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Ján Mančuška (1972–2011) was one of the most important personalities on the Czech art scene during the first decade of the 21st century. His work combines existential reflections upon the quotidian with an analytical interrogation of the limits of linguistic description and narration across a wide range of media. During the latter half of the nineties he was a member of the group *Bezhlavý jezdec* [The Headless Horseman], along with Josef Bolf, Jan Šerých and Tomáš Vaněk. In 2004, he received the Jindřich Chalupecký Award, and a year later represented the Czech Republic at the Venice Biennale (along with Stano Filko and Boris Ondreička). He was one of few representatives of the Czech art scene to receive acclaim abroad. He was represented by the Andrew Kreps Gallery (New York) and Meyer Riegger (Berlin). In 2015, a major exhibition of his work was held at the Prague City Gallery entitled *First Retrospective*, which was accompanied by a large catalogue (Vít HAVRÁNEK [ed.], *Ján Mančuška: First Inventory / První inventura*, Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, tranzit.cz – Zurich: JRP | Ringier 2015).

Originally published as: **Václav MAGID, “Mám ambici dostat se k porozumění: Rozhovor s Jánem Mančuškou”, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, vol. 3, 2009, No. 6–7, pp. 168–175.**

Translated from the Czech by Phil Jones.

# MY AMBITION IS TO ACHIEVE UNDERSTANDING: AN INTERVIEW WITH JÁN MANČUŠKA VÁCLAV MAGID

*Let's begin with Nonspekta.*<sup>1</sup> *What inspired you to create such a project in the first place?* ✕ I wanted to do something that involved other people. The whole solitary artist thing I just find unsatisfactory on so many levels. The individualism that reigns at present contributes to art being seen as an elite activity, and this then feeds into the failure of art as social engagement. Another reason I set up *Nonspekta* was related to my first experience of exhibiting outside this country. At the time I still felt very much part of the local art scene and local issues seemed to me to be the most important. And when I returned from *Manifesta*, it was with the feeling that the international scene lacked an intellectual critical discourse with its roots in Eastern Europe. The opposition between East and West, which has been an issue since the nineties and still is, was always looked at from the perspective of the smoothly functioning system of the West. I realised that there were very few theoretical trends travelling in the opposite direction, from East to West, which were capable of articulating the environment in which we found ourselves and the local issues that absorbed us here. Our space was possessed of extraordinarily strong qualities that had an authenticity that had survived despite forty years without a market economy. But these qualities were not being actuated. Instead, we were simply adapting to a capitalist regime. This is why in my opinion Eastern European

<sup>1</sup> Between 2002 and 2004, an intensive exchange of texts took place under the title *Nonspekta* between Czech and Slovak artists and theoreticians, who attempted to reflect upon their position within the context of the global art system. The project was initiated by Mančuška, though later on the discussion was joined by Boris Ondreička and Vít Havránek. The title was inspired by the project "non-spectacular art" led by Russian artist Anatoly Osmolovsky.

art only began to assert its presence on the international stage after a system had been constructed here that respected the logic of the local art scene. Proof of that would be the success enjoyed by Polish artists associated with the Galeria Foksal, which was the first of the Eastern European galleries to adapt to an international context.

*So would it be true to say that you wanted to create an intellectual background that corresponded to the art being created in this region and increase its profile so that it could compete on an international level?* ✕ You mentioned competition, but for me it was crucial that we renounce this bipolar vision of Europe after the Cold War. I didn't want to be just for or against, as though there were two extremes between which individuals and cultures oscillated. I wanted instead to create authentic value that would be striking in and of itself and thus intelligible within an international context. I think that to a certain extent I was unacquainted with similar discussions that had been taking place in the West somewhat earlier and in a different context. However, my unfamiliarity with these discourses was a plus, because it permitted me a degree of freedom.

