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Art Doesn't Care: Take Care of Art¹

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This study explores the ways in which archival material is processed and presented through curatorial activities. It also looks at the possibilities of integrating those who created or are part of the archive and collection with their works and documents. In this sense, curating (not only in the original meaning of the word) is very open to intergenerational dialogue and questions of care. It is clear that curatorial care can apply not only to works of art and archives, but also to cultural actors. How can we, as curators, care for those who, due to old age or infirmity, are unable to be in contact with art? The author works with auto-ethnographic research methodology, which allows her to examine the topic

from the perspective of her own lived experience and relate it to the art scene of which she is a member. Drawing on first-person narrative and direct dialogue, she describes the processing of the archive of the Czech artist, curator, and collector Jiří Valoch (b. 1946), which gradually turned into a care program for the artist himself. Questions relating to the concept of an art archive and its curatorial processing then move on to observations from the life of the caring subject. The more personal level of the text largely relates to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–2022 and also deals with the method of re-enactment as a tool of curatorial care.

Keywords:

The Jiří Valoch Archive and Collection in the Moravian Gallery in Brno – František Maxera – conceptualism – re-enactment – curatorial care

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In 2014, I joined the Moravian Gallery in Brno as an assistant curator in order to participate in the processing of the Jiří Valoch Archive and Collection. At that time, Jiří Valoch was still an active member of the Brno art scene, appearing wherever there was something art-related going on. He attended openings, graduation exhibitions, and went to pubs and cafés where other members of the Brno art scene would meet. He was well known for his endlessly long speeches at the openings of exhibitions and as the owner of a unique collection of art and a tireless critic, studio visitor and conceptual artist. His professional activities won him respect and admiration, especially in the small circle of those who knew of them (as the saying goes: “No one is a prophet in their own land”). His comportment, attire and overall style caught the half-amused, half-surprised attention of those who knew him only in passing.

Right from the start, Jiří was looking for an ally at the Moravian Gallery to help him out with certain problems. He longed for a place where he could store, process and present his archive and collection. But there was more to it than that. Since the death of his father Karel Valoch in 2012, he had also been searching for a safe haven for himself. I soon came to understand that, as absurd as it may sound to someone who did not know Jiří personally, his utopian yet utterly serious plan was to move into the gallery along with his collection and archive: in other words, to begin living with those of us who had decided to take care of the latter. He never really separated art from life.

I was surprised by how quickly I got used to the fact that Jiří was now part of my everyday life, who remained with me even when I left work. This was due to the contents of his archive. During the course of the exciting process of organizing the mountain of letters and documents, a more three-dimensional image of Jiří began to emerge as a hyper-sensitive radar that had identified and broadcast everything new that had appeared on the art scene at any given moment in time. Thanks to Jiří, I began to uncover a layer of global conceptualism of the 1970s that was completely new to me and still quite unknown on the Czech art scene in general. I will never forget how thrilled I was upon first realizing that this man, talking ten to the dozen while swaying unsteadily beside me, had managed, just a year after beginning to work with concrete poetry, to master the subject to a sufficient extent to be able to participate as a young man of only nineteen at one of the key exhibitions devoted to this artistic phenomenon in Oxford.²

I have written about Jiří, his curatorial, creative and collecting activities in other studies, as indeed have others.³ So here, instead, I would like to focus on the more personal side of our relationship. Drawing on the methodology of evocative auto-ethnographic research, I will dig deeper into the moment it became necessary for me to move from being curator to carer, and ask whether we might draw more general conclusions regarding the topic of care and curating within the context of gallery institutions on the basis of my personal experience with Jiří. An undeniable advantage of auto-ethnographic research is the opportunity to draw on one's own lived experience, memories and interviews in the

2 *OXPO, 2nd International Exhibition of Experimental Poetry*, Oxford: St. Catherine's College 7–18 June 1965.

3 For example, Jana PÍSAŘÍKOVÁ, “Neviditelná socha, transcendentní výstava i programované umění. Kurátorské aktivity Jiřího Valocha šedesátých a sedmdesátých let,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, Vol. 12, 2018, No. 25, pp. 48–71; Helena MUSILOVÁ, “Současná česká kresba, 1980, Dům umění města Brna – Dům pánů z Kunštátu. Jiří Valoch a možnost realizace kolektivní výstavy v období tzv. normalizace,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, Vol. 13, 2019, No. 26, pp. 65–85.

form of a text that is neither purely documentary nor academic, and does not raise questions in advance to which it is obliged to seek answers. On the contrary, such an approach enters the terrain under investigation, observes it and tries to capture it as truthfully as possible, even deploying literary elements so as to increase the suggestiveness of what is being described and tease out points of intersection between the facts. My aim here is to present the findings of field research conducted in the “terrain” that I myself inhabit.

The second life of an archive

Between 2013 and 2016, Jiří Valoch donated an extensive collection of works, as well as his personal archive and library, to the Moravian Gallery in Brno. This gift became the basis for the permanent exhibition *Art is Here: New Art (Czech Art after 1945)*, and from 2015 to 2023 it also made a significant contribution to the overall concept and visual style of this art museum. For example, the inscription “ART IS HERE,” which adorns the façade of the Pražák Palace, is derived from postcards with the same text and variations thereon that Jiří exchanged with his friends.

My rough estimate is that the Jiří Valoch archive comprises approximately 4,000 letters and 20 archival meters of library, including limited editions of art journals and zines, as well as samizdat and exhibition catalogs from all around the world. It also contains hundreds of press releases, photographic documentation, and records of everyday life in the form of sketches. In addition, there are various contracts and other bureaucratic documents relating to Jiří’s day-to-day activities as a curator and as just another “ordinary guy” who is part of the system. It should not be forgotten that in gifting his archive, Jiří was in effect handing over a significant part of his life to the Moravian Gallery. The archive was accompanied by his art collection, which grew in tandem with and is inseparable from the former, since many artifacts oscillate between archival and collection material (e.g. various postcards from artists describing the initial concept of works, limited editions of art zines, signed invitations to the first exhibitions of conceptual art, etc.). His collection includes approximately 400 works in the form of paintings and sculptures, as well as several thousand works on paper.

