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Actions, Contradictions, Negations. Robert Cyprich's Early Work and Experimental Poetry¹

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In this article I deal with the early work of the artist and theorist Robert Cyprich (1951–1996), focusing on the years 1967–1969. Though very young, Cyprich was already in correspondence with several important artists. Part of the text deals with the context of Czech-Slovak visual poetry and Cyprich's collaboration with Milan Adamčiak. This significantly determined his thinking and work. The result of

the collaboration with Adamčiak was also the intention to publish a magazine focused on the theoretical creation and reflection of experimental art: *Experiment*. The core of the study is devoted to Cyprich's series of 13 experimental poetry texts created in 1968. I also relate Cyprich's collection of visual poetry to other works in the context of experimental literature in 1960s' Czechoslovakia.

Keywords:

Milan Adamčiak – Robert Cyprich – experimental poetry – performance – art of participation

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A Multidimensional Creator

Robert Cyprich² was the author of many art actions and the initiator of collaborative, conceptual and participative projects. He was intensively engaged in distributing samizdat literature and theoretical writings. Although his interests and involvement covered a wide spectrum, no broadly conceived evaluation of his theoretical and artistic work has been undertaken to this day.³ Even the present article will not be sufficient to fill this gap. Its aim is to elucidate his “juvenile” years: his artistic activities in the course of the years 1967–1969 and his hitherto unknown and uncommented texts in the field of experimental poetry, which have survived among the artist’s effects.⁴ In the first section of the text I focus on Cyprich’s seminal encounter with Milan Adamčiak. They intended jointly to publish a periodical focusing on experimental art forms, but their efforts were thwarted by unfavourable social and political developments subsequent to the year 1968. In the second part of the article I concentrate on the collection of Cyprich’s visual poetry, and I set out the premises which are relevant to the form of his typewritten poems.

Robert Cyprich (13. 09. 1951 Ružomberok – 14. 10. 1996 Prague) was not a professional artist. He studied art history at Comenius University in Bratislava but did not complete the course; this was because of the conservative orientation of the department

- 2 Cyprich always gave his name and signed his letters as “Robert”, without the accented “o” (“Róbert”) required in Slovak.
- 3 A partial theoretical evaluation of Cyprich’s work may be found in monographs on the artists with whom he collaborated (Milan Adamčiak, Alex Mlynárčik, Igor Peter Meluzin). There is hitherto no separate monograph on Cyprich himself. Partial consideration of his activities may be found in texts by earlier Slovak writers, for example in publications which were originally samizdat, officially published after 1989: Tomáš ŠTRAUS, *Slovenský variant moderny* (The Slovak Variant of Modernism), Bratislava: Pallas 1992; Radislav MATUŠTÍK, *...predtým. Prekročenie hraníc: 1964–1971* (...previously. Overstepping the Boundaries, 1964–1971), Žilina: PGU 1994. There is a specific profile text on him in Zora RUSINOVÁ, *Umenie akcie 1965–1989* (Action Art 1965–1989), exhib. cat., Bratislava: SNG 2001, pp. 89–100. His work is addressed more intensively by Zuzana BARTOŠOVÁ in her book on unofficial Slovak art of the 1970s and 80s, *Napriek totalite* (In Spite of Totalitarianism), Bratislava: Kalligram 2011, and later, in the context of action art, by Andrea EURINGER-BÁTOROVÁ, *Akčné umenie na Slovensku v 60. rokoch 20. storočia* (Action Art in Slovakia in the 1960s), Bratislava: VŠVU 2011. Michal Murin, in four publications focusing on Milan Adamčiak’s work, offers stimulating material on Cyprich’s activities based on interviews with Adamčiak: Milan ADAMČIAK – Michal MURIN, *Milan Adamčiak: Archív I–IV*, Košice: Dive buki 2011–2014. The most comprehensive and systematic text on Cyprich’s work thus far is a thesis by Daniela ŠIANDOROVÁ, *Teoretické a výtvarné dielo Roberta Cypricha v kontexte doby* (Robert Cyprich’s Theoretical and Artistic Work in the Context of the Time), Trnavská univerzita: Pedagogická fakulta 2020.
- 4 The Bratislava art space tranzit.sk has presented an exhibition project *Experiment* (11. 12. 2020 – 14. 5. 2021), comprising a selection of works by this artist. Works from Cyprich’s archive, preserved after his death in the possession of his partner, the restorer Zuzana Melíčková, and administered today by the artist and curator Jan Mlčoch, were complemented with works by younger artists who responded to the themes and legacy of Cyprich’s art (Liza Gennart, Katarína Hládeková, Katarína Karafová and Michal Huštaty, Martin Toldy and Miroslav Tóth). The exhibition was not a fully adequate retrospective: it was based only on the materials remaining with Cyprich’s partner after his death. Taking into account the course of his life, with numerous changes of abode, and also his explicitly anti-archival relationship to his own work, the material presented was merely a torso. At the same time, my co-curators and I regarded it as an important witness to his life and attitudes and his thinking about his work. Cf.: JÁN MLČOCH – JÁN KRALOVIČ – BEATA JABLONSKÁ, *Experiment*, Bratislava: tranzit 2020.

at that time, and also due to his own bohemian nature. He engaged intensively in various forms of artistic and literary work: actions, conceptual projects, happenings, music scores and visual poetry. In his youth he was already communicating with a broad spectrum of correspondents. He was in contact with artists and theoreticians not only in contemporary Czechoslovakia but also in western European countries (especially France), the former Soviet Union, and Argentina. Since he did not have the status of an artist and therefore he could not be a freelance professional, Cyprich had a variety of occasional civil employments.⁵ Many of his written reflections on current Czechoslovak and world art are pregnant, marked by an extensive knowledge of the literature in foreign lands. With his linguistic attainments (English, French), he had an overview beyond his local setting, and in his information-packed texts one finds that he is sharply critical of the “avantgardist” ethos, frequently cultivated by Czechoslovak artists. Apart from his artistic and theoretical activities, he partly made a living by breeding pedigree dogs. In the 1980s particularly, he focused almost entirely on this work, instead of his art.