*A lack of education motivates you to be creative. You are forced back onto your own resources and your own imagination.* ✕ Exactly. In the meantime, of course, I have learned a lot more. But at that time I was basing my opinions mainly on fragments of articles by Osmolovsky, whose concept of asymmetry really appealed. These debates were based on themes being played out in the sixties around Debord and situationism. But I didn't feel my lack of knowledge to be a handicap because I was convinced that the discussion must be repeated here in a different format, using different principles and different materials. This might sound naive, but to this day I think it played a role. The article "Revolution in Asynchronous space",<sup>2</sup> which was one of the few practical outcomes of these activities, was published in *Springerin* and received well on the whole. Unfortunately, these debates were not followed

<sup>2</sup> Ján MANČUŠKA – Vít HAVRÁNEK, "Revolution im asynchronen Raum. Zum modellhaften Begriff der konstruierten Geschichte", *Springerin*, vol. 9, 2004, no. 1 [published in Czech as "Revoluce v asynchroním prostoru", *Korpus*, vol. 3, 2004, no. 3, pp. 22–23].

up, and so *Nonspekta* became a conventional artefact in this country with its own “virtual history” (“what would happen if...”), which is what I hate most about Czech culture.

*Osmolovsky, whom you've referred to, basically misinterpreted Guy Debord and Gilles Deleuze and applied their ideas to his own situation. We in turn became familiar with only a few of his texts, which we interpreted basically as we wished. With hindsight this layering of misunderstanding or misinterpretation seems quite fertile, because it creates the possibility of a distinctive creativity that is played out on the boundary between theory and artistic practice. In order for it to be a plausible theory its practitioner would need to flesh out their knowledge of the sources and push to one side the layers of misinterpretation. But perhaps I'm getting away from your ambitions at the time.*

× No, you're not. My ambition was to create a circle comprising artists on the one hand, and theoreticians who would correctly re-configure ideas on the other. At that time, Osmolovsky was an input that I understood. In this state of half knowledge I've referred to, he seemed on an emotional rather than theoretical level to be on the right track. But Karel Císař, for instance, had reservations immediately. And this was my aim: the obstinacy born partially of ignorance allowed conflicts to arise that created value for the future. Personally I feel that my art benefitted hugely. Unfortunately things came to an end. Opportunities arose for individuals to work on an international level, something we all opted for. I think it was logical to a certain extent. As far as critiquing the system is concerned, someone who has no access to it criticises it in a completely different way to someone who has had experience of it. These are two diverse qualities. I wanted to experience the system in order to know what it was I was criticising, because the discussions I was having here were always academic.

*I'd like to move away from Nonspekta and turn to your art. Several of your works display signs of a clear philosophical inspiration. You begin with a description of an object, a cup say, and then add the largest number of meanings associated with it. I interpret this as being inspired by Husserlian phenomenology. Or you create an object that is*

*based on the shape of a chair and yet represents an unidentifiable wire construction, and interpret it with reference to the scholastic dispute between nominalists and realists. To what extent are you inspired by reading philosophy when creating your works?* ✕ I certainly read philosophy, though I don't know to what extent the works that you mention are based explicitly on philosophy. It was more like a kind of mental saturation that develops on the basis of what you read, what you see, and whom you meet. That's my way of getting to know things. I attempt to find points of contact in different spheres. I'm constantly trying to learn new things and expand the possibilities of understanding them. But I hate it when people say things like, "Oh, I'm an artist, so I see things as I want". My ambition is to achieve understanding within the framework of whatever realm it is I'm exploring at any one time. The only question is how much I'm capable of.

