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# THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN A NARROWED FIELD

## KAREL CÍSAŘ

One of the telling omissions of the anthology *Czech Art 1980–2010* is any mention of the Czech translation of one of the pivotal essays of postmodern theory, Rosalind Krauss's "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", which was published in 1991 in the third issue of the first volume of the magazine *Konserva / Na hudbu*.<sup>1</sup> This omission was not an oversight. The editors had set themselves the task of publishing, alongside Czech "programmatic texts and manifestos", only "theoretical essays contextualising discourses established on the Czech scene",<sup>2</sup> amongst which Krauss's postmodern theory undoubtedly did not belong. Although Milena Slavická had drawn attention to Krauss's importance in the pages of *Výtvarné umění* in the same year, Krauss's work found almost no takers in this country and is only now, with a significant delay, achieving an influence.<sup>3</sup> And yet ever since *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, published in 1985, it has been Krauss who did not interpret postmodernism as a "farewell to modernism", but as a perspective from which we might find fertile ground for an exploration of such themes as the copy and the reproduction, the reproducibility of the sign, and the textual production of the subject in modernity. What is symptomatic of the omission is not just that it betrays the preconceptions of the editors and their notions of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, but also, and more importantly, that it is a sign of a deeper regression in which the inability of Czech theory – clear from a comparison

**1** Rosalind KRAUSS, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October*, 1979, no. 8, pp. 30–44, reprinted in *eadem*, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1985, pp. 277–290 (citations are to this edition). Cf. the Czech: "Sochařství v rozšířeném poli", *Konserva / Na hudbu*, vol. 1, 1991, no. 3, pp. 7–13, reprinted in Karel CÍSAŘ (ed.), *Stav věci* (exh. cat.), Brno: Dům umění města Brna 2012, pp. 131–143.

**2** "Úvod", in: Pavlína MORGANOVÁ – Terezie NEKVINDOVÁ – Dagmar SVATOŠOVÁ – Jiří ŠEVČÍK (eds.), *České umění 1980–2010: Texty a dokumenty*, Prague: VVP AVU 2011, p. 9.

**3** The following texts also appeared in the magazine *Konserva / Na hudbu*: "Interview Hala Fosterova s Rosalind Kraussovou", *Konserva / Na hudbu*, vol. 1, 1991, no. 6, pp. 18–21, and "Odvračená strana tvaru", *Konserva / Na hudbu*, vol. 1, 1991, no. 7, pp. 3–18. An extract from the last chapter of the author's *Optical Unconscious* (1993) was published under the title of the book in Tomáš POSPISZYL (ed.), *Před obrazem: Antologie americké výtvarné teorie a kritiky*, Prague: OSVU 1998, pp. 145–173; three essays from *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* were included in Karel CÍSAŘ (ed.), *Co je to fotografie?*, Prague: Herrmann a synové 2004: "Fotografické podmiňky surrealismu", pp. 209–233; "Obraz, text a index: Poznámky k umění 70. let", pp. 251–269 (in the original "Notes on the Index: Part 1", pp. 196–209, and "Notes on the Index: Part 2", pp. 210–219). Rosalind Krauss's early work on modern sculpture was taken up by Petr Wittlich, and her essays on surrealism were used by, among others, Lenka Bydžovská, Karel Šrp and Josef Vojvodík.

4 Igor ZABEL, "My' a ti 'Jini'" (1998), in: MOR-GANOVÁ *et al.*, *České umění 1980–2010*, pp. 303–311, and Piotr PIOTROWSKI, "Rámování střední Evropy" (1998), in: *ibid.*, pp. 321–325.

with the "contextualising essays" of other Eastern European writers<sup>4</sup> – to deal with relevant foreign sources is reframed as a virtue, which at best leads to a productive misunderstanding of art manifestos, and at worst, to the quasi-theoretical discovery of the already discovered.