Cyprich led an intensive life that burned him up. From the 1960s to the 1980s he took part in publishing and distributing samizdat texts via his own edition series P.A.N. (Pro Arte Nova). There he translated, transcribed and distributed texts by foreign artists and theoreticians and compiled thematically focused collections (Fluxus, happening, performance etc.). Many of the texts are today in various private collections. Others are now lost forever, or partly made accessible once again and reprinted in publications devoted to the history of the Slovak avantgarde.⁶ He died at the age of 45 in Prague, where he had lived from the early 1990s. In an obituary in the journal *Galéria*, Milan Adamčiak said of his colleague and friend:

His life was marked always by a desire for friction, for communication that brought living fruit. He was and remained a fighter for speaking out and liberating oneself from silence. Our society is and will be conscious of him as the youngest participant in making the action art and conceptual art of the 1960s. [...] A fine and sensitive

- 5 The laws of the socialist state (65/1965 Zb.) made it obligatory to have an employment. An exception was made for artists, who could be “freelance”. Friends and acquaintances of Cyprich (Jozef “Alter” Molitor, Dezider Tóth), in conversations with me, confirmed that he had an unconventional mode of life, doing occasional jobs and seasonal work, or more long-term work with, for example, the oil refinery Slovnaft. There he used his technical knowledge and skills. Already in the late 1960s he was interested in technological development and cybernetic systems, which he used at work and partly also in his art (as early as 1968 he wrote a short text on computer art, which was to be published in the essay collection *Experiment*). Cyprich was able to acquire a stamp from his employer and function essentially as a “freelance”, though economically his conditions were rather “hand-to-mouth”. The art historian Jozef „Alter“ Molitor, Cyprich’s friend, remembers that his family background (his father was a prominent army doctor in Ružomberok) not infrequently helped him in gaining occasional employments or evidence of being conventionally employed.
- 6 His concept for the happening *Čas slnka* was published in official outlets in the late 1960s. It appeared in the 10th issue of the journal *Mladá tvorba* (1969); *Infarkt*, a supplement to that same issue of the journal, also published his concept for an “audio-phono-visual” composition *Pocia Ludwigovi Wittgensteinovi* (Homage to Ludwig Wittgenstein). Of Cyprich’s most important and wide-ranging texts, in the post-1989 period his article *Ex Alio Loco* was reprinted, as part of a complete publication of samizdat by the action association *Terén*. Cf.: Robert CYPRICH, “Ex Alio Loco,” in: Radislav MATUŠTÍK (ed.), *Terén*, Bratislava: SCCA 2000, pp. 136–150.

observer of the art of life, an uncompromising critic, an interpreter of desires and yearnings. I do not know if he has left us or whether we have left him; but personally I incline to the conviction that he abandoned this world in pain because of an isolation which was not voluntary [...] We remain his eternal debtors, bound to find answers to his innumerable questions.⁷

Period of Activity in Ružomberok

Robert Cyprich's entry to the field of creative art, and his first contacts with the musical and visual art that tended to be open to experiment, are associated with the individual figure of Milan Adamčiak. Both of them came from Ružomberok. Adamčiak was teaching a cello class at the music school in the second half of the 1960s. In 1968 Imro Fellegi, then deputy director, sent the 17-year-old Cyprich to Adamčiak, sensing that they would have wide-ranging affinities despite the five-year age gap. At that time Cyprich was attending a violin class.⁸ However, his interests were not concentrated exclusively on music. He amassed and absorbed a great quantity of information from the fields of literature, philosophy and visual art. Naturally, in such a small town as Ružomberok, he soon came up against the limits of the potential to expand his knowledge. For the young Cyprich, Adamčiak was not only a tutor but a partner for dialogue. He lent him books, and together they began to seek out possibilities of information by corresponding directly with writers and artists whose work interested them, not only in the Czechoslovak setting.⁹ Cyprich at this time showed Adamčiak works by Ben Vautier and Julien Blaine (*Propositions*), which he had come upon in foreign publications. Since both of them felt close to Fluxus poetry, in 1967–1968 they began executing their first actions, especially *Chodecké kusy* (Pedestrian Pieces), *Pochôdzky* (Patrols), and *Telephone Pieces*.¹⁰ Adamčiak himself had been doing actions even earlier, since 1966. Cyprich was familiar with some of Adamčiak's private actions, especially *The Labours of Sisyphus*. Both of them were interested in a combination of bucolic rural life with technical civilisation, carrying a stamp of urban folklore. These were the premises which motivated them to do *Pochôdzky*, where they visited acquaintances and friends in Ružomberok and performed for them various Christmas songs and folk songs, as well as their own sonic improvisations. Milan Adamčiak recalls the events entitled *Telephone Pieces*:

