

TEN YEARS OF *NOTEBOOK FOR ART, THEORY AND RELATED ZONES*. FOREWORD BY THE FORMER EDITOR VÁCLAV MAGID

This book contains fourteen original studies and three interviews that were published in *Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones* in Czech and Slovak between 2007, when the journal was founded, and 2017. That we are able to present a foreign readership such an extensive selection of texts translated into English that we believe are of international relevance is a matter of pride. It also marks the culmination of one stage. In a sense a circle is closing. In its early days *Notebook* largely focused on translations of foreign theory and criticism. Now, however, its translations are aimed in the opposite direction. Whereas the editorial of the very first edition spoke of “self-education” and an effort to draw level with theoretical reflections on art within an international context, now the aim is to enrich this context with new insights and outputs that have appeared in *Notebook*.

The journal’s mission, as outlined on its website, is to encourage thematic openness, interdisciplinarity, methodological diversity, and the inclusion of visual culture within a broader social context.¹ It is this conceptual flexibility that defines the special status of *Notebook* among Czech academic periodicals. The journal has forged a position for itself as a unique platform for an exchange of opinions, on which researchers can meet with a background in art history, philosophical aesthetics or, for instance, film studies and whose interests range from archival

¹ <http://vvp.avu.cz/en/notebook/> (accessed 5 July 2019).

research into important features of cultural life in the former Eastern bloc, via polemical reactions to current trends on both the Czech and global art scene, to informed considerations of questions thrown up by contemporary philosophy. All of these endeavours are linked by the overarching objective to, as the website has it, “cultivate reflections on art in the Czech Republic”. However, what form this cultivation should take is a question that over the course of the twelve years of the journal’s existence has been subject to ongoing transformation, and has sometimes involved conceptual interventions or gradual changes to the authorial and editorial discourse. The most significant changes took place on two underlying axes: from the communication of foreign thinking to the generation of original theoretical outputs, and from a flamboyant, playful, author-based conceptual approach to academic neutrality, rigour and standardisation.

Notebook was founded in 2007 at the Academic Research Centre of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.² It was the brainchild of two employees of the centre, the critic and curator David Kulhánek, and the artist, curator and critic Václav Magid, who shared a dissatisfaction with the situation of expert publications on contemporary art in the Czech Republic at that time. They felt there was both insufficient connection with foreign discourses, which were far more politically aware than the local scene, and a negligible amount of theory, which in the periodicals already on the market was lost in translations of dubious quality and garbled terminology amongst exhibition reviews and illustrations. The facilities of the AVU Research Centre were unique in terms of finance, time and

² The Research Centre of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (VVP AVU) is a broad-based research platform that “processes source documentation and critically evaluates and reinterprets Czech fine art from 1945 to the present day. It focuses on art history, theory and their interdisciplinary overlaps”. (<https://vvp.avu.cz/en/o-nas/> [accessed 5 July 2019]). It is the first research centre of its kind in the Czech Republic and was formed in 1997 under the leadership of the curator and critic Jiří Ševčík. Its activities include the creation of a comprehensive archive of Czech art (containing strategic, theoretical and critical texts, art portfolios and a large collection of video art), the organisation of conferences and the preparation of representative anthologies and exhibitions offering a comprehensive overview of the changes that have taken place in Czech art between 1938 and 2010.

expertise, and this in turn encouraged dedicated editorial work allowing individual issues of the journal to be created as conceptual wholes drawing on translations of a wide range of theoretical texts and enhanced by overviews of the activities taking place on the local art scene. Though the selection of themes and authors was to an extent random and intuitive, the founding editors attempted to meet the demands of the local art scene, especially of its younger generation. In an effort to bridge the gap between the academic sphere and the art world, Marek Meduna, one of the important figures of the up-and-coming generation of artists, known above all for his membership of the Rafani group, was invited to take over the graphic design of the journal. Meduna's fresh yet functional designs, in which the footnotes, straplines and pagination of each article had their own unique format, were an important contribution to the reader friendliness of *Notebook* from the very start.

David Kulhánek, not only founder of the journal but the person who named it, made way after the first year for the aesthetician Jakub Stejskal. While the first pair of editors had placed an emphasis on mediating foreign debates, this change of personnel allowed another important aspect of the journal's potential to be exploited, namely the linking up of what had until then been the almost entirely detached spheres of contemporary art criticism and philosophical aesthetics. The belief in the mutual benefits to be gained from these two spheres, especially noticeable in the thematic double issue of 2009, defined in no uncertain terms not only the content of the journal, but also the editorial method of processing texts, in which an academic emphasis on a precise construction of arguments and work with sources was combined with an interest in current themes and passionate polemics in contemporary art.