In her text, Krauss takes issue with the historicism of post-war American criticism, according to which artworks from any period can be slotted without any great problem into a single continuous development arc. Minimalist sculpture flows naturally from constructivism and American abstract expressionism from French cubism. A similar blueprint was applied to late seventies art, which at first sight looked like absolutely nothing that had been done previously. However, criticism had no hesitation in declaring ancient objects such as menhirs or Native Indian burial mounds to be its model. Attempts to preserve the validity of the concept of the sculpture led to its internal collapse. Krauss, on the other hand, argued for the historical contingency of the internal logic of sculpture. When interpreting the transition from premodern sculpture, i.e. the monument, via its negative state, i.e. the modern sculpture without any particular place, all the way to the postmodern work, she discarded the traditional developmental arc and replaced it with a structuralist or poststructuralist model. According to this model, the sculpture does not stand in a privileged central position but on the edge of a complex structure that supplements the original negative characteristics of modern sculpture, such as not-landscape and not-architecture, with their positive antitheses of landscape and architecture, which had up till then been excluded from the definition of sculpture and that open and expand the system by new concepts such as "marked sites", "site-construction" and "axiomatic structures". The field thus expanded overcomes the existing logic of opposing pairs and rids itself of any dependency on the specificity of means of expression:

Thus the field provides both for an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore, and for an organisation of work that is not dictated

by the conditions of a particular medium. From the structure laid out above, it is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organised around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organised instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> KRAUSS, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", pp. 288–289.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind KRAUSS, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde", in: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 151–170.

<sup>7</sup> KRAUSS, "Notes on the Index".

It is clear from the location of the essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* how Krauss interprets the relationship between modern and postmodern – the essay is the penultimate chapter of section two entitled "Toward Postmodernism". Structurally, then, it corresponds to the chapter "The Originality of the Avant-Garde", which is the penultimate essay in section one entitled "Modernist Myths".<sup>6</sup> As in the essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", Krauss rejects the claim that there exists a linear developmental sequence between modernist and postmodernist sculpture. Indeed, the entire book interprets postmodernism as a fissure that reveals hitherto unseen aspects of modernism. In the first part of the book, Krauss takes issue with the reductive interpretation of the modernist grid, criticises the excessively swift appropriation of photographic archives by traditional art history along with the ideas this history has regarding authorship, and interprets positively the concept of the copy in the case of Rodin. The second part of the book gathers together critical texts on contemporary art that led her to conduct her historical investigation. In order to be able to expound upon the contemporary work of Vito Acconci and Gordon Matta-Clark,<sup>7</sup> she turns to Duchamp's work of the 1920s, and when examining Richard Serra in "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", she draws on analyses of Brancusi's sculptures. *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths* basically, therefore, has two objectives: (1) to apply structuralist and poststructuralist methods in order to defend the relevance of contemporary art practice, which historicising criticism at the time rejected; and (2) to indicate how reductive the

8 Achille Bonito OLIVA, "Umění přechodu" (1982), in: MORGANOVÁ *et al.*, *České umění 1980–2010*, p. 115.

9 Jana ŠEVČÍKOVÁ – Jiří ŠEVČÍK, "Loučení s modernismem" (1985), in: *ibid.*, p. 122.

10 *Ibidem*, "Umění 80. let" (1988), in: *ibid.*, p. 173.

formalist interpretation of modern art is and to shift the focus of its research.

