

Can art change the world?

A Study exploring the role, function and place of art in society

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Fine art

Norwich School of art and design
2007

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by Marcela Tršová

Abstract

Art has been part of human society ever since it's beginning. Its form has been continuously changing and transforming itself throughout the ages. However, its function has been changing also. From its use in ritualistic magic in prehistory to representation of spirituality and finally celebrating the human body and spirit, it has always had an important function in society. This intimate relationship has however begun to change with the onset of Modernism which has alienated and later separated art from society. And due to the certain historical events this has eventually led to the disintegration of values in society. Today, the lack of values is causing a number of fundamental problems in society. There lies the Question: Can this change? Can we save ourselves from ourselves? Can art become part of society again? Can art change the world??

*Fine Art
Norwich School of Art and Design
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Introduction

When I first began to be interested in art, the reason why I wanted to make art was because I wanted to express myself as I felt I had so much to say and I wanted to share with others. I have come a long way since then, however the desire to share my observation and outlook on the world, with others hasn't gone. As an artist it has always been very important for me to understand the reason why I want to make art and where my work stands in the world. In my eyes to create a work of art I have to have a reason or a purpose for creating it as I cannot justify making something for the sake of making it. I feel that the world is so oversaturated with images and objects already that to make more without a valid reason would be a travesty.

Looking back into art history, art could be looked at as a mirror of society as the life of people and important events in history can be clearly tracked in artworks from throughout the ages. There is no doubt that society has a big influence on art. But can art have any influence on important political and social developments in society? To find the answer for this question I am going to analyse two major political and economic systems that has had a decisive effect on the historic developments of society in Europe in the 20th century: Capitalism and Socialism. I am going to analyse, explore and compare their importance in the relation with the developments in the culture. As an example for my analysis I have chose to focus on the developments of art in Czech society in period between the years 1938 – 1989. There are two reasons why I have chosen Czech art. The first is that it is a society whose cultural developments has been repeatedly marked by the by the political events in the society. The second reason is that Czech Republic is the country I was born and grew up in. This fact offers me a great advantage to understand and explore the developments of culture in the relation to the society with an inside point of view of someone, who actually lived through some of the event and changes in its society.

In the first chapter I am going to the root of Modernist thinking and its subsequent influence on the developments in the society and culture. I am also going to look at the two major political systems (Capitalism and Socialism), their origins and the effect, their rise had on the cultural developments and vice versa.

In the second chapter I am going to concentrate on the developments in Czech art during and following World War II as this was the point when the developments in Czech art in the relationship to the society began to differ from the developments in the art and the society in the Western World. For this period I am going to give examples of work of Josef Istler and Vaclav Tikal. I will then analyse the evolution of the relationship between art and society during 1950's (Looking at work of Kveta Valova and Mikolas Medek and the art of Socialist Realism) and 1960's (Adriena Simotova, Karel Malich) escalating in dramatic year in Czech history - 1969 and the aftermath following the events which happened that year.

And finally in the third chapter I am going to explore the years of Normalization and its effect on the on the developments in Czech art. I will give the work of Kveta Valova and the work of Vladimir Janousek as an example to illustrating the atmosphere of this period. . I am also going to describe the situation in Czech art and society during the years building toward the revolution in 1989, which has dramatically cut into the developments in Czech society and its culture (Petr Nikl, Jaroslav Rona). I will also describe the events of the revolution, present a number of examples of posters and describe the important role they played in the revolution.

In this study, although I describe the developments in art and society in a time based succession, it is not my aim to capture all the developments in neither Czech art nor European culture in general. I will be concentrating mainly on examples of the art developments that are in some way linked with the development in the society.

Chapter 1

Roots of Modernism and Capitalism versus Socialism

Until the modern time, art and the artist himself has always had a role in society. The artist reflected the dominant values of his society, and society in turn recognized itself in an art that was expressive of its values. Religion, ritual and art existed primarily to support the social order¹. Historically, this relationship however has changed with the onset of Modernism which begun with Humanism in Renaissance(16th century) and later progressed to the Enlightenment (18th century) which celebrated the human body, education, science and art, after years of repression by the dominating and controlling orthodox church. It was believed that man (not god) is the measure of all things. Everything could be subjected to reason – tradition, custom, history, religion and even art. This was caused by the scientific revolution and its discoveries on which were revealed various scientific truths (Galileo Galilee, Isaac Newton) about nature.² These ‘truths’ contradicted with the conventional belief held by the Church and religion in general. The truth through reason opened new possibilities of new better society for people. It was believed that this truth discovered through reason could free people from the corrupt institution such as the Church and the Monarchy whose misguided traditional thinking has kept people in ignorance, superstition and under control. The concept of individual freedom became central to the vision of a new society.³ In art, the inspiration was drawn from the classical art of ancient Greece and Rome. It was believed that the Ancient world with its democratic principles in government and society had achieved a kind of perfection, an ideal that came close to 18th century ideals of truth.⁴