During the first four years of its existence, *Notebook* gradually changed from being an experimental offshoot of the main activities of the AVU Research Centre into one of its central outputs, and demonstrated clearly the possibility of writing about the visual arts using an research-based approach.

No longer a journal created within and catering for the art world, *Notebook* now became a periodical serving the academic community studying this world. This in turn corresponded to the objectives of the VVP AVU as a research centre. The logical outcome of this process was that in 2010 the journal was included in the Czech List of Peer Reviewed Periodicals, followed in 2015 by its inclusion in the European Reference Index for the Humanities and the Social Sciences ERIH PLUS. This change of institutional status meant the editorial process was now subject to the standard mechanisms of peer-reviewed publications. According to these new criteria, the bulk of each issue was to be devoted to original academic studies that would be subject to anonymous peer review. Individual issues were no longer thematically based and their contents were generated by means of an open call, the aim being to open the platform to the current research outputs of individual contributors regardless of any specific thematic focus. A certain thematic element in the conception of individual issues persisted in the form of materials that complemented the original studies, such as translations, documents, interviews and book reviews.

This change was decisive in respect of the aim to “cultivate reflections on art in the Czech Republic”. From this point on it was no longer about the cultivation of a community of readers by means of translations, but the cultivation of a way of writing about art. Since in its early days *Notebook* had to deal with a lack of top quality Czech contributions, this change of status was intended to ensure a supply of scholarly texts as a consequence of the institutional pressure on researchers to publish their project outputs. The system of anonymous reviews, along with the thorough, sometimes pedantic approach (opinions differ) of the two editors, contributed to the emergence of a public awareness of *Notebook* as a select publishing platform with high academic and formal standards.

In order to provide the impetus for theoretical work in the sphere of contemporary art, between 2010 and 2015 *Notebook* organised annual conferences at the Academic Research Centre devoted to

different topics in art theory (cultural politics, the consequences of conceptualism, the history of contemporary art, art praxis, and theatre and contemporary art). The output of these meetings (and other conferences organised, for instance, at UMRUM [Academy of Arts, Architecture & Design in Prague]) comprises an important part of the corpus of texts published over the years in *Notebook*. Other activities intended to create closer links with research currently being conducted into contemporary art or the broader framework of visual culture included cooperation with departments of theory at art schools and a greater involvement on the part of the editorial board in discussions regarding the concept of the journal and the process of generating contributions.³ The last important change to the conception of *Notebook* involved the partial restoration of thematic issues based around the figure of the guest editor. Since 2016, one of the two issues published each year is non-thematic and based on an open call, while the other is overseen by an external expert. One of the real benefits of *Notebook* was the space devoted to the upcoming generation of historians of modern and contemporary art. The long-term result of all of these activities has been the creation of a relatively stable circle of authors who, in our opinion, represent the cutting edge of art theory in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Though it might seem that, over time, the process of generating the contents of individual issues, review procedures, and the editorial processing of texts has been standardised to such an extent that future issues might almost be created by gravity, the

³ The editorial board is made up of leading personalities in disciplines related to the journal's orientation (art history and theory, architecture, photography, current art criticism, curatorship, etc.) from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and further abroad. Present and past members include the curator, critic and founder of the VVP AVU Jiří Ševčík, the art historian and critic Claire Bishop (New York), the curator and art critic Claudia Jolles (Zürich), the art historian and writer Milena Bartlová (Prague), the historian Daniel Grůň (Bratislava), the historian of architecture Hubert Guzik (Prague), the curator and critic Edith Jeřábková (Prague), the art historian Mária Orišková (Trnava), the historian of photography and curator Tomáš Pospěch (Opava), the art historian and critic Tomáš Pospiszyl (Prague), the aesthetician Jakub Stejskal (Berlin), the philosopher and writer Martin Škabraha (Olomouc), and the curator and art critic Jan Zálešák (Brno). Though early on the board performed a mainly formal role, over recent years it has played a more active role in the running of the periodical as an advisory body.

influence of those individuals responsible for *Notebook* cannot be underestimated. The changes in editorial positions have been accompanied by what at first sight seem subtle, but are in reality fundamental shifts, both in the dynamic of the editorial process and in the resulting form of the texts. Jakub Stejskal left the team at the turn of 2017/2018 and Václav Magid a year later. This anthology marks a kind of full stop after the cooperation of these two editors. In 2018 the baton was passed to the art critic Anežka Bartlová, who was joined in spring 2019 by the philosopher and columnist Martin Škabraha. The new team not only continues to promote the existing concept and quality of the journal, but holds out the promise of further changes that could reflect the wishes of both editors to actively include theory and art in the life of civil society in the Czech Republic.