While Krauss situates the postmodern turn in American art in the 1970s, European criticism, including its Czech iteration as we know it best from the texts by Jana and Jiří Ševčík, places the shift in the art of the 1980s. However, this difference necessitates a change in our understanding of modernism, in relation to which postmodernism defines itself. Krauss deems as modern in the positive sense of the word the broad current of art from the end of the 19th century up to American minimalism of the 1960s. She then uses the same term negatively for historicising criticism, above all that practiced by Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg, whom she accuses of an excessively reductive approach to modern art. For European theory, on the other hand, it is art of the 1970s, i.e. art that Krauss labels postmodern, that represents modernism or the post-war avant-garde. According to the Italian critic Achille Bonito Oliva,

the dematerialisation of the work and the impersonality of execution characteristic of the seventies in a strictly Duchampesque conception [characteristics of postmodern art in Krauss's interpretation] was surpassed by the reappearance of handicraft and pleasure taken in execution that the tradition of painting reintroduces into art.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Jana and Jiří Ševčík maintain that:

Unlike the 1960s and 70s, the new wave in art rid itself of the ambition to expand reality by something new and unrepeatable. [...] On the contrary, it turned to the old and familiar, accepted this reality as its own, and by means of a well known manneristic strategy brought the centre to the periphery and the periphery to the centre."<sup>9</sup>

The Ševčíks also claimed that "instead of the relentless invention of new procedures and techniques, traditional methods are returning, the old way of working with image and conventional means is being restored".<sup>10</sup>

Even though, like Krauss, Bonito Oliva and the Ševčíks rejected notions of the continuity of time and progress, they defined postmodern art negatively in relation to modern.<sup>11</sup> Instead of Krauss's "expanded field", from which it clearly ensues that not everything is always possible, in their text "Art of the 80s" the Ševčíks spoke of a "free field" in which everything should be possible, including a return to timeless mythical forms and premodern means of expression. Given that postmodernism was here being viewed as a negation of the progressive tendencies of Czech art of the 1960s and 70s, there was inevitably a return to traditional media, painting and sculpture, which in Krauss's view should be included in the expanded field of art independent of a specific medium. This is very clear from the second exhibition in 1989 in Prague of the Tvrdohlaví group (*Tvrdohlaví II*) at the ÚLUV Gallery (the former Centre for Folk Art Production), at which figurative sculptures and pictures predominated.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear with hindsight that the form of postmodern art present at the turn of the 1980s and 90s in Czechoslovakia was a manifestation of neoconservative tendencies (not only in respect of the dominance of traditional means of expression, but also by virtue of its interest in the theme of the family, religion and the nation), and should perhaps be termed anti-modernist rather than postmodernist.<sup>13</sup> Of more importance than the form of art at that time, a form that many of its practitioners soon abandoned (if only to return to periodically), is the form its theoretical reflections took. These led to contemporary art being torn from its history and a mood of resignation regarding the confrontation of Czech art with what was deemed necessarily "asynchronous" foreign art and its theory.

Yet at this time in both Czech art and its theoretical offshoots we find positions that directly encouraged this confrontation. Guest artists at the second exhibition of the Tvrdohlaví group included such figures as the art duo Martin Polák and Lukáš Jasanský. The very fact of their joint authorship corresponds to the "textual production" of subjectivity as we know it from texts by Rosalind Krauss. The same is true of their utilisation of series and sequences, or the direct

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the reactionary character of German and Italian neoconservative postmodernism cf. Benjamin H. D. BUCHLOH, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting", *October*, 1981, vol. 16, pp. 40–41: "First there is the construction of artistic movements with great potential for the critical dismantling of the dominant ideology. This is then negated by those movements' own artists, who act to internalise oppression, at first in haunting visions of incapacitating and infantilising melancholy and then, at a later stage, in the outright adulation of manifestations of reactionary power. In the present excitement over 'postmodernism' and the 'end of the avant-garde', it should not be forgotten that the collapse of the modernist paradigm is as much a cyclical phenomenon in the history of twentieth-century art as is the crisis of capitalist economics in twentieth-century political history."

<sup>12</sup> This point was made by Tomáš POSPISZYL, "Receptář Tvrdohlavých", *Umělec*, vol. 3, 1999, no. 4, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> See Jürgen HABERMAS, "Moderna – nedokončený projekt" (1981), in: Egon GAL – Miroslav MARCELLI (eds.), *Za zrkadlom moderny: Filozofia posledného dvadsaťročia*, Bratislava: Archa 1991, pp. 299–318.