However as a result of the scientific and technology discoveries the old feudal order was beginning to be replaced by Capitalism which caused some dramatic changes in the structure of societies all over Europe. In art, this was also reflected in the developments of art and as opposed to the ancient art inspired by perfection, a new artistic movement called Romanticism was formed. The Romanticists still embraced

¹ Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed*(London: Thames &Hudson,1984), p. 30

² Professor L. C. E. Witcombe, *ART & ARTISTS: the Roots of Modernism*, First part of five-part essay on Modernism p.2

<http://www.arthistory.sbc.edu/artartists/modernism.html>

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁴ *Ibid.*, P.6

the concept of freedom of an individual but they believed in subjective sensibility, emotion and imagination and that it should not be subjected to reason. They felt that the reason stifled imagination and without imagination no progress would be made.⁵ The Romantic Movement also saw the artist as an outsider, on the edge of society exploring his own imagination, emotions and feelings as they did not believe in god any more and were disillusioned with corrupt society, they distanced themselves from any responsibility to society and the world and tried to find a refuge and the true meaning of life within themselves. The early ideals of Enlightenment (reason to everything, refusal of organised religion) and Romanticism (the freedom of expression of oneself, withdrawal from the society) gave rise to the avant-garde movement which has been explored by numerous artistic styles (impressionism, expressionism, cubism, surrealism, fauvism ect) throughout the end of 19th and first half of 20th century. During this period a new revolutionary form of art has emerged – abstract art.

To understand the full impact that the emergence of abstract art had on the role of art in the society, we have to summarize what happened in relationship of art and society up to this point. Beginning from the Humanism in which the art begun to portray and glorify the human body and spirit (not just god), escalating with the onset of the Enlightenment in which it turned its back on the religious belief and celebrated human spirit and perfection, reason and scientific progress. When it got to Romanticism in 19th century, the scientific and industrial revolution and progress has revealed its negative sides such as poverty and pollution of the environment and nature. The Romanticist artists with no religious belief to turn to and disillusionment with the new society have turned inward and have taken refuge in portraying nature and his relationship to it. The avant-garde movements of the 20th century built on the idea of turning inward and carried on with the search for a valid meaning, which they could no longer be found in the society, within themselves. This attitude has eventually developed into most artists of early 20th century into thinking, that a work of art was an independent world of pure creation which had its own, essentially spiritual, essence. The artist saw himself as a kind of priest who divined the interior

⁵ Ibid. , p. 6

soul or a spirit.⁶ One of the leading founders of abstract art Russian artist Kazimir Malevich pointed out:

'Art no longer cares to serve the state or religion. It no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners; it wants to have nothing to do with the object as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without things.'⁷

From what Malevich says we can clearly see that the rise of abstract art was an influential point in the question of where art stands in society.

Despite the fact that the abstract artists no longer wanted to serve to society in a formal way, they still believed that there's other than just an aesthetic purpose to their art. This belief was maintained amongst others by the Abstract expressionists. One of the main representatives of Abstract Expressionism Mark Rothko stated:

'I'm not interested in expressing of colour or form to anything else. I'm interested in expressing in basic human emotions...And the fact that a lot people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows...they are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.'⁸

However the Abstract Expressionism movement was the last group of artists to prevail the conviction that there could be any other than aesthetic purpose in art. This shift in opinion came about as result of the aftermath of the World War II as the core Modernist belief in progress technology, and the whole idea that art and education makes better people has diminished. The Germans after all were civilised people who actively participated in the Modernist movement from its beginning. Having rejected the past many years ago (Enlightenment – rejection of god and Monarchy) and with the disappointment and disillusionment over the new 'civilised and progressive' society which has killed masses of people, there was no hope for the future. Artists no longer believed their art could have any other than aesthetic effect on people. In the visible distress they turned to the present and focused on contemporary culture.⁹

⁶ Suzy Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed*, page 21

⁷ Kazimir Malevich cited in *Ibid.*, p. 21

⁸ Mark Rothko cited in *Ibid.*, p. 22

⁹ Professor Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, *ART & ARTISTS: Modernism and Postmodernism*, Fourth part of five part essay on Modernism, p. 4