The work of the editors would not be possible without the support of the AVU Academic Research Centre. When the journal was first launched it received considerable support from the founder and director of the centre, Jiří Ševčík, and practical assistance from Eva Krátká, a researcher at that time. For most of its existence *Notebook* has benefited from the oversight of its assistant editor Eva Ellingerová and the conceptual and practical contribution of the wider editorial team comprising the director of the Research Centre, the art historian and curator Pavlína Morganová, and the researchers Terezie Nekvindová and Dagmar Svatošová. One element that has remained constant throughout the existence of *Notebook* and which is present in this English anthology is the inventive graphic design of Marek Meduna, who has retained the original design of the individual texts.

The texts included in *The Sešit Reader* represent the first ten years of the periodical's existence. The overriding criterion when selecting the texts was quality. All members of the editorial board were asked for their suggestions. The publication aims to showcase contemporary Czech and Slovak art theory. However, the need to introduce the current and historical context from which this theory arose in more concrete form also played an

important role. For this reason, in addition to the original theoretical studies, we included interviews with artists and a theoretician. The chronological arrangement of the material allows the reader to observe the changes in themes deemed of interest for Czech art theory over the course of the decade in question, as well as the shifts in editorial conception.

The interview that opens the book symbolises to a considerable degree the interconnection of the local historical approach and the international theoretical perspective in the conception of the journal. Representatives of two generations of Czech art seek and find a consensus regarding their outlooks on the meaning of artistic creativity, which also display many parallels with current artistic and theoretical trends abroad. The interview is between the group **Ládví**, which in the 2000s devoted its energies to improving the public space in and around the housing estate in Prague of the same name, and **Jan Mlčoch**, one of the key representatives of Prague action art of the seventies, who increasingly questioned the social benefits of art. In several of his projects Mlčoch appeared to anticipate the characteristic methods of relational aesthetics and participative art of the start of the twenty-first century, and Ládví fall within the same category by virtue of the priority they give to ethical over aesthetic criteria. The ethical, political and aesthetic questions regarding the art of cooperation formed the overarching theme of the first double issue of *Notebook*, in which this interview first appeared.

The second text is also an interview. It examines one of the central issues that continues to play a crucial role in the concept of the journal, namely, the relationship between what we might call “high” professional theory attempting to find a precise definition of terms, and the intuitive theory that coalesces around artistic or curatorial initiatives. The interview was conducted for the fourth issue of *Notebook*, which examined the relevance of aesthetics (both as discipline and a type of experience) to contemporary art. The interview was with **Ján Mančuška**, one of the few figures on the Prague art scene with an international

reputation and an artist who managed in a relatively organic way to apply conceptual principles to a quotidian existence embedded in a specific local and historical experience. Mančuška refers to art as the “sovereign intellectual activity” and speaks of a kind of fruitful misunderstanding that can result from the reception of theory within an artistic environment. He points to the paradox he encountered in his own professional life, namely, that the weakening of the role of the artefact that conceptualism in its time resorted to in order to liberate itself from the clutches of the institutional art system ultimately reinforced the significance of this system.

The conflict between the promises of social benefit that art bears within itself and the neutralisation of this promise within the autonomous sphere of art is the subject of the first study entitled “On Dropping Out in Contemporary Art: An Analysis” by **Tereza Stejskalová**. Drawing on the theses propounded in Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and the criticism they received from Hal Foster, Stejskalová unpicks the complex examples of the artists Lee Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske and Laurie Parsons, who in the late sixties and early seventies gave up creating art as a consequence of the realisation that even the most radical artistic forms are socially “impotent”. The current interest in this gesture on the part of curators both brings the artists’ critical impulses up to date, while retrospectively institutionalising their art.