14 Nancy FOOTE, "The Anti-Photographers" (1976), in: Douglas FOGLE (ed.), *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982* (exh. cat.), Minneapolis: Walker Art Center 2003, pp. 24–31.

appropriation in the photographic series *Drawings* (1989), exhibited jointly with the cycle *On White Paper* (1989) on the stairwell of the ÚLUV Gallery. This coincides with their interest in what Krauss calls the theme of the copy, reproduction and the reproducibility of the sign. However, above all what needs to be emphasised is the expansion of the field of photography, as we might term it using Rosalind Krauss's terminology, or directly anti- or non-photography, as Nancy Foote speaks of it as far back as 1976 in connection with postmodernism.<sup>14</sup> Given that the position of Jasanský and Polák did not correspond to what at that time was the dominant concept of postmodernism, it comes as no surprise that in the catalogue *Mezi první a druhou moderností* (*Between the First and Second Modernity*) images of their installations were removed from the section devoted to postmodernism and included fifty pages later amongst exhibitions of the groups Pondělí and B. K. S. Their work received similar treatment at the exhibition *Ostrovny odporu* (*Islands of Resistance*), where photographs from the cycles *On White Paper*, *Fluxus* (1990) and *Jokes, Jokes, Jokes* (1991) were excluded from the section on postmodernism and associated instead with works by Jiří Kovanda.

If Polák and Jasanský represented the Czech response to poststructuralist postmodernism, then theoretical reflections of this kind were represented by another text omitted from the anthology, "Dobře, ale to není žádný argument (Fine, but that's no argument)", which Karel Thein published in 1991 in the pages of *Výtvarné umění*. Like Krauss, Thein does not indicate rejection, but a complex system of anticipation and reconstruction between modernism and postmodernism, and draws attention to the problem of time as it relates to postmodernism:

The movement from modernism to postmodernism is a theoretical movement. It does not involve a relationship of temporal sequence (at least not primarily), but different methods of *conditionality*. From the perspective of the debate around postmodernism, modernism is of course the strategic identification. This identification

is violent. In a new composition the modernist voice is obliged to say that which it would never have been able to say. Postmodernism wants to indicate modernism completely, but repeat selectively. The old question of creation and re-creation: in which moment can we choose “freely from history”?**15**

If the accepted form of European postmodernism meant adherence to a logic eliminating opposites and tearing art from its history, in the longer term it nurtured the feeling that Czech art and theory was incompatible with its foreign counterparts. In their lecture “On Context”, Jana and Jiří Ševčík described a situation in which artists wishing to define themselves in relation to the politicising tendencies of official and unofficial art were later presented abroad as political artists.**16** Fifteen years later, in the essay “The Eastern and Western Cube”, Tomáš Pospiszyl addressed the historical assumptions behind this discussion and demonstrated convincingly the glaring incompatibility of seemingly similar Czech and foreign artworks.**17** Pospiszyl describes how the self-interpretation of Stanislav Kolíbal as predecessor of American minimalism collapses if his metaphorical and aestheticising sculptural forms are set against the completely concrete, crudely industrial materials of Richard Serra. While in Kolíbal’s small sculpture instability is abstracted, in Serra’s *One Ton Prop* it is real, draws the gallery space into itself, and represents an immediate threat to the viewer.