The transfer of this archive and collection to the Moravian Gallery was a somewhat painful process that I would compare to a supernova and the beginning of a second life. In retrospect, I realize that during the process of organizing the material to suit institutional needs, the private dimension largely disappeared. The aura deriving from the authentic and unique ties created by the original spatial and physical coexistence of works, letters, catalogs and invitations in Jiří’s apartment on Jugoslávská Street in Brno has disappeared forever. The way that Jiří placed Ladislav Novák’s alchimages on a shelf next to prints by Vladimír Boudník is significant in itself and illustrated the relationship between all three artists. However, once in the depository, this delicate skein of contexts was torn apart within the alphabetical order of the works carefully placed in boxes of the highest archival standard made of acid-free cardboard.

I cannot help but smile when I see how auction houses offer concepts, drawings and art documentation in polished cartridges and frames for tens of thousands of Czech crowns, while Jiří lay in bed with similarly valuable “papers,” “cuddling” them and arranging them around him as though they were roommates. In short, there is a difference between collecting art on the one hand, and living with art, connecting with it fanatically, becoming intoxicated, creating more and more information, and at the end of one’s life – in somewhat self-exculpatory fashion – being sublimated into art, on the other. In

this respect I never cease to be amazed by how Jiří's mission describes the same temporal trajectory as the phenomenon of conceptualism. He was a pupil of the art scene in the same years as the notion of concept and dematerialized art first appeared. And while Czech-Slovak conceptualism is definitively historicized, Jiří's memory is degenerating as a result of his illness. Fortunately, the external memory, through his collection and archive, has a hope of living on.

At present, the Jiří Valoch Archive and Collection is being digitalized and published on the Moravian Gallery's website: online collections.⁴ The process is complicated by the fact that the Moravian Gallery currently has only part of the collection at its disposal. In 2002, several works were donated to the National Gallery in Prague, and in 2014, some of the archive and collection (it is unclear how much) was transported to Zagreb, Croatia, by Marinko Sudac, a private collector and gallerist of the Virtual Museum of Avant-Garde. The reason for this transfer was the preparation of a monograph on Jiří's life and work, which, however, never saw light of day. As a result, Jiří's archive and collection exists in its original form only in the recollections of those who knew him and visited him in his apartment.

As regards the original form of Jiří's archive and collection, Ondřej Chrobák, my partner and curator of the Moravian Gallery in Brno, and I have begun to use the term "archaeological site."⁵ As collector, curator and artist, Jiří was never a systematic archivist or collector. His archive and collection were always one huge tangle, materials stored in layers. Nonetheless, we might see his role as being linked to the notion of self-archiving as an important tool for preserving the memory of art in countries of the so-called Eastern bloc prior to 1989.⁶ In the publication *The Exhibition as Medium*, which summarizes the most important exhibition projects of the Czechoslovak post-war art scene, Terezie Nekvindová described Jiří as "the first curator."⁷ Personally, I incline towards the more provocative term "agent of new art."⁸ Jiří represented the neuralgic point of the international network of conceptualism. His archive and collection correspond to the definition given by Boris Groys in his text on the economy of culture as a place for the collection of everything that is deemed new at any given moment. "The archive and collection become the memory of art, into which innovative works enter [...], they are a comparative base for the qualitative differentiation of the new."⁹ With its emphasis on the new, Groys's definition is consistent with Jiří's situation and the reasons he began putting together the material comprising his archive and collection. In the mid-1960s, the Brno art scene was under the sway of a fading surrealist tendency, the subjectivity of which Valoch set

4 <https://sbirky.moravska-galerie.cz/katalog> (accessed 12 November 2024).

5 We first used the term in the curatorial text accompanying the exhibition *Jiří Valoch: Merde* curated by Ondřej Chrobák and Jana Písaříková, Prague: tranzit.cz 2015.

6 For more detail, see Daniel GRŮŇ (ed.), *Subjektívne histórie. Seba-historizácia ako umelecká prax v stredovýchodnej Európe / Subjective Histories: Self-historicisation as Artistic Practice in Central-East Europe*, Bratislava: Veda 2020.

7 Terezie NEKVINDOVÁ, "Od komisaře ke kurátorce? Tvůrce výstav v českém umění ve druhé polovině 20. století," in: Pavlína MORGANOVÁ – Terezie NEKVINDOVÁ – Dagmar SVATOŠOVÁ (eds.), *Výstava jako médium*, Praha: AVU 2020, pp. 149–212.

8 He approached the realisation of his own work, lectures and theoretical texts as equal outputs of his creative practice in the service of new art. PÍSAŘÍKOVÁ, "Neviditelná socha."

9 Boris GROYS, *Über das Neue: Versuch eine Kulturökonomie*, München: Carl Hanser Verlag 1992, cited in: Aleida ASSMANNOVÁ, *Prostory vzpomínání: podoby a proměny kulturní paměti*, Praha: Nakladatelství Karolinum 2018, p. 390.

himself in opposition to through his artistic, theoretical and curatorial activities, thus building a local breeding ground for “new art” through links to international events.¹⁰

The archive as social capital

Curatorial work with Jiří's archive and collection represented not only an opportunity to create discursive narratives of art through separate shows and the permanent exhibition of the Moravian Gallery.¹¹ It also involved reading hundreds of letters, sorting through invitations, press releases, identifying works, art editions, photographs, etc.