- 7 Milan ADAMČIAK, "Nekrológ za Roberta Cypricha" ("Obituary for Robert Cyprich)," in: *Galéria*, Vol. 3, 1996, No. 3, p. 14.
- 8 Adamčiak speaks about his acquaintance with Cyprich and their first joint activities in an interview with Michal Murin: Milan ADAMČIAK – Michal MURIN, *Archív IV: akcie, performancie, projekty, koncepty a výstavy* (Archive IV: Actions, Performances, Projects, Concepts and Exhibitions), Košice: Dive buki 2014, p. 64.
- 9 Adamčiak subscribed to many of the journals available during the second half of the 1960s (*Sešity pro mladou literaturu*, *MY 64*, *Dialog*, *Host do domu*, *Výtvarná práce*, *Výtvarné umění*, *Divadlo*, *Mladá tvorba*, *Typografie*, *Revue svetovej literatúry* etc.) where current world artistic tendencies were regularly featured and texts on experimental visual art were translated and made accessible. Cf: Milan ADAMČIAK–Michal MURIN, *Archív I: Experimentálna poézia 1964–1972* (Archive I: Experimental Poetry 1964–1972), Košice: Dive buki 2011, p. 21.
- 10 On correspondence contacts and information about Fluxus cf.: ADAMČIAK – MURIN, *Archív IV*, pp. 30 and 64.

One of us used to ring a randomly chosen telephone number, and if there was a response we immediately began to play for the respondent. Sometimes this ended immediately, but it also happened that the other party ordered songs with our “cacophonies”. Many telephone pieces came into being in this way, spontaneously, and I have no reason to designate them as my work, but I was indeed present and I did record some number of them.¹¹

In 1967 Adamčiak and Cyprich took part in the *IFCM (International Festival of Contemporary Music)* in Prague. By then both of them were writing their own experimental texts; Adamčiak had many of his own scores and textual recordings of events. Cyprich suggested they should visit Ladislav Novák, Jiří Valoch, Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová, and Milan Grygar. Valoch and Hiršal gave them several addresses for artists abroad, and so following their return to Ružomberok, they began corresponding avidly.¹² Their shared interest in experimental art – happening, performance, concrete or visual poetry, notations, scores, and in Cyprich's case, notably also in computer art¹³ – and living in a small town, gave added strength to their collaborative spirit, which in 1968 led to an attempt not simply to absorb but also to produce and distribute. They decided to establish a journal, or rather a periodical anthology of their own, foreign and translated texts about contemporary art. In 1968 they began gathering materials and forming the concept of the “zero” edition of *Experiment*, their journal. They invited Vincent Šabík, editor-in-chief of *Revue svetovej literatúry*, to be editor-in-chief of *Experiment*. An order sheet has survived, announcing the publication of the journal and containing a provisional plan of the published texts in *Experiment 0*, subtitled *a journal for confrontation of experiments in art*. A wide spectrum of texts was announced: from artists' texts (Robert Cyprich: *The Credo of Synthology*, Milan Knižák: *Manifesto of Contemporary Art*) through reviews and visual specimens of works (acoustic drawings, concrete poetry, a presentation of a Brazilian concretists' journal called *Ponto*) to translations (John Lansdown: *Dance*). In the circular (written in English) from Cyprich's effects one finds mention also of texts by Alex Mlynárčik, Vincent Šabík, Jindřich Procházka, and reproductions of the concrete poetry and visual scores of Milan Adamčiak and Alexander (Saša) Rychecký.¹⁴ Because of the constantly expanding number of texts, publication of the journal was continually postponed, and after August 1968 the situation changed. By 1969 publication was no longer possible, and all that remained was the manuscripts and the visual design of the cover, created by the Ostrava artist Rychecký.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

12 Cp.: MURIN, *Archív I*, p. 14.

13 Cyprich was one of the first Slovak artists who reflected this new tendency in theory and in art and also used the computer in his artistic practice. Radislav Matuščík recalls Cyprich's composition *Mon Alphabet de la Synthologie* for Paris (presented by Jochen Gerz), a poetic piece created on a mathematical principle using a computer. Cf.: Radislav MATUŠTÍK, *Predtým 1964–1971*, p. 95.

14 In a maquette of the journal still extant in Jan Mlčoch's archive, there are typewritten copies of the following texts in the *Experiment* section: Jiří VALOCH, *Střídání/In memoriam Josefa Honyse* (Alternation/In Memory of Josef Honys); Robert CYPRICH, *Krédo syntologie* (The Credo of Synthology); Jaromír PACLT, *Marginálie* (Marginalia); Ladislav KUPKOVIČ, *AD LIBITUM*; Robert CYPRICH, *Umenie a computer?* (Art and the Computer?); John LANSDOWN, *Tanec* (Dance); Allan SUTCLIFFE, *POEM 3433*; Jiří VALOCH, *Pro novou situaci nové metody* (New Methods for a New Situation); Ladislav NOVÁK, *Festival fónické poezie* (Festival of Phonic Poetry).

In 1969 Imrich Fellegi, then director of the music school, proposed holding a concert of contemporary music in the Adult Education Centre in Ružomberok. This was the genesis of the *Ist Evening of New Music*, where the newly formed Ensemble Comp. was introduced (Cyprich, Adamčiak, Jozef Revallo), performing Adamčiak's *Three-dimensional Score No. 3* on cello and violins. This event represented Adamčiak's entry to experimental music. He began to collaborate more intensively with Revallo, who later composed music principally for films,¹⁵ and also with another musician, Jaroslav Vodák. This trio of colleagues – Cyprich, Revallo, Vodák – was of key importance to Adamčiak in his decision to abandon the field of performance and begin to devote himself more intensively to his own composing and the theory of modern and contemporary music.¹⁶ Furthermore, his interest in visual art, concrete and visual poetry, event forms and happenings based on live, unrepeatable action, introduced performative and aleatoric forms, and a notable visual component besides, into his musical expression. Ensemble Comp. soon afterwards appeared at the *Second International Seminar for New Music* in Smolenice (1969).

