the crackdown against the demonstrations to be worse than it was. Glasnost, of course, hasn't quite come yet to hard-line Czechoslovakia. However, you'd never suspect it from the art—or from this art event, which was interpreted by all as a harbinger of change. With one or two exceptions, it was hard to tell from the work whether a particular artist was the product of six years of classical study at the Prague academy or was a recent MFA from Claremont. Our rootless West Coast and a part of Central Europe that has had its roots cut—both satellite states—seem to share a craving for spirituality.

Posters for the show at Lidovy Dum (Peoples' House), a former neighborhood worker's hall, and Galerie Mladych (the Young Artists Gallery of the Union of Czech Artists, a new experimental space run, with official sanction, by Michal Blazek, one of the artists in the show) were plastered on walls around the city. At the mobbed opening, one of the artists, Vladimir Kokolia (whom one Californian dubbed "Czech Berry") performed with his rock band, E, while another, Tomas Ruller (he was supposed to be in Documenta 8 but his passport was revoked), did a riveting "presentation" within his installation. Face slathered blue, draped with and surrounded by tools (hammer and sickle among them), he ended the two-hour piece by stepping out of his green neon circle, walking outside, setting his jacket on fire, and, with

arms outstretched, throwing himself into the nearby stream and floating off, turning the water blue in the dusk.

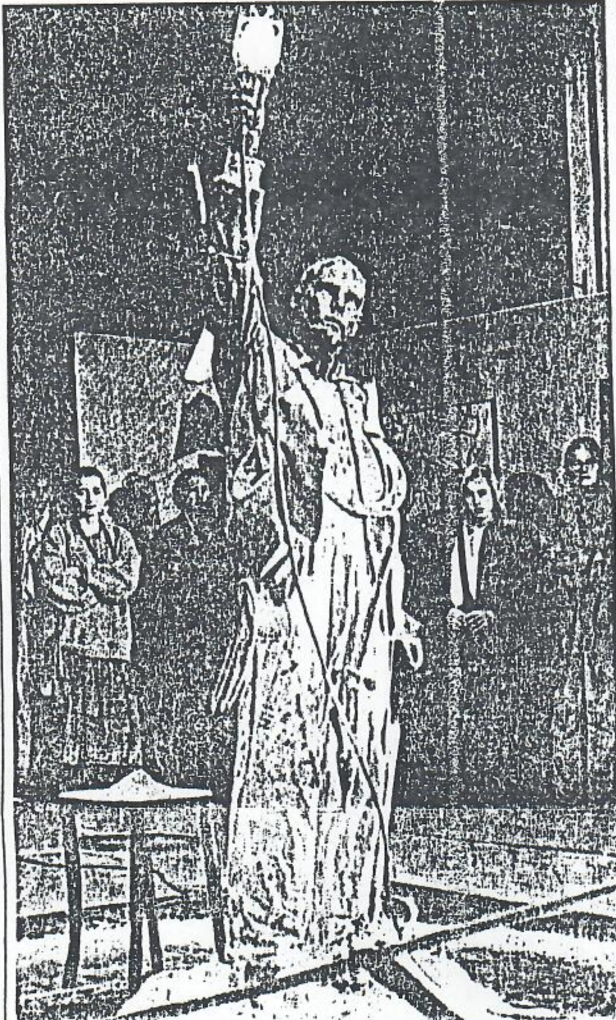
I'm torn among wanting to describe the political situation's effect on the art, the art's effect on the political situation, and the art itself. We'll be hearing more in New York from some of the talented new Californians, but what about Ivan Kafka (his *A Slight Uprising* was made of 25 red-and-white striped wind socks, one of which periodically inflated and collapsed), who's been doing world-class site-specific outdoor installations for years? We saw Jiri David's emblematic paintings at Artist's Space last season, but what about Vladimir Merta, who describes his work (his lopsided graphite painting of black bubbles had a thick wooden border) as "advertisements for infinity"? Or Margita Titlova, whose exuberant finger-painted, lipsticked, and silk-screened construction of panels and rocks, *A Monument to Two Dog Sleds Passing Each Other*, is based on her Conceptual body work; or Stanislas Divis, whose diagrammatic instructions for milking a cow is part of a series he calls "scientific realism"?

At the symposium, which took place at "Gong" (the House of Culture for a part of Prague), hardly anyone spoke of their own work. Jan Merta (whose canvases explore fullness and emptiness) showed slides of artists missing from the show. Kokolia (whose thick stack of mutant-figure drawings was clamped together with a big blue C clamp) introduced us to official art: "In Czechoslovakia it is not difficult to be a painter because we know what is allowed to be done and what isn't allowed to be done. It becomes more difficult when we try to attempt something a little different," he explained. "Perhaps our American friends have an idea that our official art is monstrous statues of Stalin 60 feet high, but I would like to suggest our official art is inconspicuous. I think struggling against official art is struggling against a chimera. But I think even in America there is what can be called official art."