There was no more idealism, the main focus was the reality of the upcoming consumer society. Artistic styles such as Pop Art and Existential Art reflect this period. During the 1960' and 1970's abstract art continued to occur, however it has been stripped of any spiritual meaning or aim to change anything or anybody. It was created for purely aesthetic purposes only. Clement Greenberg who was the key figure of the new stylistic movement – Post Painterly abstraction, in particular rejected the notion that there is a higher purpose to art, or any ‘spiritual’ point to its production:

‘Art only does what it does: its effect is limited and small. It is there to be aesthetically ‘good.’”¹⁰

We could say that this point has marked a complete change in the relationship of art towards society. The very notion of the way artists saw themselves in the relation to the society has changed quite dramatically. The position of art in the society had come around full circle. At the beginning, the modernist movement rejected organised religion and monarchy in a hope of creating a new and better society based on the truth and individual freedom. When the new society didn't turned out to be as perfect as the philosophers envisaged to do so and had revealed its negative sides, the artists rejected the society, choosing to live on the verge of it and exploring their individual self, trying to find a meaning within themselves and claiming that art does not need to portrait society or religion and can exist on its own basis and therefore, refusing an active role in the society. And finally, disillusioned with the human kind and the atrocities which it is capable of, despite of a great education and aesthetic values, the artists had given up to attach any higher purpose to their art completely. The only widely accepted purpose art had in a capitalist consumer society since then, has been an aesthetic one.

Nevertheless, over the years there have been attempts to shift the passive role of art in the western society by various activists art movements (Conceptual Art, Body Art, Performance Art) which have tried to engaged the public and communicate a variety of social issues. These movements aspired to move away form the purely aesthetic value of art and tried to re-engage the aim of art with the society and its issues. These movements may have made big changes in the developments of art in the artistic

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg cited in Suzy Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed*, p. 22

community, they have however made a little difference in the way people perceived art outside it. It is just like the writer and art critic Peter Fuller claims:

‘...like a freedom of madman and the insane; they can do what they like because whatever they do has no effect at all...they have every freedom except one that matters: freedom to act socially.’¹¹

I believe the current apathetic situation in visual art in western society happened as a result of Modernism as although the notion of Modernism has given the artists freedom to express themselves freely without the pressure to satisfy the demands of the Church, Monarch or the compulsory portrayal of the society it has also diminished its power to have any significant influence in making any difference in the society, which it enjoyed prior to the rise of Modernism. Although the artists had originally chosen to place themselves outside the society in the protest against it, in the long run it has backfired, as someone who is outside the community cannot much influence those who are inside it. In a contemporary western society, consumer culture which values material wealth above all, the notion of creating meaningless and purely aesthetic ‘art for art’s sake’ has turned art into nothing but a commodity. The exclusion of oneself to the outside of society and creating meaningless works of art for the sake of making them in the protest of materialism had not made the society a better place. The only result of the modernist ideals was the alienation of art from society and the loss of its power to make any difference in its developments. In the western culture art based on individual expression no longer carries the power to change anything because contemporary society and its people haven’t got any belief in its power.

As opposed to Capitalism, under which Modernism and the Avant-garde movement raised, an ideology that has had an important effect on the history and social structure in Europe, was formed by the German philosophers Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895). Their ideology was based on the criticism towards capitalist society and although Marx acknowledged the capability of Capitalism to reinvent itself throughout the history, he claimed that capitalism was prone to periodic crisis during which the profit rate fall and the economy go into depression followed

¹¹ Peter Fuller cited in Suzi Gablik, *Has modernism failed*, p. 3

by recession in order to grow again.¹² He predicted that repeat cycle of growth, collapse and growth would eventually lead to severe economic crisis. He also held an opinion that the long term consequence of this process was the inevitable enrichment and empowerment of the capitalist class and the impoverishment of the proletariat (working class).¹³ He trusted that if the proletariat came in to power over the means of production, they would encourage a formation of system that, in the case of economic crisis would support everyone equally. He envisaged a society that would be run and ruled by people who would hold an equal place in the society. He celebrated a classless socialist society in which each member of the society would work and give their labour in order to benefit the whole society and not just his individual self. He anticipated that the ruling class wouldn't give up the power without a struggle and foreseen that a violent revolution would be needed in order to install the change. Marx foreboded:

'Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.'¹⁴

The instability caused by World War I has given the opportunity for the Marxist ideals to come in to practice as the Russian revolution in 1917 gave rise to new phenomenon in the history – Communist state and Socialist society. However by this time the original Marxist ideals have been misinterpreted and manipulated and later abused by his followers. The originally 'transitional' period of revolutionary dictatorship of proletariat has been transformed into 'indefinite' dictatorship of the centrally organized Communist Party and its leaders.