For Cyprich, his activities in 1968–1969 were his initiation in the art scene, securing his entry to the sphere of alternative, extra-gallery and extra-institutional practice. In creative art the alternative was an attempt to constitute a field of production that would open up a measure of freedom, in the sense of disconnecting from conservative artistic expression and seeking new expressive means. An important part of this was creating authentic, autonomous communication platforms, whether via artworks or through community meetings, discussions and exhibition presentations. The art historian Zuzana Bartošová speaks in this connection of “an alternative scene”, by which she understands what went on in art to the year 1972. Up to that point it was possible to offer a variety of creative opportunities and approaches, whereas post-1972 (after the November Congress of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists, ZSVU) one must necessarily speak of “unofficial art”, since it became a sphere of forbidden, undesirable artistic expression.¹⁷

Cyprich was a secondary school student in the late 1960s. More than in school, he was interested in art and texts which expanded his knowledge beyond the limits of the domestic art milieu of that time. Expanded knowledge led to a divergence in his work, away from a Fluxus-musical conception towards becoming intermedia in the highest degree. Cyprich began to broaden his artistic ambitions and to devote himself more intensively to his own work. For his subsequent sociologically orientated actions, focused on

15 Jozef Revallo (1944–1993) was a music composer, including of film music. Of his many works, I will mention his music for the films: *Schůzka se stíny* (1982), *Zánik samoty Berhof* (1983), *Skalpel, prosím* (1985).

16 Adamčiak acknowledges in an interview that it was precisely these three authors who stimulated his liking for New Music. ADAMČIAK – MURIN, *Archív IV*, p. 64.

17 Cp.: Zuzana BARTOŠOVÁ, *Napriek totalite*, pp. 36–56, 320–322.

the motif of appropriation, activation and performative transformation of reality, his acquaintance with the visual artist Alex Mlynárčik was decisive.¹⁸

In the late 1960s Cyprich, besides energetically participating in current activities in art, also reflected theoretically on the artistic processes around him. Among his important early texts, one must single out “The Credo of Synthology”, which is an interlinking of textual notes derived from ideas by a heterogeneous body of theoreticians and thinkers (Pierre Restany, Herbert Marcuse, Leon Bagrit, Louis Armand, André Lerou-Gourhan etc.). He synthesises the fragments and connects them with thoughts about the necessity for a complex scientific-artistic knowledge of the world. On the artistic concept of “synthology” he argues:

With the entry of the 21st century in space-time, the classical concept of the structure of the “work” – material, medium, form etc. – disappeared. SYNTHOLA made its appearance. Synthola is art in interpretation. The art of SYNTHOLOGY is Science, Philosophy, Art... but the art of the 21st century is a privilege not only of artists but of all people, and an activation of their uniqueness. It is auto-masturbation of the spirit. [...] Synthology is a human ethics. We do not put a full stop after our sentences like science or a question mark like philosophy or an exclamation mark like art. The art of synthology is not closed, it is a maximally open system. Our constant is dynamism. Synthola is an open form of immediate being-in-action.¹⁹

The interpretive and appropriative modes of art betray Cyprich’s “anthological” thinking. In his text he breaks down texts by other writers, puts them together and composes them in the formal configuration of a manifesto. Gathering heterogeneous thoughts from the fields of science, social studies, philosophy and art, Cyprich strives to achieve completeness in absorbing and projecting them in paraphrase, and his language becomes impenetrable. Often one cannot determine where his own thinking and authorial formulations begin. However, taking into account the years when “The Credo of Synthology” was produced and the writer’s youth, it is an admirable conspectus of highly topical thoughts by writers who at that time had not been translated in Czechoslovakia. It testifies to Cyprich’s tireless search for and translation of literature and his stubborn attempt to understand the world and to name its contemporary problems and orientation.

- 18 Cyprich became acquainted with Alex Mlynárčik in the summer of 1969 in the action *Trenie*, initiated by Mlynárčik, in Teriánské pleso in the High Tatras (July 19, 1969). In subsequent years they realised several projects together: *Donácie pre bienále mladých v Paríži* (Donations for the Youth Biennale in Paris), 1969; *I. festival snehu* (1st festival of Snow), 1970; *Záhrady rozjímania* (Gardens of Reverie), 1970, etc.). In one of his letters to J. H. Kocman, Cyprich calls this the “together-with-Mlynárčik period” and remarks: “With Mlynárčik this was already collaboration, not formation. Previously I had not known Mlynárčik, and I think I had done a piece of honest work in the years 1967–1969 with Milan Adamčiak, which sometimes I find more convincing than certain of the gestures in my work in recent years (and not my work only). So the idea that Mlynárčik is perhaps my GODFATHER is ridiculous, both on my account and Mlynárčik’s. If Mlynárčik and I at a certain time had a kindred way of seeing things, then it was only logical that we made contact and collaborated rather more than with some other people. In practice, though, our collaboration lasted just 2 ½ years.” Transcribed from a handwritten letter in J. H. Kocman’s archive.
- 19 Robert CYPRICH, “Krédo syntologie,” 1968–1969, manuscript, unpag., part of the group of typewritten texts for the prepared journal *Experiment*, in J. Mlčoch’s personal archive.

Cyprich's Experimental Poetry

A striking discovery among Cyprich's effects was 13 texts of visual poetry, dated 1968. The relatively low number of texts indicates an attempt by the artist to involve himself in this kind of art-literary work, rather than a continual development of experimental procedures on the frontier of word and image. Although Cyprich's work is intermedia, one cannot call it consistent. It shows the marks of partial commitment, bearing witness to the diffuse attention of an artist striving to absorb a broad diapason of the creative forms of that time. The artist in question was currently seventeen years old, and his work is in the true sense of the word *amateur* (from the Latin *amāre*, to love), stimulated by a desire for expression, while at the same containing knowledge of contemporary tendencies in art.