Pospiszyl’s interpretation of Jiří Kovanda’s *Sugar Tower* (1981) is less convincing. Although he shows that Kovanda’s work is less an example of late minimalism than a completely contemporary post-minimalist critical reaction to this direction (meaning that, by virtue of this approach, the artist “does not differ from his Western counterparts”),**18** he compares it to the work of the minimalist Carl Andre.**19** As in the case of Kolíbal and Serra, Pospiszyl isolates a difference between what in other respects are similar works, Andre’s brick installations and Kovanda’s actions involving nine sugar cubes. According to Pospiszyl, the main difference is the material used and the location of the work. While

**15** Karel THEIN, “Dobře, ale to není žádný argument”, *Výtvarné umění*, vol. 15, 1991, no. 1, p. 11.

**16** Jana ŠEVČÍKOVÁ – Jiří ŠEVČÍK, “O kontextu” (1990), in: MORGANOVÁ *et al.*, *České umění 1980–2010*, p. 296.

**17** Tomáš POSPISZYL, “Východní a západní krychle” (2005), in: *ibid.*, p. 343–352.

**18** *Ibid.*, p. 350.

**19** I have attempted a comparison of Kovanda’s work with the post-minimalism of that time in “K Instalaci 5 (Tabule skla v pusté galerii)”, in: Edith JERÁBKOVÁ (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda* (exh. cat.), Ústí nad Labem: Fakulta umění a designu UJEP 2010, pp. 38–39.

20 POSPISZYL, "Východní a západní krychle", p. 351.

21 Carl ANDRE, "Rozhovor", in: Karel SRP (ed.), *Minimal & Earth & Concept Art*, Prague: Jazzpetit 1982, pp. 73–83.

Andre uses brick, a neutral material, and only in galleries, Kovanda placed his semantically laden sugar cubes on the well of the Vyšehrad fort:

While Andre's objects are invariably situated in a gallery and their replacement with ordinary bricks is therefore hypothetical, during the 1980s Jiří Kovanda did not work in galleries. He undertook his actions in the streets, or built installations in public space or in the privacy of his own apartment. His work is not a terse reply to art theory, but is a reaction to the social situation, a situation that Kovanda does not distance himself from but engages with through his works.<sup>20</sup>

Though we may agree with Pospiszyl's claim that Jiří Kovanda's work "is not a terse reply to art theory", this does not mean that it is "intellectually isolated". A year after *Sugar Tower*, an interview was published with Andre in the Jazzpetit series that Kovanda had translated for his own purposes.<sup>21</sup> Among the illustrations accompanying the text we find not only Andre's *Lever* (1966/1969), which Pospiszyl compares to Kovanda's work, but also two works that, notwithstanding Pospiszyl's claim, Andre realised outside any gallery space (*Rock Pile*, 1968, and *Joint*, 1968), and which he later presented in the form of photographs, as indeed did Kovanda. Furthermore, it is to the relationship between these two types of work – gallery-based and exterior – that the interview is devoted. According to Andre there is no great difference. One is a sculpture in a museum, the other the recording of an event in a forest. In conclusion, he expresses the wish that his work follow in the tradition of the Russian revolutionary artists Tatlin and Rodchenko.

Just as Andre cannot be deemed the immediate heir of the linear tradition traceable to the Soviet avant-garde, so too Kovanda is not Andre's successor. Neither Kovanda nor Andre belong to the Darwinian evolutionary model of universal art. This is not because Czech art was isolated and American art universal. Even American art was "isolated" after the Second World War, and Americans only became

acquainted with the Russian avant-garde with the publication of *The Great Experiment* by Camilla Gray in 1962.<sup>22</sup> We cannot write the history of contemporary art through the optics of either linear history or postmodern timelessness, but through the heterochrony of different times that the artwork gathers within itself. It is not necessary to invent a new category for this. Sometimes it suffices to use those categories that already exist, and above all not to forget that they have all been here at some point in time. If it seems that, from the perspective of the 1990s, the publication of a translation of a paradigmatic postmodernist essay in a magazine that adopts a critical stance towards postmodernism and refers to it as being an ideology is an error, with the hindsight of today it seems completely understandable. In the case of Krauss this was a postmodernism that did not wish to break away from modernism, but to reveal its hidden possibilities.

<sup>22</sup> Camilla GRAY, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*, London: Thames and Hudson 1962.