All of the effort needed to process this extremely interesting documentary material resulted in my gradually becoming part of a special archival universe and growing with it. I came to understand that the archive is not merely a place that “rustles with paper,” but represents huge social capital, a space that can be built on in the sense of renewing contacts and times from Jiří's artistic network, a network forged by the generation born in the 1930s and 1940s that made its first forays onto the art scene in the early and mid-1960s. One of its key features was an avant-garde belief in the connection between art and life. Perhaps it is this that gave rise to the characteristic greeting “Dear Friend” with which most of Jiří's letters began. His contacts and social ties began to enter my life too. Many of his friends became my friends. As a curator I am motivated by the need to have an inter-generational dialogue with people whose creative work Jiří respected and followed. These included established figures on the art scene as well as solitary figures on the periphery.

Jiří's network of contacts has undoubtedly influenced my own curatorial work, both in the Moravian Gallery and outside of it. I began to collaborate intensively with the artists I met while working within that complex universe.¹²

I began to become aware of Jiří's archive and collection as social capital with the potential for further growth around the time of the exhibition *Donation* by Josef Dabernig.¹³ I had already met Dabernig in Linz at the opening of the exhibition *Who was 1968?* *Art, Architecture, Society* (2018), where Jiří was represented by works on loan from the Moravian Gallery. Our strange caravan, comprising the artist in a wheelchair accompanied by curators and a child in a pram, earned us the nickname “melodramatic family.” Not long after this meeting, Dabernig contacted us with an offer to donate his works to the Jiří Valoch Collection and Archive at the Moravian Gallery. As a reciprocal gesture, Ondřej Chrobák, Jiří and I decided to organize a one-day exhibition of Dabernig's work at Jiří's apartment in Jugoslávská Street. The medium of the apartment exhibition became a way for us to bring art back to the original site of Jiří's collection and archive, and, most importantly, back to Jiří himself. Dabernig's donation comprised a series of works,

10 For more details of Valoch's curatorial activities in the 1960s and 1970s see PÍSAŘÍKOVÁ, “Neviditelná socha.”

11 The permanent exhibition *ART IS HERE: Nové umění (české umění po roce 1945)*, curated by Ondřej Chrobák, Petr Ingerle and Jana Písaříková, Brno: Moravská galerie 2015.

12 The Jiří Valoch Archive and Collection initiated a number of exhibitions, including *ČS koncept 70. let*, curated by Beata Jablonská, Denisa Kujelová and Jana Písaříková, Brno: Fait Gallery 2017; *Milan Maur: Nejisté sekvence děje*, curated by Denisa Kujelová, Ondřej Navrátil and Jana Písaříková, Brno: Fait Gallery 2022; *Jiří Kubový: Obrazy*, curated by Jana Písaříková, Blansko: Galerie města Blanska 2024; *Dušan Chládek, Petr Koičala: Před obrazem*, curated by Jana Písaříková, Hradec Králové: Galerie Škroupovka 2024.

13 *Josef Dabernig: Donation*, curated by Ondřej Chrobák, Jana Písaříková and Jiří Valoch, Brno: Jiří Valoch's apartment, Jugoslávská ulice, 28 November 2019.

photographs taken in Adamov, and a factory clock that had featured in his original installation in the Galerie Na bidýlku in 2007.¹⁴ The invitation featured a photograph of Jiří taken by Dabernig in this small private gallery run by Karel Tutsch since the 1980s. “He looked more like part of the installation than a regular visitor,” writes Dabernig in his text, a reading of which formed part of the opening. The photograph thus made reference to a common feature of the two collectors Karel Tutsch and Jiří Valoch, namely, a kind of strange, almost corporeal connection with art. This exhibition was intended to kick-start another series of exhibitions, discussions and performances in Jiří’s apartment, thus expanding his artistic and social network. However, our plans were thwarted by the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which at that precise moment was only weeks away.

From curator to caregiver

Of course, it was not only through processing Jiří’s archive that I earned the trust of the members of his network. That on its own would not have sufficed. In 2018, I reached a major life decision: henceforth I would take care of Jiří.

The theme of care is one that has been addressed by many organizations, theoreticians and artists in recent years.¹⁵ The aim is to help articulate publicly the problems faced by excluded groups, to fight for equal gender opportunities and the inclusion of the disadvantaged in the cultural mainstream. Alongside reflections upon climate change, care and the need to care is quite rightly the subject of many grants, exhibitions and publications. However, it is no easy matter to relate adequately and appropriately to the issue of care through curatorial work in museums and galleries. There is always the risk of appropriating a professional agenda that belongs to other disciplines and specialists, a risk associated with the banal visual articulation of what are in reality extremely complex issues. Notwithstanding these risks, at present we are witnessing a curatorial turn towards care. In the anthology of texts entitled *Critical Care*, the feminist theorist Elke Krasny describes this turn as an appeal to change our perception of the discipline of curating.¹⁶ There is a need, she argues, for the development of a curatorial practice in which caring and thinking are given equal status. Historically, the status of curator has been associated with author. It was a privileged position for individuals whose job was to think independently, to create content from the constellation of works in the exhibition space. However, let us try to imagine a cultural practice that replaces the supremely individualistic position of the curator with a kind of collective micro-political caring strategy that takes art outside the normal forms of display and (re)presentation.

Feminist-oriented cultural practice, often associated with artistic and curatorial collectives, offers a possible starting point. It is activist in nature, connecting the act of thinking to the experience of the body as a socially and culturally produced subject, which it seeks to approach in a non-normative way. In this respect, art no longer plays an autonomous role, but is part of socio-political narratives and strategies. Audience

14 *Josef Dabernig* (solo exhibition), Brno: Galerie na Bidýlku, 18 October – 25 November 2007.

15 For example, the projects *Islands of Kinship*, Praha: Společnost Jindřicha Chaloupeckého 2024; *Multilogues on the Now*, curated by Hana Janečková and Zuzana Jakalová, Praha: Display 2021.