However, how does Marxist economic and political ideology relate to the relationship of art and society? The Marxist ideology came to life around the same time as the rise of avant-garde. It was at the end of the 19th century with the industrial revolution at its height, when the cultural elite of Europe have grown increasingly unhappy with what was happening in the society. Initially the avant-garde artists were

¹² Shlomo Avinery, *The social and Political Thought on Marx*(Cambridge, 1968), p, 9

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx, 17/01/2007

¹³ Ibid., p10

¹⁴ Karl Marx, cited in Ibid., p. 10

in great support of the Marxist philosophy and believed that the overthrow of the capitalism and the rule of the people would support and ensure the freedom of artistic expression. They were very enthusiastic and actively participated in the process of installing of the new establishment (the revolution) and used visual art as the means to do so (propaganda). However, after the new socialist states were formed and the original idea of Marxism manipulated and twisted by its new dictatorial leaders (Lenin, Stalin, Gotwald) the idea of free expression in the socialists' state was no longer valid. Art and culture on the whole, became ideologically controlled and manipulated. Art was merely seen as useful tool that could be use to celebrate and promote the socialist ideals. However it was also perceived as a powerful weapon that if not controlled and regulated could cause a great threat to the new society. After all, it was the artists and writers who supported the propaganda, who has helped to install the new system. However the avant-garde movement which was based on the freedom of an individual and the right of the self expression soon became very unsuitable. Its focus on individuality was seen as a symbol of Capitalism and a potential threat to a new society based on collectivism. Socialist realism¹⁵ - a new purposeful figurative form of art which celebrated the socialist achievements of the communist party and its leaders was promoted and the avant-garde and abstract art was forbidden and the artists prosecuted. The art scene became controlled and censored by the government and only the official form of art was allowed to be exhibited.

Art can be used as a very powerful tool in influencing people and putting one's ideals across.¹⁶ This fact was abused by the communist government of the Socialist states and for a while the official art was very effective and played a very vital role in building a new society. However, when the citizens of the communist run countries realised that instead of living in democratic society ruled by its people, they are living in totalitarian dictatorship, the optimism for the future portrayed by the official art has become very false. As a result of that in the totalitarian society of the communist state art existed, but to its people it meant nothing but a bitter reminder of a great betrayal. By being controlled and censored art has lost its active role in the society and ultimately the power to effect people.

¹⁶ Documentary series - How art made the world(BBC Worldwide ltd, 2005)

Chapter 2

War tragedy, October 1948, Prague Spring in 1968

Although having just described and analysed the concepts of two most influential ideologies that have both tried and failed to transform their ideals into a reality and to make society a better world, I still have a hope for the future and I believe there is a way forward. Perhaps the best way to find a new direction could be to analyse the developments of art and culture of a society that has endured and experienced the domination of both ideologies. A society, which has also lived through the failure of both ideologies.

To fully understand Czech art of the second half of 20th century one must gather what was happening in the Czech society, as these two are irrevocably connected. As in the rest of Europe, following the horrific events of World War II, Czech artists too, were disillusioned by the principles of modernism and the immediate post-war years were characterised by the Existentialist movement. However in Czech lands, the Existentialist notion began to resurface already during the Nazi occupation in 1938, followed by the onset of World War II. During the occupation the prior Modernist avant-garde tendencies became illegal as the very notion of Modernism – the individual freedom of expression, became a threat to Hitler's Dictatorship. Hitler, similarly to Stalin, believed art and culture was a great weapon and its control was as important as that of the Economy.¹⁷

¹⁷ David Elliot in David Britt, ed., *Art and Power – Europe under dictators 1930 - 45* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995), p. 33



Fig. 1. Josef Istler, Civilizace(Civilization), 1944, oil on canvas, 58 x 63cm

Nevertheless, the gap caused by the illegality of the avant-garde movements was soon filled by young generation of artist (groups – Sedm v rijnu, Skupina 42, Skupina Ra), who refused and negated the modernist notion of the previous generations. In the repressive atmosphere during the occupation which was accompanied by the loss of national and social identity, they turned their focus to the basic attributes of humanity and the so called ‘naked man’ who was torn out of the social connections and focused mainly on the character change instead of the social change.¹⁸ The main subject of war time movements was man captured in the everyday life of his existence as well as in the critical moments of his fate (although, emotionally charged landscape and still life appear also). Overall, although these artistic groups were stylistically influenced by the pre-war avant-garde (especially surrealism), they were primarily interested in

¹⁸ Vlastimil Tetiva, Ceske Umeni XX. Stoleti / 1940 – 1970(Hluboka nad Vltavou:Alsova jihoceska galerie,2006) p. 9

the expression of the human feelings and emotions on the contrary with the analytical solutions and experiments of the pre-war avant-garde. As an example of this period could serve one of the main representatives of the artistic group Skupina Ra, Josef Istler. In his work titled *Civilizace (Civilisation)*, 1944(Fig. 1), he uses scenic lighting and the placement of the abstracted figures in an empty, hollow space, with low horizon (surrealist influence) to express his real feelings of the war traumas, anxiety and horror.