Cyprich's set of texts fills an empty space in the history of experimental or visual poetry in Slovakia. The texts do not suppress the meaning of the words; they are not anti-semantic. They form words into shapes or set them in frameworks which either negate their meaning or alternatively empower it. The thirteen typewritten texts use the mechanical possibilities of the typewriter and the compositional form of the calligram. Right at the beginning of the 1960s, one finds texts based on the typewritten sign with optical effect in the work of several Czech writers. Jiří Kolář produced the pioneering texts (already in the 1950s); later came the first ventures in experimental poetry by Jiří Valoch, Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová, Vladimír Burda, Ladislav Novák, Karel Milota, and others. Experimental poetry became a joint programme of tendencies in the visual arts and literature, which invigorated linguistic elements and their pictorial, visual quality. Furthermore, in visual art also there was growing interest in the motif of text and letter in the picture.²⁰

Heading towards the beginning of 1964, individual tendencies gathered intensity. Josefa Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová's *Co se slovy všechno poví* (Everything We Say with Words), a publication designed for children and youth, illustrated by Věra and Pavel Brázda, appeared in 1964. Word plays, anagrams and calligrams were used here to develop associative thinking and vocabulary, and in its linguistic and visual form the book was a unique attempt to link experimental text with a pedagogic function. In the second half of the 1960s experimental poetry began to appear on the pages of literary and art journals (*Výtvarné umění*, *Výtvarná práce*, *Výtvarný život*, *Orientace*, *Host do domu*, *Mladá tvorba*, *Plamen*, *Revue světové literatury*, *Sešity pro mladou literaturu* etc.). Mladá Fronta publishing house issued a book of texts by Ladislav Novák *Pocta Jacksonovi Pollockovi* (Homage to Jackson Pollock), containing prepared texts and constellations, in 1966. More complex publications appeared towards the end of the 1960s, above all the anthology *Experimentální poezie* (1967), encompassing a selection from a variety of tendencies in experimental poetry and compiled by the Hiršal – Grögerová duo.²¹ The collection included a survey of this art in the contemporary world. A year later saw the publication of their own collection *BOJ JOB* (1968) – *boj* in Slovak and Czech means “fight, struggle”. In 1967, however, two important theoretical books also appeared. One of these was a translation

20 19 Cp.: Eva KRÁTKÁ, “Česká vizuální poezie šedesátých let a její teorie (“Czech Visual Poetry of the 1960s and Its Theory”),” in: Eva KRÁTKÁ (ed.), *Česká vizuální poezie*, Brno: Host 2013, pp. 7–42.

21 At the same time the editors were preparing a separate publication which was to be a selection of Czech experimental poetry entitled *Vrh kostek* (Roll the Dice). This did not make it to publication, because of the changed socio-political situation after 1968. The book appeared only in 1993, published by Torst.

of Max Bense's *Teorie textů* (Theory of Texts); the other was an anthology of essays, manifestos and art programmes from the second half of the 20th century, *Slovo, akce, písmo, hlas* (Word, Action, Letter, Voice). This period of intensive publication climaxed with an official edition of older texts by Jiří Kolář (dated 1965), entitled *Návody k upotřebení* (Instructions for Use), which contains his directions for private events, non-public happenings formally presented in a deliberately unpoetic, down-to-earth mode of matter-of-fact instructions.

Taking into account analogous procedures and visual similarities, we may say that a knowledge of the publications in question was manifested in Robert Cyprich's cycle. However, there was also an immediate influence on his younger colleague by Adamčiak, whose initial texts are dated 1964. Adamčiak had his current points of departure not only in the later Baroque poetry and in emblematic art, but also in the avantgarde procedures of Futurists, Dadaists and Russian Constructivists. His gradual awareness of the existence of other authors and texts also, as well as the publications above-mentioned, reinforced Adamčiak's self-confidence; his early attempts (cycles: *Konštelácie, Mutácie, Selektívne texty* [Constellations, Mutations, Selective Texts]) led to a development of the motif of omission, erasure (*Preparované texty* [Prepared Texts]), work with punctuation (*Bipoe-my*), or a grapheme multiplied to a "design" of a textual image (*Typorastre* [Typo-Grid]). Furthermore, his study and awareness of musical notation and scores served him as a powerful resource. In this field equally, a diapason of approaches opened up, which followed on from the older models of record-making, visual notations and events of the Fluxus movement, and John Cage's works of the 1940s and 50s.

The situation of experimental poetry in Slovakia was different from that in Czechia or the European countries. Writers found their resources mainly by drawing upon Czech translations and the above-mentioned books and journals, and naturally also through personal contacts with authors. More complex publications about the forms of experimental poetry did not appear in the Slovak language during the 1960s. There was also an absence of theoreticians who would have engaged with that sphere more intensively. Finally, in the early 1970s, a compendious study by Ľudovít Petranský on the relation of text and image was published as a book.²² For Slovak artists, the reference milieu in experimental poetry or music scores was primarily the Czech context, with occasional texts and reproductions in Slovak journals (*Mladá tvorba, Výtvarný život*). As the theoretician Katarína Ihringová points out in a publication dealing with the relation of image and word in Slovak art, it is interesting that in European countries the issues of experimental poetry were mainly addressed by poets and literary scholars; in Slovakia, by contrast, they were responded to by visual artists, who related the letter sign to a picture or used the letter as a distinctive aesthetic element.²³ In the structural paintings of Eduard Ovčáček, a Moravian artist who settled in Bratislava during the first half of the 1960s, typographical, letter or number signs appear from 1962 onwards. Especially in the texts *Fonetický slovník* (Phonetic Dictionary) and *Mechanické básně* (Mechanical Poems, 1962–1965), he works with the variability and reversibility of words, vowel mutation and humorous punchlines.