16 Elke KRASNY – Lara PERRY (eds.), *Curating with Care*, New York: Routledge 2023. Another excellent source is Elke KRASNY – Sophie LINGG – Lena FRITSCH – Birgit BOSOLD – Vera HOFMANN (eds.), *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, London: Sternberg Press – Academy of Fine Arts Vienna 2021.

members no longer occupy the role of passive observers, but are now active participants. In terms of feminist practice, curating becomes an interdisciplinary activity allowing for reflections upon a person's lived experience of disadvantage, illness, or economic problems and social insecurity and exclusion, to offer just a few examples.¹⁷ It encourages us to see all feelings associated with illness and bodily failure – indeed, any dependence on and connection with others – not as a cause for anxiety but as a source of resistance and a tool for change.¹⁸

In this context, the post-representational theory associated with cultural theorist and political activist Stuart Hall offers inspiration. In his writings on visual (re)presentation,¹⁹ Hall stresses the need to bridge the gap between the “real event” and how it is presented. The challenge of curatorial practice is to create an unmediated “real event.” By this means the possibility of knowledge is situated not in philosophical speculation, but in a collective knowing body that admits of curiosity, doubt and even possible failure.

In order to care for Jiří, whose organic brain disorder gradually took away his ability to live independently, I had to give up my professional career as curator of the Jiří Valoch Archive and Collection at the Moravian Gallery in 2021. This post had become incompatible with the role of guardian. It was not an easy decision, but in retrospect I believe it was the right one. I cannot imagine staying on as the custodian of the archive knowing that Jiří himself had been unceremoniously dumped in one of Brno's psychiatric hospitals, from which the Moravian Gallery, through its professional agenda, had no way of retrieving him.

In 2016, court proceedings were initiated to assess Jiří's medical and mental capacities. From 2016 to 2018, the very same personality who had put the City of Brno on the international map of conceptual art and donated a collection worth several million dollars to two state institutions in 2002 and 2013, became a sectioned patient of Station 17, the Geriatric Psychiatric Department of the Brno-Černovice Psychiatric Hospital. He remained an involuntary patient even after the court verdict, spending a total of 831 days in the institution. After his legal capacity was restricted, the reason for his hospitalization was no longer based on an assessment of his state of health, but his social situation, namely, the unresolved question of where he should live and who should help him to carry out the everyday tasks he was no longer capable of performing on his own. He had a guardian appointed by the municipal district of Brno-sever. However, there were no family or friends who could have helped him return home and live the life he was used to.

Notwithstanding its institutions and teams of specialists, art cannot help you in these situations. Such help must be provided by specific individuals, often at the cost of significant sacrifices. And if said individuals refuse, you may spend your old age in the institutional gears of nursing homes and geropsychiatric units. Believe me, this is not the end of life that any of us want to experience. It took a while before Ondřej and I were able to convince the Office of the Public Guardian and the psychiatric hospital to entrust Jiří to my care. It was no easy job inspiring confidence in the authorities. I remember the years 2016 and 2017, when I regularly visited Jiří in the psychiatric hospital and brought him home at least on weekends. His complaint that, as a conceptual artist, he couldn't give

17 Elke KRASNY – Lara PERRY, “Introduction,” in: KRASNY – PERRY, *Curating with Care*, p. 23.

18 Hana JANEČKOVÁ, “Crippling the Curatorial,” in: KRASNY – LINGG – FRITSCH – BOSOLD – HOFMANN, *Radicalizing Care*, p. 82.

19 Stuart HALL, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: SAGE 1997; Stuart HALL, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, London: Allen Lane 2017.

a damn about art workshops for pensioners, represented the humorous tip of the iceberg of an otherwise sterile system. After all, a general feature of most institutional systems is their inability to take into account the special needs and particularities of the individual. For example, you only receive a drinking straw when you are bedridden, not before. The fact that “Mr Valoch has difficulties swallowing and therefore cannot drink without a straw” is of no interest to anyone; the rules of the ward apply to everyone without exception.

Worst of all were the flu epidemics. After two months during which no visits were permitted, Jiří lost all enthusiasm for life. “Mr Valoch will not walk anymore. Just accept it, the disease is progressing,” the ward sister informed me tartly at the door. Yet after two weeks of daily visits, we again walked together through the vast hospital grounds. “Let’s run away together to Prague to see Knížák and send a postcard to this lunatic asylum,” Jiří suggested, always the practical one, despairing himself at how long he had been kept in the hospital. I finally wrote to Milan Knížák in August 2018. It was his phone call to the hospital management and the Office of the Public Guardian that saw my insistence on Jiří being released into home care finally being taken seriously.²⁰

Since September 2018, Jiří has been living with us in a shared household. The Office of the Public Guardian made sure he did not get married, enter into a registered partnership, sign any contracts or wills, or run for president, and arranged for a visit once a month by a social worker to check on him. My family and I ensured he had enough to eat, took baths, visited exhibitions, wore clean clothes and did not live in total isolation but enjoyed the company of others.

At this point, readers may be wondering why I am describing of all this in a specialist journal focusing on art and theory. What justifies me writing about my lived experience with Jiří is my desire to approach curating as a post-representational practice that can care not only for artworks, but for the actors involved in artistic operations. In a figurative sense, I also subscribe to the avant-garde belief in the link between art and life, a belief that knows that in the process of learning it is above all the human body that, through experience and memory, understands events.

The curator Berit Fischer proposes that we reframe the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am,” still a building block of Western society, with a new model embodying an active approach: “we care, therefore we are.”²¹ Caring for an art archive and collection is of course easier than caring for a person. Art certainly ages better than humans. And after all, from our position as curators of galleries and museums, we know how to take good care of art, we have the necessary skill set. We have a highly developed standardized structure for preserving art and a sophisticated discourse for its presentation and other types of specialist consideration. But what do we do with a doddering old conceptualist? In terms of caring for an aging generation of artists, there is no set methodology to follow.

