

OBROVSKÉ ZANÍMENÍ PRO VĚC,
KTERÉ VDĚLU JE MASÁM SILU
UČINIT PŘÍMÉ
ROZHODNUTÍ A
ODVAHU

VCHÝLIT SE K
NAŠÍM PODLE SORELA
PRAMENÍ Z VITĚLNÍCH
SIL A NIKOLIV Z ÚVAH
O PROSTŘEDÍCH
A ÚČELECH



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Translated from the Czech by Dan Morgan, Trada.

Tomáš Samek

Two Questions from German

Documenta, or Two Times

about Public Space

What is to be done?

The longer I walked through the pavilions of the most recent Documenta in Kassel and looked over the exhibits, the clearer it became: the majority of exhibited work is socially engaged. Many artists dive into public topics and are unafraid to depict them from a political perspective. They throw light on a local matter, event, or act so that its connection to the global context of today's world is revealed. What a contrast, it dawned on me, with the language spoken by the majority of contemporary Czech art. Germany and the Czech Republic are both Central European countries and it is not that far from Kassel to Prague. But the discrepancy between the two artistic discourses gives the impression that each of these countries must be from a different cultural continent or live in different cultural epoch.

Czech citizens, Czech artists included, let the previous regime drive them from the public space and have yet to fully reestablish residence there: instead of filling the public sphere with civic self-confidence and healthy engagement, they have left it to the mercy of market forces. Even more than the Germans we need artists who defend public interests and public space against the merciless pressure of those motivated solely by private interest and personal gain.

We do have a handful of artists whose works decry the abuses and residue of the previous regime. But how many are there among us who are systematically devoted to new threats – the portioning and

tearing up of public space by the jaws of private interests at the expense of the majority of citizens? This threat is far more pressing and real than the much feared (and realistically impossible) return of the pre-1989 regime. To confront the cynicism of the lobbyists of contemporary capital requires far more courage than wearing a T-shirt saying FUCK COMMUNISM.

Therefore, in response to the question “What is to be done?” I reply: Do not be afraid to act like a self-confident citizen, not just in the voting booth but above all in your work; stand up more for public matters; and finally break through this hopeless provincialism of so many questions, to realize that the world is just around the corner. I have nothing against personal themes. I am merely claiming that here and there it is good for the most personal confessions, if the artist perceives their broader global context. Only after connecting the local to the global does a full discussion arise, with the art scene of the particular country speaking to itself and to the world. In this respect we are conspicuously behind and needlessly remove ourselves from the European context. It is not about being programmatically global. But if we become greater advocates for Czech public space (which is not the same as exhibiting in it), and if we do this thoroughly, the global perspective will sooner or later appear in our work by itself. Private things can still be done today in one’s backyard, and need not be bad at all; but public things of course necessarily draw us into the global context. What should we do and create? Public space – with everything it entails.

What is bare life?

Even Kassel’s Documenta presents public space of its own kind. There has been much talk about how an exhibition of this size was managed. As far as I know, nobody has yet noticed one thing: the contrast between the socially engaged nature of the exhibited works and the social reality which was visible only a few steps away. While the exhibit halls were packed with engaged art, all it took was to go outside to see the beggars: between two pavilions a Moldavian girl played accordion, she was almost hidden behind it. She played there for hours, by her side a plate for coins. The majority of exhibition visitors, who a few minutes earlier attentively stopped before works depicting the social injustice of this world, walked past her indifferently and without interest.

Child labor belongs to the same order of problems which many of the artists exhibiting at Documenta have addressed. That girl was

unfortunate – and again it relates to space: if she had stood with her accordion a bit further in the exhibition hall, the same people who passed her by without notice would have stopped in front of her, and given her, if not their money at least their attention. They could have considered her part of some performance. Outside of the prestigious exhibition space she didn't have much of a chance; hardly one out of ten passersby noticed her exhaustion, denigration, and poverty – poverty not artistically mediated but immediate and bare. It is precisely this image I see when in connection to Documenta I hear the question: "What is bare life?" At times it is the timid and tired figure crouching unnoticed and unpraised a few meters from a respectable place where we contemplate art and ask grand questions. Concentrating on the art, we do not see the life nearby, of which the art is an image.

But in the end: isn't this part of life itself, seeing something at the price of not seeing something else? Is that not a quality of life, just as art perceives selectively and turns its attention to certain things, while other things are not seen at all, or merely become the background to what is seen? And thus is not injustice (or more precisely the possibility of injustice) encoded in the very manner in which we perceive the world? Would we not go mad if we were to suddenly see all of the misery and pain of the world? Just once I would like to visit a gallery where the art voluntarily becomes the background, to give greater focus to the reality of the girl begging in front of the gallery. Art which voluntarily turns attention away from itself to more intensively fix it upon bare life. In Kassel that child stood between two pavilions and I thought that we have a long way to go to attain such art. As both viewers and artists.