22 Ľudovít PETRANSKÝ, *Písmo a obraz* (Script and Image), Bratislava: Pallas 1972.

23 Ihringová mentions isolated attempts at visual experiment in poetry, e.g. *Reč páleného* (Language of Someone Burned) by Štefan Moravčík and *Tehotná* (Pregnant) by Vojtech Mihálik. However, these attempts did not generate any notable tendency. Cp: Katarína IHRINGOVÁ, *Vzťah slova a obrazu v slovenskom vizuálnom umení* (The Relation of Word and Image in Slovak Visual Art), Trnava: Pergamen 2012, pp. 86–87.

In the cycle *Kruhy* (Circles, 1964–1966) he works exclusively with a typogram produced by typewriter, in the form of a geometric composition. Ovčáček, together with another Czech artist settled in Slovakia, Miloš Urbásek, proceeded from the lettrist principle of using the letter or number as an aesthetico-visual sign deprived of the level of meaning. The word is stripped of its function as bearer of information, and its function is replaced by a form-creating level and a compositional purpose. Text dissolves into graphemes which the artist multiplies or fragments. For example, in the cycle *Útržky rozhovorov* (Scraps of Conversations, 1964) Urbásek works with collaged sheets of texts which he covers and makes illegible with white paint, on which he retroactively impresses the stamped symbols of graphemes.

The fifth issue of the journal *Mladá tvorba* in 1960 reproduced *Pohľady na notovú osnovu* (Glances at the Stave) by the music composer Peter Kolman. The motif of the five main lines of the staff was visually laid out, in the form of short scores with a succinct point. A humorous subtext gives the picture the designation of scores, e.g. *Anarchista* (The Anarchist); the music lines run chaotically, one through another, *Abstrakcionista* (The Abstractionist); the lines are laid out in geometrical pictures, *Človek s kruhmi pod očami* (Man with Circles Under His Eyes); the lines form five concentric circles etc. At that time Milan Adamčiak was familiar with the graphic scores of the composer Ladislav Kupkovič. In his project *Ozveny* (Echoes) for *Hudba dneška* (Music Today), he created sixteen scores with schematic symbols of the basic parameters of the planned execution of sound (ambit, length of notes, loudness, etc.).²⁴ The visual notation places demands on the artist's interpretation. Adamčiak thematises and accentuates precisely this side of notation: what is registered is always an interpretive key, but at the same time it has a visual, and indeed an artistic power. He transmits this also to his experimental poetry, where he orientates his variously conceived cycles towards reading and searching for a relation between the significance of the statement and the image; or he directs them towards a performative presentation of the text, where the essential thing becomes the possibility of an actual accomplishment of the textual statement. Hence the inspirational sources which determine the appearance and form of the poetry of Cyprich, among others, are coming from various directions: from lettrism, from music notation, and in their core content from the Czech milieu, at first mediated via the reading of journals and other publications, and from 1967 also through personal contacts and later correspondence with authors.

In Cyprich one does not find the tendency to a poetry of briefings, such as could be found in Fluxus operating instruction texts or early texts by Adamčiak (*Syzifovské roboty* / Labours of Sisyphus, 1964–1965). Cyprich works with composing words to pictures which either correspond to or are in conflict with the meaning of the text. He has a perceptible inclination towards working with the contradiction of word and image. Literary-optical annihilation is something which he develops in his cycle of visual poetry, as a possible settlement of accounts with the paradoxes and contradictions of his life as it was then and the contemporary socio-political milieu. The individual texts are specifically adjusted. What this involved was gumming a typewritten text to coloured paper of A-4 format. In the typescript Cyprich works with a red and black colour of the letter. An exception to this principle is the first picture of the cycle, where a typographically conceived letter “a” is introduced in a hand drawing complemented with a ring

24 Cp: Lubomír CHALUPKA, *Slovenská hudobná avantgarda* (The Slovak Music Avantgarde), Bratislava: FF UK 2011, pp. 179–180.

that floats above the upper protuberance (in typographical terminology the “grain”). The presentation of the typographic picture strikingly recalls the work with the typographical sign conducted by the Czech graphic artist and illustrator Jaša David in his art publication *Kaligramy* (Calligrams).²⁵ Here one finds the motif of the letter symbol, whose size, placing, rotation or relation to another is linked together with a title that creates a meaningful point. The letter is anthropomorphised; it becomes a figure in the coloured field of the page. Cyprich works in a similar manner: the typographically formed letter represents a figure (a small printed “a”) and by its shape connects with the female figure, to which the very name of the image (*Aphrodite*) leads the viewer. Another principle is the calligram, where the letter “A” is created by text: “Amputation” and “Amputa”; and the connecting link (the beam) of the letter so created is formed by the word “uniform”. Absence here is embodied in the letter, in such a way that the pattern evokes the motif of wounding, connected with the absurdity of military drill and military campaigning.²⁶ Cyprich’s pacifist attitude is demonstrated in several of his texts (notable above all in *Čas slnka* [Time of the Sun] and his textual proclamation in *Mladá tvorba*).²⁷ In the case of *Amputácia*, a significant part is the gumming of the text to a green paper background that evokes the colour of military uniforms. Cyprich uses the same principle also in another text, where the letter “A” is created by the text *Ad augusta per angusta* (“Through the reefs to the heights”) and its connector is the word “Sloboda” (“Freedom”). In an analogous manner Eduard Ovčáček works with the letter “A” in his anti-occupation cycle *Lekce velkého A* (Lesson of the Capital A). That cycle was produced as a direct response to the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact armies in Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968. Ovčáček’s typographic images evoking the motif of violence, subjugation and repression thus have a pendant in Cyprich’s visual poetry. However, we do not know the exact date when the 13-sheet cycle was produced, and hence it is not possible to determine whether it too was conditioned by the events of that August.