I take care of Jiří because I appreciate the way he took care of art all his life. Every so often I receive comments from people like: “Why do you take him to exhibitions, it’s so undignified in his condition! Besides, he’s been in no state to appreciate art for ages, he’s off his rocker.” Or: “Aren’t you afraid of having him at home when you have small children?”

20 Personal email correspondence between the author and Milan Knížák dated 20 August 2018.

21 Berit FISCHER, “A Laboratory of Care – Active Micropolitics, Joyfulness, and Activity,” in: KRASNY – PERRY, *Curating with Care*, pp. 115–126.

Illness and disability are often viewed from a normative perspective as something undignified, reprehensible, to be hidden, only acknowledged when they begin to intrude upon us.²² We will only change the way we approach disability and sickness by changing the way we think.²³ Barrier-free access points, special programs for the marginalized and a caring discourse are undeniably an important aspect of this change, though personally speaking I have the following question: When will this finally take place? Probably only when we no longer “feel” uncomfortable in the presence of the disadvantaged or sick. Changing the way we think will not take place without them: change can only take place with them.²⁴ I see no reason why illness should deprive Jiří of the right to art as an essential part of his everyday life. Why should a sick person with a background in and deep appreciation of the arts lose this right? By “right,” I don’t just mean having their favorite paintings hung above a reclining bed and the occasional visit to an exhibition via wheelchair access. It is much more about finding ways to be mentally and physically involved in artistic and cultural practice notwithstanding disability.

Being in it together

A major turning point came during the COVID-19 pandemic, just a few weeks after Dabernig’s exhibition *Donation* ended. We relocated to our family cottage in the little village of Ludíkov in the Moravian Karst. Not far away there is the Kůlna Cave and the town of Sloup, in the vicinity of which a significant part of Jiří’s photo-pieces and concepts were created. In the 1960s, he used to travel here with his father, Karel, to work on archaeological digs, and later he often returned with his life partner Gerta Pospíšilová and fellow artists. For Jiří, the Moravian Karst was an initiatory environment in which he discovered the terrain of new art through his father’s archaeological activities. The fact that we started to live here together triggered a need in us for a deeper understanding of the role this location played in his life and how we might relate to it in terms of its cultural memory and current form and “adopt” it curatorially. The exhibition entitled *Valoch & Valoch: Archaeology and Conceptual Art*,²⁵ which explored the connections between archaeology and conceptual art on the basis of the relationship between Jiří and his father, Karel Valoch, was one of the outcomes of this life change.

Settling down together in the Moravian Karst also prompted a desire to pinpoint the location of a number of works by Jiří that he had created here in the early phase of his career. Their physical form, preserved in the Moravian Gallery, suddenly became the starting point of a performative practice of re-enactment.²⁶ Re-enactment is an interdiscipli-

22 Stigmatization and self-stigmatization due to illness was addressed, for example, by art critic Susan Sontag in her essay “Illness as Metaphor” of 1978.

23 Cf. Johanna HEDVA, *How to Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom*, New York: Hillman Grad Books 2024, p. 16.

24 James I. CHARLTON, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1998.

25 Curators Ondřej Chrobák, Jana Písaříková, Petr Ingerle, Miroslav Maixner, Brno: Moravská galerie 2023.

26 Marina Abramović first drew attention to this method in the art world with her performance *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2005. In Czechia, this was initiated by Daniela Baráčková with the transfer of an event by Jiří Kovanda, performed in Prague in 1976, to Times Square, New York, in 2006. The artist Barbora Klímová has also worked continuously with this method in relation to the action art of the 1970s.

nary method that allows us not only to learn about the complexity of a historical event, but above all to experience it “in the flesh,” through direct physical experience. The art historian Heike Roms, who researched performative art in Wales between 2009 and 2011, speaks in this regard about “eventful evidence.”²⁷ Historical evidence regarding the form and process of ephemeral works can be acquired not only by studying their documentation, but also through field research at the sites where the events took place and through oral histories involving artists and living witnesses in the form of a public event. It is a method of research that fundamentally expands the possibilities of historiographic work.

In my mind I go back to autumn of 2020. Friends arrive, we take a paintbrush and black paint, we put our two-year-old daughter into a pushchair, Jiří into a wheelchair, and we go for a walk in the woods.

One of the striking theses of 1960s and 1970s conceptualism was the denial of originality and the visual attractiveness of the artwork. A more important aesthetic quality became the idea, which in many cases could be multiplied, finalized in the mind of the viewer, and perhaps even recreated using surviving texts, photographs and the recollections of participants...

... as I explain to friends from different professional backgrounds. We write the word “silence” on a pile of felled spruce trees. The same action, documented by photographs, was performed by Jiří in the Moravian Karst in 1972. Art exists in infinitely diverse layers (art is here and there), and right now we are perhaps on the most banal, since it is part of our family’s caring activity. During a period when galleries are closed due to a state of emergency, this is one way to feel an intimate closeness to the art we all care about within our shared household. We discuss with friends what exactly it is that we are creating here. “Is it art or not?” “It’s not art, it’s a leisure activity,” they say. “It’s art,” mutters Jiří. These are the first words he has uttered in weeks.

For Jiří, who can no longer express himself through speech or writing, re-enactments have become a way to be comprehensively inside an art event by means of his body, notwithstanding his illness. They help him activate buried layers of memory and consciously recall moments from his own life. For us they have become one of the ways we communicate with each other. Our knowledge of art has thus been enriched by the dimension of embodied experience, encounters with participants of the conceptualist network, and oral history. Chronicles and recollections have thus brought us together in a shared sense of being with something.