The next essay remains in the same period of the history of post-war art, but brings us back home to Czechoslovakia and to a different geopolitical context associated with a different understanding of what social demands can be made upon art. In “Czech Art around 1980 as a Field of Cultural Production” **Josef Ledvina** draws on concepts and methods featured in the work of Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art* to conduct an institutional analysis of Czech art during the normalisation period. The prevailing trend in art history and criticism post-1989 involved a retroactive endorsement of the unofficial art scene. Ledvina on the other hand offers a relatively varied overview of the conditions and circumstances that defined the status of artist from the perspective of official organisations.

At the turn of the first and second decades of the twentieth-first century a relatively intense debate took place in Czech art circles regarding the legitimacy of the political utilisation of art and the possibility of rehabilitating the term “engagement”, which in the wake of 1989 had been rejected as discredited by the previous regime. **Ján Zálešák** attempts to track down the very first signs of a “social turn” in Czech art in projects that raised the topic of the public space in the latter half of the nineties. Zálešák looks at a selection of key exhibitions and festivals that took place at that time (*Reduced Budget, The Artwork in Public Space, Public District*) and that he believes represent a turning point at which the social dimension finds itself in the forefront of interest of art projects for the first time.

The interest of several Czech and Slovak artists in the subject of the quotidian, the form of which ranged from subtle poetic interventions to provocative engaged gestures, coincides with the rediscovery, close research and retroactive institutionalisation of specific local forms of conceptual art. This line would include the text by **Daniel Grůň**, which analyses the artist’s archive as one of the distinct formal links between unofficial art of the era of real socialism and the characteristic artistic methods of the early twenty-first century. Drawing on the examples of many artists active during the seventies and eighties in the Eastern bloc, Grůň claims there is a distinction to be made between a “self-documenting” approach in which the archive serves as a parallel institution undermining the hegemony of the official narrative, and the “deconstructionist” approach, which interrogates the official canon of art history through fiction or mystification.

In the wake of a series of exhibitions and publications that around 2010 sought to reflect systematically on the theoretical and social context of art in the post-1989 transformation period, *Notebook* devoted a lot of space to a critical review of the prevailing methods of art history and criticism. Several contributions to this debate are included in this anthology. In his text “The History of Contemporary Art in a Narrowed Field”, **Karel Čisář** expresses

his surprise at the omission of the work of Rosalind Krauss, a key figure of American postmodern art criticism, from representative anthologies of theory forming the Czech artistic context. He contends that this omission reflects the prevailing reading of postmodernism as anti-modernism (rather than as an expansion of the logical possibilities of modernism, as suggested by Krauss). No less polemical is the essay by **Milena Bartlová** devoted to the place occupied by Marxist methodology in Czech art history after the Second World War. Bartlová claims that, though representatives of this field of study outwardly claimed allegiance to Marxism, in terms of methodology they remained indebted to the approach taken by the Vienna School. This claim is largely supported by an overview of the dominant trends in art history methodology after 1948, which are explained in the third interview contained in the anthology with the leading expert in this field, **Rostislav Švácha**.

The next text is also a critical review of the dominant narrative of Czech art history in the latter half of the twentieth century. **Martina Pachmanová** uncovers the hidden prejudices in the thinking of a canonical figure of post-war criticism, Jindřich Chalupecký. Though she recognises that during the normalisation period Chalupecký was the only critic to take systematic notice of Czech women artists, Pachmanová also shows that the way that he used the category “femininity” in his texts reveals an unconscious bias against feminist thinking.

An integral part of the study of the specific forms that modernism took outside of the Western centres, including the unofficial culture of the Eastern bloc, is an analysis of the similarities and differences between the social and personal preconditions that led to the appearance of similar approaches in different places. Is this evidence of the effect of direct influence or were these independent phenomena? To what extent are the parallels random and to what extent do they ensue from the shared internal logic of modern art? Do formal similarities indicate similarity of content? **Pavčina Morganová** takes advantage of an ideal opportunity to research these questions in the form of the fascinating similarities between

books published around the same time by Yoko Ono and Jiří Kolář. Though neither knew of the other, both simultaneously arrived at an almost identical type of text/instruction situated on the border between poetry and action art.

