

Ládví (founded in Prague in 2005) is an art group that organises socially beneficial interventions in public spaces, mainly in Ládví, part of the Ďáblice housing estate in Prague. The group has implemented over twenty such projects. Members of the group include Jan Haubelt, Tomáš Severa, Adéla Svobodová, and Jiří Thýn. More information about the group can be found at <http://www.ladviweb.ic.cz>

Jan Mlčoch (1953) was one of the leading Czech performance artists of the 1970s. He performed around thirty pieces up until 1980 when, as his final performance, he transformed De Appel Gallery in Amsterdam into a free hostel. He is currently curator of the photography collection at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.

Originally published as: LÁDVÍ, “**Od osobního ke společenskému: Rozhovor s Janem Mlčochem**”, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, vol. 1, 2007, No. 1–2, pp. 99–113.

Translated from the Czech by David Gaul, Trada.

THE SHIFT FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE SOCIAL: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE LÁDVÍ GROUP AND JAN MLČOCH

How do you look back today at the work you did in the 1970s?

To be completely honest, I don't look back at it at all. My work in the 1970s was something highly specific to that decade. I came to that work in something of a circuitous way. At the age of seventeen I began working in the depository of the National Gallery, handling art by such renowned artists as Slaviček and Zrzavý, as well as Czech works from the 1960s and 1970s. This was a great experience for me. The second huge and formative experience was meeting Karel Miler, who was the curator of the collection of 20th century Czech painting. Through him, I was later introduced to Petr Štembera, who worked at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague. These two individuals had an enormous influence on me. I was twenty one years old when I did my first work, Climbing Mount Kotel, in 1974. I was interested in contemporary world art at the time, but obviously there wasn't much information available here then. Nevertheless, Petr Štembera, who had contacts with numerous people around the world, had access to information.

How specifically were you able to get information and make contacts in the outside world in the 1970s?

While the 1970s were awful, grey, slimy and foul – simply disgusting, especially the first half of the decade, which was an absolute quagmire, at least the postal system worked, unlike in the 1950s and during the Nazi occupation. This was the way Petr Štembera was in contact (and later we, too) with people

outside. Petr Štembera and Karel Miler had been performing their work since the end of the 1960s and had already made some contacts. In a way I just sort of climbed on board with them. I was also lucky not to be living in the nostalgia and memories of the 1960s like many people in the country at the time. I was fifteen in 1968 and the greatest experiences for me at the beginning of the 1960s were Yuri Gagarin, rockets, and then, obviously, the occupation in 1968, though not January of that year (Dubček's appointment – translator's note). I simply didn't feel any nostalgia and was just too young for any fond recollections. But thanks to my friends I was able to meet with older artists I was interested in. I met with Jan Svoboda, Adriana Šimotová, Václav Boštík – people who clung to candour and weren't living immersed in memories and nostalgia. I met Jiří Kolář and over time others such as Antonín Dufek, Jiří Valoch, the Brno school of artists, and even with people from abroad who captured our interest. These included Chris Burden and Terry Fox from California and Marina Abramović with Ulay from Europe. Marina and Ulay even came to Czechoslovakia to visit us, as did Chris Burden and Tom Marioni. Petr Štembera arranged translations of texts from abroad. Giancarlo Politi, the publisher of *Flash Art*, was already active in Italy at the time. He was a very outspoken man. Karl Miler in fact introduced him to his current wife, Helena Kontová. My friendship with Milan Knížák was also very important to me; I met him in the mid-1970s just after he had been released from custody. We were in close contact with him and his wife Maria until the end of the 1980s. These were encounters with a genuinely free individual; there weren't too many of those around at the time. Knížák managed to fight for and hold on to his own personal integrity and for this he was absolutely exceptional.

In 1979, the *Works and Words* exhibition was held at De Appel Gallery in Amsterdam and artists from the Eastern Bloc were invited to participate. Czech artists, who never actually received

official permission, were joined by artists from Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Slovakia. If our calculations are correct, you were twenty seven years old at the time. How did your participation in the exhibition come about?