Renewed friendship with František Maxera

Re-enactments are also a method that combines caring with research into Jiří’s archive and collection beyond the boundaries of their material form in the direction of the development of socio-artistic and period contexts. A concrete example of such research was

27 Heike ROMS, “Eventful Evidence: Historicizing Performance Art,” *MAP – Media / Archive / Performance*, Vol. 2, 2010, No. 1, pp. 1–10. In Czechia, Pavlína Morganová opted for a similar strategy as Roms in her project *Procházka akční Prahou: Akce, performance, happeningy 1949–1989*, Praha: VVP AVU 2014.

our cooperation with František Maxera, a ceramist, participant in the so-called Third Resistance (the Czechoslovak Anti-Communist Resistance), and a representative of Czech dissidence in the 1970s. Maxera's extraordinary life story was captured in detail by the Memory of Nations project.²⁸ In the 1960s, he studied ceramics at the Brno School of Applied Arts, and later in the same decade became involved in The Young Friends of Fine Arts club at the House of Arts. On the club's committee he became friends with Jiří, the photographer Dušan Klimeš and the architect Petr Haimann. Together with other members of the club, they carried out a series of land-art events around Brno during the 1970s. Around the same time, Maxera became part of the circle associated with the Crusader School of Pure Humor Without Jokes and the Prague underground. He came to the attention of the secret police in 1970, was imprisoned for the first time in 1974, and moved to Austria after signing Charter 77 in 1978.

In 2021, we met František Maxera for the first time at the opening of the exhibition *The Young Friends of Fine Arts (1960–1995)* at the Brno House of Arts, and in 2024, together with Jiří Valoch, Maxera invited us to visit him in his home in Alberndorf, Austria. Decades on, two old friends meet... One had signed up for cooperation with the StB (the State Security), while the other had signed Charter 77 and been forced to emigrate. Despite this, there was no sense of suspicion, but rather a deep and mutual understanding. Through Maxera's recollections, a multi-dimensional image of Jiří's curatorial activities and Moravian unofficial art of the 1970s began to emerge. Maxera worked as a ceramist in Kunštát, Moravia, from 1967. His studio became a meeting place for Prague dissidents in the circle around the band The Plastic People of the Universe, which organized two concerts in Zbraslavce and Letovice in Moravia.²⁹ In 1971, Kunštát hosted another joint event, *Zajíždění bílého pásu* (Driving over the White Strip) by Jan Steklík and František Maxera, which until then had been attributed only to Steklík. Similarly overlooked in the history of action art was *Beer Exhibition*, which Maxera organized in 1973 at the Prague pub U Lojzy.

The renewed friendship with Jiří Valoch eventually led Maxera to donate his ceramic objects from the early 1960s, along with photographic documentation of *Beer Exhibition*, to the Moravian Gallery, and in this way to add another layer of art history to the Valoch Archive and Collection. The forgotten story of the talented ceramist, whose artistic activities had been erased from the cultural map of local unofficial art as a result of his forced emigration, was thus revived. Along with Ondřej Chrobák, we exhibited the works he had donated as part of the permanent exhibition *Art is Here* at the Moravian Gallery in Brno, along with prints and the sculpture *Spoon* by Naděžda Plíšková, who was also a member of the Crusader School of Pure Humor Without Jokes. The latter's work, based on the grotesqueness of the object and a pop-art aesthetic, shares the same art-historical context as Maxera's ceramic objects, anthropomorphically combining themes from the world of animals, people and plants.

In June 2024, along with František Maxera, Jiří, and other members of our families, we put on the event *Zajíždění bílé čáry* (Driving Over the White Line), regarding which there is uncertainty regarding the date, title and co-authorship of František Maxera. The

28 František Maxera, *Paměť národa*, <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/maxera-frantisek-1943> (accessed 13 September 2024).

29 For more details see Ivan M. JIROUS, "Pravdivý příběh Plastic People," *Paternoster: malá revue pro umění a kritiku*, Vol. 1, 1983, No. 3, pp. 36–50.

original event took place in front of the old brewery building in the village of Kunštát in Moravia and used car wheels as a stamp by which to imprint the tire tread on a white strip laid across the road for this purpose.

While the records of the Valoch Archive and Collection at the Moravian Gallery include photographic documentation of the event under the title *Zajíždění bílé čáry*³⁰ (authored by Jan Steklík in 1971), the records of the Moravian Gallery's photography collection register documentation from the same event as *Untitled (Zajíždění bílého pásu)*, author Jan Steklík, dated 1972).³¹ In neither case is the photographer of the event, Jaroslav Myška, mentioned, nor the co-authorship claimed by František Maxera. The latter himself appears in these photographs as the basically invisible driver of the car used (the legendary red Fiat 500 called "Maxes"), which was driven over the white strip, while Jan Steklík determines the direction of travel from the sunroof. The monograph by Jan Steklík, who to this day is recorded as the sole author, is entitled *Zajíždění bílé čáry* (1971).³² On 24 June 2024, in the company of František Maxera and Jiří, we mounted a reconstruction of the event in the Alberndorf wine region. In truth, it was basically a new event but based on the concept of the original event: "the utilization of car tires as a printing stamp."³³ We donated the photo documentation to the Valoch Archive and Collection. We believe that it can add another historical layer that will help us revise details of the date, co-authorship and title of the original work.