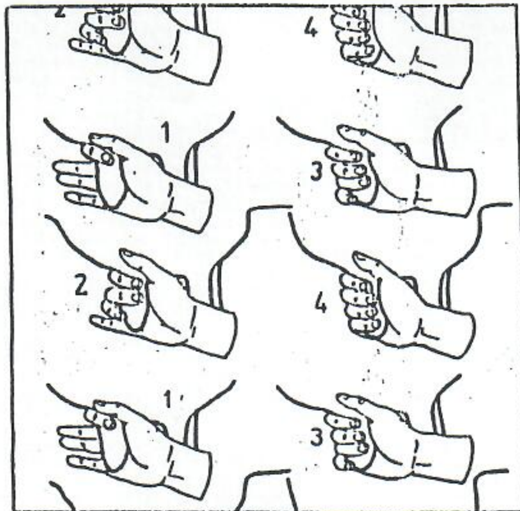
The first day's symposium ended with a long, engrossing dance performance (*Requiem*, to Antonin Dvorak's unabridged score), layered with symbolism, by a group called *Studio pohyboveho divadla* that has affinities with Pina Bausch. The second day, Ruller, in the 15 minutes allotted for his talk, did a ritualistic stage piece about transformation and alchemy. The third day ended with an improvisation by one of the Americans, Habib Kheradyar, who had asked Ruller to collaborate. Standing in buckets on the sidewalk in front of Gong, they slowly hurled fistfuls of black mud at each other until both were blackened head to foot, then hosed each other down and shook hands. It was the perfect closing ceremony: a woman in a window across the street yelled that they were crazy, a passerby complained they were behaving like children, a Gypsy woman loved it and rushed to phone her husband to come quickly to watch.

The Prague art world is unexpectedly familiar. An art collector's apartment, crammed with recent Czech art, is furnished in chrome and glass ("three years ago in that chair sat Diebenkorn"). But you realize it's an opposite parallel world when he tells you he began collecting after he lost his job as professor of cybernetics during the events of 1968, or when one of the Czech artists makes a comment about collectors: "It's a very rare obsession here. I don't understand it at all." Or it suddenly dawns on you that the galleries are all what we'd call nonprofit alternative spaces in a place with no true alternatives.

There's an unwritten history of unofficial exhibitions that took place in courtyards, hop fields, and barns. In 1980, a show of site-specific installations was held in a communal house where a number of artists lived; in 1981, another took place in the courtyards of Prague but was closed by authorities after three days; in 1982, a group of artists exhibited on some tennis courts ("It took only 45 minutes. Then came police"). Says Ivan Kafka, "These things were not whimsical gatherings, but came into being because it was totally impossible to exhibit in rooms covered with roofs."



Czech artist Tomas Ruller calls his slow-motion performances "something between sculpture and drawing." Does this moment/image look familiar?



Stanislas Divis: *Milking Instructions*

"In some way I consider the terrible conditions for art here more productive and more exciting," one spectator at the symposium told me. But Tomas Ruller has been arrested in the middle of performances, and was once put on trial for public nudity (he was invisible, lying in a sandpile in the dark) and using explosives (a child's toy), though he was acquitted. Jindrich Streit, a photographer whose documentary pictures of a decrepit village were on exhibit in a Prague gallery (wry comments such as "onward and upward socialism!" were scrawled in the gallery's visitor's book), was put on trial too, accused, I was told, of simulating the bleak scenes to make things look worse than they were. He was acquitted after villagers testified that the pictures were accurate.

Franz Kafka wasn't kidding: there are 217 steps up to the castle, and the invisible presence of an amorphous, omnipresent "they." And there's another invisible presence in Prague: that of the monumental statue of Stalin that existed for just a few years in the '50s and was demolished after Khrushchev denounced Stalin. Photographs of the colossus were also destroyed, but it remains in people's memories—all different. I became fascinated by the invisible Stalin statue, climbing to the top of its vacant base (bigger than a basketball court), which contains a cellar now supposedly used to store potatoes. Also, I finally tracked down a picture of the statue. It was larger than I'd imagined (two people in the picture reached barely to the bottom of the dictator's long overcoat), and there were two flag-waving patriots behind him, then two peasants, two workers, and bringing up the rear, two military men: a Czech soldier and a Russian liberator, as they're called.

I also visited the Klement Gottwald Museum, where the first thing you see is a statue of a Czech soldier and a Russian one kissing each other passionately (what would Jesse's wife say?). The ornate building, back in "the old capitalist time," used to be a bank. Now its ornate central hall is lined with red flags, busts of politicians, and potted plants, and the galleries display relics of socialist history: posters, broadsides, artful arrangements of uniforms, medals, boots. "It's one style overlaid on another. It's appropriation. Would you call it postmodernism?" Gabalova joked. The modern avant-garde came about as a reaction against bourgeois society. Will a postmodern avant-garde, reacting to the socialist state, emerge as the Iron Curtain lifts?

"The American media is much more manipulative than our local media. When I came to America I understood why the artists are so much obsessed with the media. Nobody takes the media seriously here," Gabalova tells me in the car one day on the way to Gong. What about the idea we have in the West that a Communist country isn't a consumer society? "That's bullshit," she says. "This society is in a way much more a consumer society than yours. People here concentrate on getting commodities much more because they aren't easily available. You become much more consumer-oriented than a society with an overflow of commodities." Can I quote you? I ask. "It is time to speak freely," she replies.

Authorities, accompanied by police, unobtrusively tried to close the exhibition at Lidovy Dum and showed up at the symposium the second day, but Karol Srp, Artforum's organizer, spoke up for its legal right to take place. Gradually, the show was mentioned in the newspapers, each time with a longer account. The official Communist daily finally reviewed it. And now the exhibition is supposed to go to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia (where an Andy Warhol museum is rumored to open), for a month. The young Czech artists, pushing the system to accept what they do, and this project that slipped through the system's back door could teach our Corcoran Museum something about not knuckling under to intimidation. Artistic freedom is a peculiar thing: it can be nourished—or squelched—unexpectedly. While freedom of expression is sprouting in Czechoslovakia, it's eroding here. Are you listening, Jesse? ■