To be honest, by 1979 I was no longer very interested in these types of events. I don't really recall anything special about the Works and Words exhibition; for me the offer of a solo exhibition at De Appel Gallery was far more significant. That one in 1980 was the last one I ever did. The curator of the Dutch De Appel Gallery came here to visit me and offered me an exhibition period. I came up with the idea of creating a free hostel in the gallery. Together we organized the interior furnishings and the set of rules. We agreed that there would be at least thirty beds, each with their own lamp, chair, as well as access to a toilet and cooking facilities. I also requested official permission to travel to Holland, an exit visa, and a currency allowance. The response from the Ministry of the Interior was that my trip was not in line with the foreign interests of Czechoslovakia. So unfortunately I wasn't able to do what I had originally planned – to go to Amsterdam as an anonymous person from the street and sleep for several nights free of charge in the hostel in the gallery.

And what was the public's response to the hostel?

The hostel worked great. By sheer luck the show coincided with the Festival of Lunatics, a carnival-like party in which a rebellious mob takes over the city. I think Karl Gott and I are among the few Czech artists that can boast of receiving thank you letters from abroad during that period.

And the social level of that show? It was, after all, something quite different than what you were doing at the beginning.

Yes, of course it was something different. At the beginning I was concerned exclusively with myself. But the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia changed completely in the second half of the 1970s, thanks in great measure to Charter 77. I'm not

sure if this was something perceived by the general public as a whole, but for me the change was substantial. Life began to open up and reactions to politics and the surrounding world started to function better. Before, there was a lot of awkwardness at banned concerts and private defiance. At the beginning of 1977 I noticed a move toward better organization and an awareness of broader societal contexts; something that – in the 1980s – moved toward a parallel society that was no longer underground but was demanding its own place in the sun. My interests shifted from those “me” things of the early 1970s to organizations like the Salvation Army and missionary activities. I read the letters of Baroque missionaries in South America and similar things. That’s what I was interested in at the time. It was a move from a personal to a social approach.

You were actually the first person in the country to think about art as a social project.

No, I certainly wasn’t the first. Milan Knížák was definitely thinking along those lines in the 1960s when he created his *City in the Desert* project. This was 1960s science fiction – a utopian project for a new city and society. But you can go all the way back to Boudník in the 1950s and especially to the architects.

The *City in the Desert* still strikes us as a project that is more personal than social. We were thinking more about projects in which the artist’s ego was completely suppressed.

There were certainly fragile things like that. Petr Štembera, for example, did a nice piece. He installed a bed in an abandoned wooden home in Klárov for anyone who might need it, be it a homeless person or just furtive lovers. He cleaned out a corner in the ruins and set up a bed.

We also thought it was interesting that you created your hostel in a gallery and completely changed the function of its exhibition

space. Don't you ever have the desire to do something similar – something that expresses this socially engaged approach?