This way of viewing the archive corresponds to the way that the archive is defined by Jacques Derrida in his book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.³⁴ According to Derrida, the archive functions similarly to memory. It is a place that creates more than it mechanically preserves and is susceptible to conscious and unconscious transformations of the original meanings into new wholes. It externalizes the mechanism of remembering into the form of a technical medium, thereby weakening the power of death and forgetting. In other words, we are driven to this externalization of the "archive" by the awareness of our own transience and by the desire to have a stake in the future. Derrida's use of the term archive as a metaphor rather than a clearly defined concept leads to a blurring of the boundaries between memory and history, between the private and the public. Performative art then appears as a means of turning our attention towards the dark edges of the archive, to phenomena that conventional archival practice would not deem objects suitable for archiving. Drawing on art practice and re-enactments, rather than archival science and museology, performative art defines new ways of reading history and the related concepts of memory and document.³⁵

30 Jan STEKLÍK, *Zajíždění bílé čáry*, 1971, *Moravská galerie, online collections*, https://sbirky.moravska-galerie.cz/dilo/CZE:MG.JV_2765-6 (accessed 13 September 2024).

31 Jan STEKLÍK, *Untitled (Zajíždění bílého pásu)*, 1972, *Moravská galerie, online collections*, https://sbirky.moravska-galerie.cz/dilo/CZE:MG.MG_13107 (accessed 13 September 2024).

32 Terezie PETIŠKOVÁ – Josef CSERES (eds.), *Jan Steklík*, Brno: Dům umění města Brna 2020.

33 Author's interview with František Maxera, Alberndorf, 24 June 2024.

34 Jacques DERIDDA, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression (Religion and Postmodernism)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998.

35 For more details see Jana PÍSAŘÍKOVÁ, *Archivy a dokumentace performance art. Hledání cesty mezi historií a mýtem* [PhD thesis], Brno: FaVU VUT 2016.

How to keep the archive alive

By handing over his collection and archive to the Moravian Gallery, Jiří surrendered his right to live with what had hitherto been an integral part of his life. Between 2015 and 2017, we spent all of our time together in this institution. However, this intense cooperation came to an end with Jiří's hospitalization. It was around the same time that his collection was recorded in the central register of the state collections of the Czech Republic, and the archive was categorized into photographs, letters, press invitations and personal documents, including Jiří's medical reports from hospitals and the death certificates of his forebears. In the professional terminology of the museum, the archive and the extensive library are designated "auxiliary collection material." Together with the collection, the archive was relocated three times within the buildings of the Moravian Gallery between 2015 and 2024, firstly from the Pražák Palace to the Governor's Palace, thence in 2024 to a newly constructed building housing a brand new depositary. The depositary, which is not accessible to the public, is in the same building as the library and archives of the Moravian Gallery. With this most recent move, the Valoch Archive and Collection lost the visual ability to refer to Jiří himself. At first glance, it no longer differs in any way from the other collections and archives housed in this institution. Its origin is revealed only by the inventory series bearing the initial letters JV. It has thus definitively become the material cultural property of the Moravian Gallery and the state as its founder. I cannot resist pointing to the strange analogy between the gallery and psychiatric hospital. Not even the gallery managed to take into account the particularities of the individual Jiří Valoch from the perspective of a longer time horizon or to take care of his archive and collection in such a way that it would not lose its unique characteristics and context.

I am of the opinion that as far as the institutional storage of art archives and collections is concerned, a reference to the original owner and creator and the retention of some aspect of their authentic form, albeit a form "retold" through the museum, is as crucial as their professional classification and standardized storage in a depositary. In this regard, we might seek inspiration in the collection and archive of the visual poet Carlfriedrich Claus.³⁶ In accordance with the wishes expressed in his will, Claus's estate has become a permanent part of the collections of the Kunstsammlung Chemnitz, while at the same time, the Carlfriedrich Claus Archive Foundation was established on the initiative of Chemnitz donors and supporters of the museum, which is financially involved in the management of his archive. The moment you enter his archive and collection, it is clear where you are.³⁷ Above the door is the artist's name. His works and correspondence are housed in specially designed archival display cases, within which there is a regular turnover of selected works and archival documents. Merely by browsing the archive and collection, you acquire a clear idea of Claus's artistic and organizational agenda, as well as

36 Carlfriedrich Claus (1930–1998), co-founder of the visual poetry movement. His work was based on Lettrism. Translucent papers were marked on both sides in such a way that the layers and networks of text created hints of figures and landscapes. In addition to his work on paper, he worked acoustically, creating "non-semantic sound processes" that he recorded on tape. He was also part of the global conceptual network. *Carlfriedrich Claus Archiv*, Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, <https://www.kunstsammlungen-chemnitz.de/en/haeuser/carlfriedrich-claus-archiv/> (accessed 13 September 2024).

37 I chose this particular archive as an example, because Carlfriedrich Claus was also in contact with Jiří Valoch and their collections share similar materials, replies to each other's letters – they shared a similar lifestyle devoted exclusively to art.

the form and breadth of materials he created and collected through his artistic and organizational activities.

The diminution of the Jiří's significance in the Valoch Archive and Collection cannot be blamed on the Moravian Gallery, whose mission naturally extends beyond caring for the legacy of a single artist, curator and collector. Moreover, there is no foundation or endowment fund to ensure the visibility and sustainability of Jiří's professional legacy. The artist himself did not attach any special conditions to his donation. In this respect, his gesture resembles what Dietmar and Gertraud Bogner did for the Austrian State Museum.³⁸ On the other hand, I believe that the way both the archive and collection are professionally handled in the years to come will be crucial for their success moving forward.

Such curatorial work could set itself the objective of not only using the contents of the collection and archive for the creation of the institution's exhibition narratives, but also keeping this material trace of Jiří's work "alive" in the sense of exploring and developing the social and cultural capital that makes reference to the person of Jiří Valoch and the artistic network of which he was a part. This is not about building a cult, but rather engaging in a critical and scholarly reading of the artist, something that is at present being lost. And yet there are still many themes that it would be suitable to articulate in relation to his archive and collection. One of these that has not yet been publicly voiced is the way that Jiří acquired the contents of his collection and archive, or the "breadth" of his artistic network, regarding which most people haven't a clue.