*It's one thing to understand something, but another to work with it and create an artwork, something that inhabits a completely different domain from a philosophical text.* ✕ I have always tended to connect my work with a certain intellectual environment, with what I'm reading and so on. This connection then forms the framework of what I do and is independent of day-to-day creative ideas. It is formed very early on, possibly earlier than in the case of people working more intuitively or emotionally. I suspect that someone in my position, i.e. someone with an artistic background but who wants to lend their work a theoretical structure, should be as convincing when speaking or writing as someone who interprets the work as a theoretician. Many people attempt to avoid interpreting their own work, arguing that the work speaks for itself. I hold the opposite view. Interpretation is to a certain extent an independent issue and yet it shifts and transforms your thinking. In my case it is not equal to creating art, but it is very close. Up till now I don't feel I have succeeded. But the ambition is there. Of course, there's a huge range of different ways of interpreting things. You can if you so please opt for an interpretation that itself is an artistic gesture. Or you can opt for a purely theoretical approach. And I don't feel like giving up either of these possibilities.

*If I've understood right, you are kind of split between being an artist and being a critic or theoretician who interprets your own art.* ✕ For me personally art is an incredibly intellectual matter. I've always been interested in intensely intellectual models of creativity. However, I also respect more intuitive and emotional approaches. It would place unnecessary restrictions on an artist if they were forced to choose between these possibilities.

*So what opinion do you have of the professional critic or theoretician who interprets your work from outside?* ✕ With a few exceptions I don't really have much experience with good quality criticism. I am very close to Vít Havránek. I enjoy reading what David Kulhánek writes about my work and I'm a great admirer of Karel Čižák. I am grateful to Tomáš Pospiszyl for introducing me to the nouveau roman. But this is all very personal. It's a description of a small scene in which everyone knows each other. It's difficult to regard it as criticism.

On the international art scene and in large magazines, criticism is inextricably bound up with what we might call power relations. So decisions as to who will write about you and for what journal, how long the text will be and what a decent interval is before they write about you again, who will feature on the cover, etc. are so subordinate to power relations that they slowly erase the very possibility of criticism as such. It is extremely rare for criticism as an autonomous intellectual activity to react immediately to what is alive at that precise moment in time. Criticism that is liberated from power relations is far more common when a period of time has elapsed and a work has gained acceptance. I think this could be used as a metaphor for creativity. One of the huge problems of the contemporary art system is that it basically prevents art from doing what it is supposed to do.

*Are there any trends in contemporary art theory that you find inspiring? Personally I feel that the most recent writer to attempt to grasp current trends and set them within some kind of theoretical background was Nicolas Bourriaud.* ✕ It is true that Bourriaud attempted to formulate a starting point for contemporary art on a more

robust level by connecting it to other cultural realms. His ideas were important to me, though nowadays I find relational aesthetics somewhat passé. I find the essayistic model of contemporary theory and cultural studies equally problematic. By that I mean the way that Žižek, Badiou etc. write. I'm allergic to a popularised form of philosophy, often making reference to psychoanalysis, which is applied with the aid of models taken from pop culture. Ideologically it is based on a conservative concept of leftist politics and Marxism. What I find important is the fact that this method is being used (e.g. in the case of Žižek) in most Anglo-Saxon universities, i.e. in an environment that in my opinion is perhaps most remote from a concept of leftist thinking as a genuine means of political action and the transformation of society.

*It's a kind of intellectual branch of the entertainment industry.*

× Exactly. Suddenly this illusion appears that this is the way to write, that this is contemporary theory. It seems unbelievably arrogant and tedious to me. I'm simplifying things of course. There is a lot of interesting stuff being written too. I have great admiration for Agamben. Bauman's book *Modernity and the Holocaust* is fundamental. If someone were to ask me when I was born, I would tell them it was not quite thirty years after the Holocaust. Though I don't have Jewish ancestry, the Holocaust is a trauma I inherited and which I have been unable to come to terms with. It is something that has a fundamental impact on the way I think.

*Have you ever been through a phase of pure conceptualism?* × Some of my stuff gets close. This is connected with my time in the USA. You can't understand minimalism or conceptual art anywhere else. You have to become acquainted with a system that has a pure, indisputable logic and operates flawlessly, and in the case of minimalism with a complete lack of substance, something that in the Western world is perhaps only possible in America. And that brings me back to my previous reply and the reference to the Second World War.