One of the problems faced by neo-avant-garde artists on both sides of the Iron Curtain was the status of photographic documentation of performances and happenings. In “The Photographic Conditions of the Happening” **Hana Buddeus** not only offers an introduction to this topic in which she compares the approaches taken by Allan Kaprow and Milan Knížák, but also formulates a polemical standpoint that to a certain extent overturns the intuitive idea of the secondary role of photography in relation to the event being documented. Taking the examples of the legendary predecessors of the happening and action art, Jackson Pollock in the USA and Vladimír Boudník in Czechoslovakia, Buddeus shows how large a part was played in the creation of the myth of these artists by the way they were captured at work in photographs.

The texts up until this point have been mostly historically oriented. The essay by **Václav Magid** is more a theoretical reflection upon an artistic phenomenon that was topical at the time it was written. Magid examines the debates raging over the concept of the post-internet as the designation of a broader “post-internet situation” in culture and as the designation of an artistic genre. The originality of this contribution resides not so much in a confrontation between foreign debates and Czech art, but in an interpretation of several examples of post-internet art using critical theory. Drawing on the Frankfurt School’s analysis of the culture industry, Magid examines the political dimension of the work of the DIS collective, which, in opposition to the supposed pedantry and hypocrisy of the art world, puts its faith in the acceleration of e-commerce strategies and a consumer lifestyle.

Though the next text returns us to culture during the period of real socialism, **Jan Wollner** is not so much interested in historical facts as in analysing the diverse ways in which a certain

term is used. Drawing on period sources he discovers that, in sixties Czechoslovakia, calling a work “experimental” could evoke completely antithetical connotations. While Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová promoted experimental literature based on the concept of experimentation in science, at the beginning of normalisation Pavel Juráček was none too pleased at hearing his films called experimental, since the term had by now acquired pejorative overtones by virtue of its association with the “political experiment” of Prague Spring.

In 2016 Sešit reacted to the growing popularity of the speculative turn in philosophy in artistic circles with a special issue that, on the Czech art scene, represented a shift away from the mere mediation of this movement in the form of translations to a more considered, often critical, reflection upon it. Of the studies included in this special issue we selected the one by **Václav Janoščík**, who has played a key role in popularising this approach in the Czech Republic. Drawing on the metaphor of “the map and the territory” taken from the novel of the same name by Michel Houellebecq, Janoščík examines the central thrust of the speculative turn, namely the reintroduction of a requirement that our thinking move in the direction of the *grand dehors* or “great outdoors” beyond the boundaries of the correlation of thought and object. In addition to a critical introduction to the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux, the study opens up the possibility of overcoming the opposition between speculative realism and poststructuralism.

Both of the last two texts are taken from the special issue of 2017 devoted to the convergence between art history and film theory. In an essay based on a combination of archival research and recent reflections upon the term “montage” in film theory, **Tomáš Pospiszl**, guest editor of the issue, examines the creative method deployed by a leading figure in Czech post-war poetry and art, Jiří Kolář. Though several of Kolář’s collages from the forties and fifties involving the juxtaposition of two or more contrasting images might appear to represent the application of film

montage, Pospiszyl ultimately attributes this cinematographic feature to the broader inspiration of modern visual culture, especially the illustrated magazines popular at that time.

We also encounter a somewhat surprising connection between methodology and subject matter in the text by **Kateřina Svatoňová**. This leading film theoretician attempts to view the work of four contemporary Czech artists working with elements of cinematography within the environment of a gallery (Zbyněk Baladrán, Barbora Kleinhamplová, Tomáš Svoboda and Adéla Babanová) through the prism of contemporary German philosophy and media theory (*Medienwissenschaft*). She sees this kind of work as comprising a kind of “lateral view” revealing the very mediality of film.

The dissolution of the boundaries between disciplines and the conceptual straddling of positions encompassing historical research and critical interpretation visible in the last two texts is characteristic of *Notebook* and its position among Czech journals. However, it also shows how such an anthology might be of interest to the wider public and not just to academics interested in the possibilities of multidisciplinary research. It is not simply a collection of translations of texts offering information on local phenomena, but also an opportunity to reflect upon the very process of translation, the translation between local and global, between the past and the present, between art and theory, etc. We very much hope that this publication will not remain an isolated presentation of Czech writing on art torn from its context, but will stimulate foreign researchers to respond within the framework of a broader international debate on art and theory in Central Europe. We are very grateful to **Viktor Misiano**, co-founder and editor-in-chief of the Moscow Art Magazine, and **Sven Spieker**, founding editor of ARTMargins, for their introductory texts.