The term "performing the archive," associated with Simone Osthoff's 2009 publication of the same name, has been adopted in English to describe an expanded model of museum and curatorial practice.³⁹ In her book, Osthoff describes the ontological transformation of the archive from an unchanging repository of documents and artworks into a dynamic and content-generating medium, using the Brazilian conceptual artist Paulo Bruscky's archive as an example. Currently, the expression performing the archive is generally used to refer to the development of complex methods of literary performances, re-enactments, discussions and artistic residencies in archives as tools for preserving and transmitting memory and knowledge. This method of performative archival work draws on conceptual art of the 1970s, above all its ability to act topologically, to make no distinction between the practice of the artist, theorist and curator, and to combine all three into one complex performance of life within art. Jiří Valoch is thus, like Paulo Bruscky, part of the story of global conceptualism. These were artists who lived as much in their texts and art as in their apartments, which they gradually transformed into vast archival and artistic universes. Their work was not built on intellectual and academic speculation and critical distance, but was instead intrinsically linked to their everyday physical existence.

The anthropologist Diana Taylor, who conducts research into indigenous South American ethnicities, has called this type of performative archival and life practice a

38 Since 2007, the Bogners have donated a large part of their collection and archive to Austrian institutions such as the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Landessammlungen Niederösterreich, Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, Wien Museum and Belvedere. Their donation was not conditional upon any processing or presentational requirements. Details available at *Kunstraum Buchberg*, <https://www.kunstraumbuchberg.at/en/about-1585579475220/gertraud-and-dieter-bogner/> (accessed 13 September 2024).

39 Simone OSTHOFF, *Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium*, New York – Dresden: Atropos Press 2009.

“repertoire.” It allows for the hegemony of written documents and artifacts to be weakened in favor of ephemeral strategies aimed at transmitting memory and history. In contrast to conventional curatorial work, in which material artifacts and archival documents become the subject of intellectual speculation and display, her notion of repertoire is based on a physical and collective experience that can be repeated, re-performed and enriched with new layers.⁴⁰ Moreover, in its original meaning, the archive was primarily associated with mnemonic (memory) aids, activities and service, as art historian Rebecca Schneider notes in her essay “Performance Remains.”⁴¹ Performative behavior is not the antithesis of the archive, but its constructive force, which can “actualize” the archive and collection in a way that involves not only preserving the artifacts in their unchanging state, but also understanding and developing them within the context of examining the intangible socio-historical and interpersonal connections enshrined in them.

Conclusion – come down from the ivory tower

My story is perhaps too subjective to draw general conclusions and recommendations regarding the possibilities and forms of care in the context of contemporary art practice. Nevertheless, I will try to summarize a few key outcomes of my “field research.”

I will probably never get my head around the fact that after handing over his collections to the two main collecting institutions of the Czech Republic, Jiří found himself spending a prolonged period of time in a psychiatric hospital without any support. None of the galleries nor any of the collectors to whom he had donated his work helped him resolve his difficult life situation at a time when he himself, with limited capacity, was unable to do so on his own. I believe this is more than systemic failure. It is the result of the fact that neither professionals in the field, nor the founders of collections and galleries, associated caring for art collections and archives with taking an interest in and caring for the artist him or herself. The act of creating professional narratives in the form of exhibitions and the management of collections is often disconnected from social empathy and a natural interest in representatives of the ageing generation of the local art scene. In many cases, this interest somehow only comes after the artist has died and the question arises of how to deal with their legacy.

Having listened to his wishes, I personally took the decision to take care of Jiří. Of course, if I had taken the line that “it’s none of my business,” no one would or could have blamed me. Taking an interest in those who have donated or might in the future make a donation of their artworks and collections is not an obvious element of the professional agenda of an arts institution. It is not equivalent to the entire business of exhibition-making and caring for art. This relates not only to employees of galleries and others involved in the arts. Our society in general has still not fully identified with the slogan “we care, therefore we are.” And yet this is completely self-preserving, not only within the context of our own future, but the future of the creation of art archives and collections. At present, most archives and works only enter state collections after the death of the artist, often in fragmentary form comprising items the artist’s surviving family members were

40 Diana TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham: Duke University Press 2003, p. 15.

41 Rebecca SCHNEIDER, “Performance Remains,” *Performative Research*, Vol. 6, 2001, No. 2, pp. 100–108.

unable to sell off at a tidy profit. Underfunded state galleries and museums generally rely on donations instead of being able to purchase archives and collections during the lifetime of their creators. In short, art museums and galleries should come down from their ivory towers and start paying attention to local scenes and supporting them in a friendly and financial way. This form of support could also work on the basis of pragmatic advice on what to do with an artist's creative legacy in order to help ensure a "contented old age."

The re-enactments I arranged with Jiří Valoch represented for me in my capacity as curator the possibility of operating "in the gap." I believe that such events are a valid method of expanding the repertoire of scholarly documentation activities, while at the same time functioning as a means of caring for the needs of the artist themselves, their archives and collections. Indeed, they help reveal otherwise invisible social and historical contexts that have been basically "rendered invisible" by the process of museum processing. I would like to see the collective re-enactment method, along with lively discussions, meetings and artists' residencies, become part of the institutional repertoire of the Jiří Valoch Archive and Collection at the Moravian Gallery. This would contribute to its development as an open research and artistic platform, accessible not only in digital but physical form to the public, in a way that ideologically identifies with the ecology of the conceptual network of the 1960s and 1970s. An essential feature of this network was the inseparable link between art theory and practice. Critical distance was replaced by a subjectivizing, affective, bodily being with art. The separation of art and life, so crucial to the global conceptualism of the 1970s, would also I believe be a key that would open new strategies for the sensitive treatment of the Jiří Valoch Archive and Collection. I can recommend this strategy as someone who has tested it on myself. It is attested to by my own family life, of which Jiří Valoch has become an integral part.