Calligramatic formation began to be noticeable in the 1960s in our milieu also, in connected with the once-again-topical reflection on avantgarde procedures. The word calligram is formed from the words calligraphy and ideogram (Gr.: *kalos* – beautiful, *gramma* – letter). Marie Langerová devotes her article “Zbytky písma – kaligram, typogram, čára” (The Remnants of Script: Calligram, Typogram, Line) to the calligram in its relation to the typogram:

In the calligram the script should keep to the outline of the object, itself create the object; it is therefore closer to drawing and visual art shaping than the typogram, in which the text goes along lines and it is only these lines in their margins that form the object.²⁸

25 Jaša DAVID, *Kaligramy* (Calligrams), Praha: SNKLHU 1963.

26 In this connection it is interesting that Robert’s father Štefan Cyprich was a colonel and senior consultant in Ružomberok hospital. Dezider Tóth said in conversation that it was partly thanks to his father that Cyprich had his “blue book” (a document that exempted him from compulsory military service).

27 “The action – as a form of permanently demonstrative exercise – was dedicated to the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Gandhi, as a manifestation of physical and psychic non-violence.” Robert CYPRICH, “Vážená pani, vážený pán (Dear Madam, Dear Sir),” *Mladá tvorba*, Vol. 14, 1969, No. 10, p. 22.

28 Marie LANGEROVÁ, “Zbytky písma – kaligram, typogram, čára (The Remnants of Script: Calligram, Typogram, Line),” *Svět literatury*, Vol. 16, 2006, No. 33, p. 40.

In the mid-1960s Milan Adamčiak was working with the calligram, especially in the cycle *Konštelácia*, for example in: *Príbeh notorika*, *Kaligram*, *Nehoda*, etc. Cyprich's calligrammatic texts may have reached also to other influences which he probably knew: for example, the optical poems of Vladimír Burda (*Vázy*, *Typogramy* / *Vases*, *Typograms*) or Emil Juliš (*Růže je má krásná* / *Beauty Has the Rose*).

In *Aliancia* (Alliance) Cyprich composes a word in the form of a cross, while doubling the bars in the figure by also writing the word backwards: "aicnaila". The meaning of *aliancia* as junction or pact creates the sign of the cross on a black background, with an evocation rather of tragedy, of death. This may also be seen in connection with the artist's antimilitarist attitude. The text recalls Adamčiak's compositions from the cycle *Konštelácie*, for example *Putovanie* (Wandering), where the letters "o" and "d" written in sequence after each other create intersecting lines; thus one may read them in both variants: *od – do* (in Slovak meaning *from – to*) as an allusion to movement and translocation. Among the calligrammatic texts I would also assign *Adie*, a pattern with the gradually increasing vowel "a", which at the end has the form of a large hand-written sign, seeming to stride out of the paper.

The cycle where he is working with words beginning with the first letters of the alphabet also contains the optic poem *Absencia*. In the three lines of the written "a" a vacant space is created, a blank spot, where the typewriter's multiplication of the vowel is omitted. A white spyhole, as it were, has revealed the silence of the unwritten text. This motif strikingly recalls several of Jiří Valoch's texts from the cycle *Z abecedy* (From the Alphabet), which he was working on in 1967. In *Antisonet* Cyprich replaces the vowel "a" in the word "abracadabra" successively in each line with another from the group of Slovak vowels. The last in the given group of texts is *Absolutizmus*, with the printed letter in the middle of the circle created from typewritten imprints of the plus sign, +.

The second group of texts consists of optical poems with a motif of negation, where the principal motif is a paradoxical relation between the shape and the significance of words. There is a set of four texts (*Autonegacia*, *Negacia Negaciae*, *Negacia Negacionis*, *Negacia Mundi*), coloured black and red, gummed to a black paper foundation. Three texts work with multiplication of a word and its composition into "X", or into a motif that evokes cancellation. An impressive example is *Negacia Negacionis*, where the red text "anexia" strikes through the black double cross, the Slovak national symbol. In compositional arrangement and treatment of the subject motif (above all in *Autonegacia*), the poems of this cycle reveal some similarities with those in Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová's collection *BOJ JOB* (1968). The compositional motif of crossing words appears in the work of those two authors (*Morgensternovo jablko* / *Morgenstern Apple*), also the laying out of script (*Selekce*) and a visual game with the motif "X" (*bylo je bude* / *was is will be*). In Cyprich's cycle it appears as a supra-personal theme, deriving from military terminology (motif of the word "anexia" in *Negacia Negacionis*), also as reflections on a more personal theme. In *Autonegacia* the word "subject" when crossed creates the motif of a rhombus in which is inscribed "ego". Again, in *Negacia Mundi* there is a crossing created with the white surface of the paper, while the surrounding space is filled with the red sign "X" and the symbol "O" is inscribed at the centre of the crossroads.