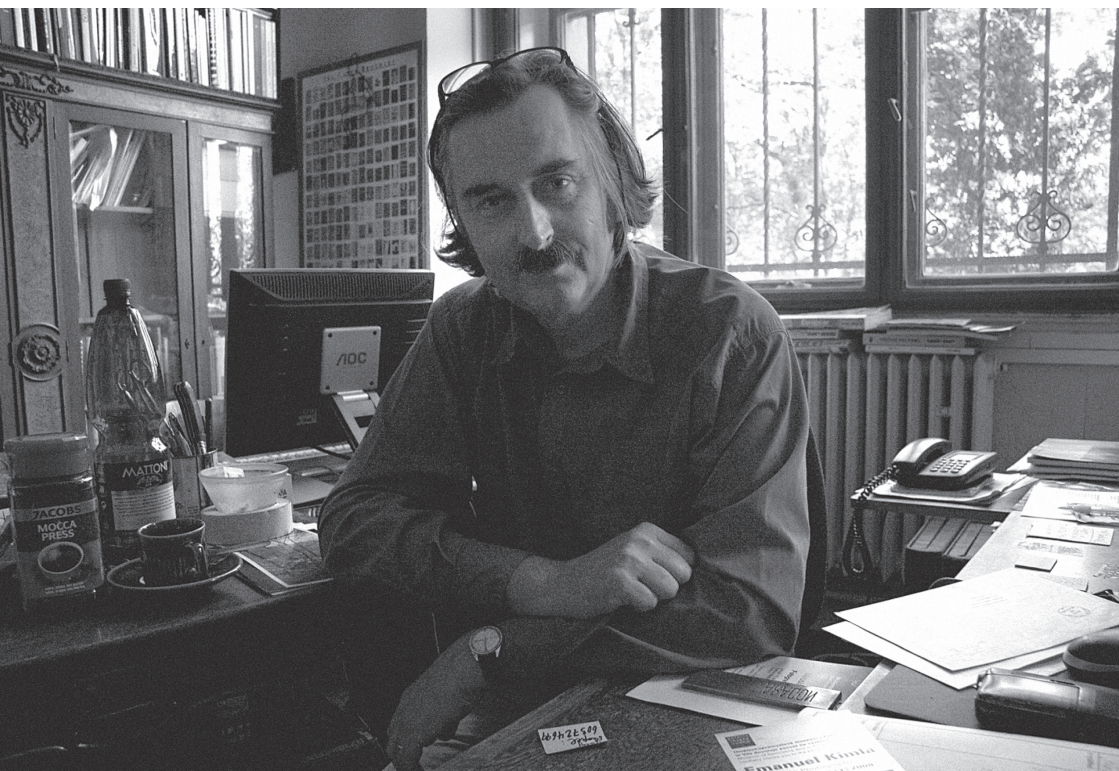
I'm not really interested in that pure art. Today I hold setting up a school or establishing a retirement home in higher esteem than some artistic gesture. I regard such things as far more consequential than any piece of art. In the 1990s, twenty years after the hostel at De Appel, we went to Paris to do an exhibition. After the opening party we were invited to the recently reconstructed Czech House, but no one came. I told them that they should do something with this largely unused house; they could use it as a hostel in the summer, just like my hostel in Holland. It was completely obvious: a person needn't be an artist to come up with something like that. Let's be honest and admit that even art can be junk. Even art can be something that pollutes the environment. We could easily do with a little less of it. The artistic gestures I really can't stand these days are those giant sculptures installed in public spaces that cultivate some kind of joke. I would have all of those works melted down! It wouldn't be any great loss for the Prague art scene. In fact, I believe that organizations like People in Need, Adria, Hope, or the Czech Catholic Charities are of much higher value than the entire cultural scene after 1989. The work that these groups do is far more meaningful than the whole cultural front.

If you were to compare the 1970s and 1980s with today, what would you say the greatest difference is?

In my opinion, the 1970s are pointlessly disparaged and at the same time are strangely adored. It is a mistake to merely shove the 1970s into some Formica background. People forget that in its own way the decade represented an attempt at solving social living. For many people it offered at least some form of housing. To look at prefab housing estates only from the point of view that these were buildings that were no longer being built in the West is a great misunderstanding of the place and the times. If you want to compare the 1970s and

current times I would have to say that today social issues are not regarded as being of any great importance. I am annoyed with today's adoration of mafia-run football, idiotic Olympic Games, outrageously expensive motorways, and a total ambivalence toward social programmes, programmes for minorities, seniors, youth, the sick and the infirm. Just for the sake of interest, official statistics indicate that up to 32,000 people in the Czech Republic are addicted to hard drugs. That figure represents the population of two medium-sized towns. No one gives these numbers a second thought; instead they wonder how the top Czech cross-country skier Kačenka Neumannová will fare in her next race. This myopia and blindness to social projects by the state and our representatives is simply unforgivable. One example from the history books: To celebrate the tenth anniversary of independent Czechoslovakia the Masaryk Senior Homes, today's Thomayer Hospital in Krč, was opened on 28 October 1928, along with many other schools, spas, hospitals, and other similar facilities. Compare this with the situation today – seniors still don't have their Masaryk Homes back. Prague is making a bid to host the Olympics but in the nearly twenty years since 1989 the city hasn't been able to solve issues surrounding social living, taxis, homeless people, and not even public toilets or clean streets. It seems that only gigantic billion-crown projects have the green light; apparently we know how to accomplish this when there are huge amounts of money at stake. On the other hand, artists today can do whatever they want; they can all apply for grants and travel wherever and whenever the like. But the quality of art isn't connected to what a person is permitted or forbidden to do – this is a big misunderstanding. Surprisingly, incredibly authentic and powerful works were created during the German occupation and in the 1950s. Economic prosperity does not guarantee high quality art.

Thank you.



Jan MLČOCH, 2007, photo: Jiří Thýn