*I still haven't quite worked out your approach to the art world. It is not about unequivocal rejection, or slavish identification, but something ambivalent. For me personally it is difficult to accept the fact that art operates as a flawless system in which huge sums of money exchange hands. On the other hand, I have to confess a reluctant admiration for it. ✕* My approach is critical, or should I say self-critical, because I have been active in the art world for some time. I think that minimalism and conceptualism represented a turning point as regards how the art world operates today. At the end of the sixties, there was a sense of disillusionment at the realisation that a pure idea that would be resistant to institutionalisation and monetisation and be wholly immaterial was impossible. I think the trauma of this awareness opened the doors to the last remaining space that the system had not yet devoured. But I wouldn't restrict my comments to the market. Classical conceptualism defines itself in opposition to the artefact. But if you take away the artefact as something that endures in physical form, then you find yourself totally dependent on the environment within which the value of art appreciates. And what is that environment? It is the system, i.e. the closed circle of institutions, critics, commercial galleries and collectors. When you get rid of the artefact, then you become existentially dependent on the system that ascribes it a monetisable and hence appreciable value. However, I don't want that to sound like a defence of the artefact. I am speaking more of the internal conflict being played out inside me.

When I think of how I should operate as an artist, I don't think in terms of transforming the system, because the system has its own implacable logic that is virtually impossible to change. And I don't think in terms of destroying the system because that is a waste of time. Firstly, preceding generations have tried and failed, and secondly, because defining yourself in opposition to something still makes you completely dependent on that which you are defining yourself in opposition to. I am more interested in looking for a platform that would exist alongside the system. I haven't found one yet, but I haven't given up the search.

*Is it not an error on a theoretical level to imagine you could step out of the system? The system is necessary if art is to exist. It does not comprise only institutions and the market, but the culture and*

*language in which a person is embedded.* ✕ The final trauma suffered by conceptualism in my opinion was the discovery that institutionalisation is already inscribed in language. However, I think we need to make a distinction here. When I speak of a system I am referring to the art system, which comprises market institutions, critics, educational mechanisms, etc. When a trade fair is created on the back of the magazine *Frieze*, the very next moment you hear voices saying that an art school should be established with the same name. It would educate people, promote them via the magazine, and sell their works, thus acquiring funds for financing the school...

*... where there would be courses in criticism, just to be sure.* ✕ I hope I'm not speaking out of turn, but I believe the system prevents art from doing what it is supposed to do. Or at least it is attracting attention away from that. Having said that, I am not foolish enough not to see that it is also valorising it. My aim is not to be forever standing up to the system, to be "against" rather than "for", but to create a certain distinctive asymmetrical quality. In this sense I hold fast to certain approaches that emerged while working on *Nonspekta*. When I speak of the possibility of being "alongside the system", I have in mind the possibility of rising above its merciless logic. However, for the moment this is still an aspiration for the future.

*To wrap up, could you formulate what the mission of the art you speak of will be?* ✕ The system of art is a closed circle that touches upon life to a minimal extent. Anyone operating in this circle is employed in such a way that they do not come into contact with life. You have exhibitions planned for the next two years and a structured life. You spend your time trying to catch up with everything that needs to be done. You derive a warm feeling from the fact of doing something. In two years' time you will have exhibitions planned for the next two years. But what has this to do with art, for heaven's sake? This is just an illusion. That which is fundamental to art, its main objective, i.e. the mission your question referred to, lies outside this structure. And this mission is

to process the world we all share. Everyday life. Turning art into a profession is problematic to say the least. You are so bound to a role defined in advance that it becomes incredibly difficult to actually practice art. And although I certainly concede the possibility of an aesthetic that is able to exploit the system and work with it, this doesn't interest me personally. I think there comes a moment when you have to be able to say: fuck it.