On close acquaintance with Cyprich's visual poetry, it is evident that he absorbs and reflects several influences from contemporary texts (Adamčiak, Valoch, Kolář, Hiršal – Grögerová) which he had an opportunity of knowing. His texts are not stochastic or aleatory; rather, they are clearly composed. The laying out of the individual graphemes often creates a calligrammatic pattern whose significance is reinforced by the choice of

title for the given poem. In the “negation” cycle the title is always given at the top or bottom of the paper, given that it is a crucial code for understanding the meaning of the text.

Conclusion

For Cyprich, the creation of visual poetry was a momentary phase. Besides the visual poems mentioned in this article, concurrently he was working on creating musical notation. In his later period also, he returned to experimental working (in diverse forms) with text. It is not known whether he developed the cycle of visual poems further and returned to them in later years. That Cyprich's work was noticed in the late 1960s is proved by the fact that he was one of only three Slovak artists (the others being Adamčiak and Ladislav Kupkovič) whom Jiří Valoch invited to the international exhibition *Partitury* (Scores), 1970, Brno.²⁹

Cyprich's later work sets out to develop the register of action art, as well as conceptual works and participation in group actions (e.g. with the Temporary Society of Intense Experience around Ján Budaj). By the end of the 1970s his work is sceptical about the ability of art to change society, or human fates at least. His scepticism is expressed in letters sent to colleagues and friends, and it deepens especially after the unsuccessful participative action *Červený rok* (Red Year) 1979. Cyprich had called upon 365 artists to participate in the year-long event, appealing to them by correspondence and with a printed poster calendar. In the letter to the participants he declares that the action is a programme: all days will become festive, via the creative poeticisation of social processes and the participation of the invited artists. The challenge could not be met, however, because many artists did not respond or took a sceptical attitude to the action. In a letter to J.H. Kocman Cyprich voiced his disappointment: “As usual in our clime, the thing has not even been properly born yet, and already people are putting the most unexpected constructions on it and speaking of it with ridicule.”³⁰

An important feature of Cyprich's story is the organic combination of art and life. This interweaving is distinguished by frequently excessive gestures, linked with various registers of the artist's personality: here extravagance alternates with moderation and exhibitionism with a bashful intellectualism. He was the “Rimbaud type” of artist, outstanding from his youth, immensely perceptive, but often his boundless zeal led him to excessive, even self-destructive courses. With all its paradoxes, his life was like a captivating literary story, which it is sufficient just to record. In one of his letters addressed to the theoretician Tomáš Štraus he wrote:

(I am saying that) I do not write poems, I ACCOMPLISH them, that their themes are eternal as “poetry” itself (love, happiness, heroism, hatred, wealth and poverty...), that after inspiration I go out and

29 The exhibition was held from 27. 9. to 5. 11. 1969 in the House of Art in Brno on the occasion of an international music festival. I do not know which work Robert Cyprich exhibited. In 1980 Jiří Valoch compiled a more extensive publication *Partitury*, which was published by the Prague Jazz Section in the Jazzpetit edition. From the Slovak scene it includes only works by Milan Adamčiak and Dezider Tóth.

30 Robert CYPRICH: *Milý Jirko...*, letter to J. H. Kocman, undat., in J. H. Kocman's private archive. In the letter Cyprich states that the action met with incomprehension: many took it to be a compilation of Knižák's actions or a response to *Biely priestor v bielom priestore* (White Space in a White Space), a work by the artist trio Filko – Laky – Zavorský.

I sow, even in lifts, where on entering I catch the perfume of women's sprays and men's aftershave, and other poetic ideas occur to me about this house, although they love... as in lifts, where the animal smell of sweat is pungent... that even so I "sniff" at reality and touch it ... that I don't like looking at the street from a window, but I love the movement and space of the street, when I am amidst its churning mass... and that I am "publishing" poetry in the edition called life.³¹

Cyprich's early work already shows signs of interest in recording and accentuating reality. He used elements of everyday life as "materials" for his works, which do not attempt to cover over and aestheticise life but, on the contrary, to discover poetics in real circumstances, unstylised. Already one can detect this in his joint works with Adamčiak, which derived from an interest in the motif of chance and improvisation and were realised outside of exhibition halls. In his visual poetry texts Cyprich thematises his conflictedness and personal ambivalence, which was manifested also in his fate later in life. Such titles as *Absencia*, *Negacia negacie*, *Autonegacia* bear witness to that. We appreciate the exceptional quality of his work even looking back in hindsight and knowing that he created those works between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. His later decision not to devote himself to art professionally (abandoning the study of art history) was conditioned both by personal and social changes and by the onset of normalisation.

The discovery and relatively concentrated presentation of Cyprich's experimental poetry fills a hitherto empty space in the knowledge of his early creative production. It shows signs of inspiration from experimental texts particularly of Czech provenance, which were communicated in contemporary prints or acquired from the artists by writing to them. Even in the earliest stages of his own theoretical writing, Cyprich capitalised on the interest he had in writing (to the point of graphomania) from a young age and on the texts and foreign catalogues that he frequently requested by letter. Many of the solicited texts, which he prepared and translated with Adamčiak, were to be contents of *Experiment*, a journal of experimental art, which proved impossible to publish. However, even after the journal's publication was stymied, Robert Cyprich's activities did not falter. They evolved in the field of artistic and theoretical work, even though this remained on the level of samizdat (except for one text published in *Mladá tvorba*) and his personal thinking, developed mainly via his rich correspondence. In the 1970s Cyprich became one of the critics of the still-surviving ethos of the neoavantgarde. More and more he began to "dissolve" his artistic ambitions, replacing them with thoughts about the possibilities of social change and instruments for the intensification of life.

31 Robert CYPRICH, "List T. Štrausovi (Letter to T. Štraus)," in: Tomáš ŠTRAUS, *Slovenský variant moderny*, p. 217.