Following the new found freedom at the end of the war, which marked the end of the isolation from the rest of the world, Czech artists were once more able to freely reflect on the society. The simmering focus on the 'naked man' during the war, crystallised into a full blown Existentialism and the belief that man is alone in the world without any pre-existing moral religious systems to guide him. On one hand he is forced to realisation of his solitariness, of the futility and absurdity of existence, but on the other hand he has a freedom to define himself in every action.¹⁹ It enabled artists and people to express and deal with the traumatic experiences and at the same time to hold on to a brink of hope for the future. Great example of the immediate post-war period could be the work of Vaclav Tikal. In his paintings *Lidice II.*, 1945 (Fig. 2)²⁰ and *Rabbi Leow (In memory of the tortured)*, 1946(Fig.3) he tries to come to terms with the individual helplessness in face of horrific massacres of the war. In the both paintings we can still see the significant influence of the surrealism,

¹⁹ Amy Dempsey, *Styles Schools and Movements*(London: Thames&Hudson ltd, 2002), p. 176

²⁰ Lidice – a former village in Czech Republic destroyed by the Nazis as an answer to the assignation of the protectorate councillor Reinhard . Heydrich . in 1942. All the men of the village were shot and the women and children sent to concentration camp. The village was then grounded to nothing but dust.



Fig. 2. Vaclav Tikal, Lidice II., 1945, oil on canvas, 80 x 100cm

however the content deals very much with the existential issues. In his work he commemorates the events that occurred during the war with which he tries to reconcile with in a desperate urge to make sense of it.

Nevertheless this new found freedom of expression and spontaneous effort to reconnect with the rest of the creative world was short lived following the events of February 1948 when the Communist party took the lead of the country. The new political system had a profound effect on the social structure of Czechoslovakia.²¹ Inspired by the Soviet model, culture was to play a vital role in reformation of the new society. The pre-war surrealism and post-war developments influenced by it were banned and considered a symbol of capitalist bourgeois.

²¹ Karel Pacner, *Osudove Okamziky Ceskoslovenska*(Praha: Albatros nakladatelstvi, 2001), p. 292



Fig. 3. Vaclav Tikal, Rabbi Loew(In memory of the tortured), 1946, oil on canvas, 73 x 60cm

The new cultural politics under the communist leadership orientated on the heritage of the classical national art, revolutionary Hussite's movement, Czech National renaissance and the celebration of the Labour's movement. One of the leading figures of the socialist realism Vladimir Solta described it as:

‘The art of Socialist realism should portray the reality in its revolutionary evolution, it should be true and realistic, mercilessly critical towards events in the society, but at the same time show the future in the best qualities of a man, whom it generalise and celebrate.’²²

However this new officially preferred form of art was not only seen as a common theory of an artistic movement, it was perceived as a specific program and the only aesthetic norm allowed to be publicly exhibited.²³ This politically controlled schematic regulation of the culture had catastrophic effects on art developments. It wasn’t the artistic form of realism as described by Vladimir Solta it was more the way it was used by the doctrine and dictate of the system that made the very idea of ‘true portrayal of reality’ absurd. As Vlastimil Tetiva notes:

‘Realism wasn’t guilty by the fact that it was realistic, but because it took reality only in the form of observed objects rather than like a human creative activity, not subjectively, and it ignored psychic life as a reality. In art that is subordinated to a specific model and dictate, the differentiation of realism from naturalism has the sense, that as naturalistic it is rejected such description of life, which maybe true in its nature but disclaims the ‘official truth’.”²⁴

In retrospect the official art of this period could be seen as the epitome of describing the communist government. The tragic and paradoxical thing about the Socialist realism was that despite claiming that it portrayed the true reality it was effectively doing the exact opposite. It did not portray the true reality but it was used as an effective tool by the communist government to portray the ideologically indoctrinated reality rather than the true reality (Fig. 4, Fig. 5).

²² Vladimir Solta, cited in Vlastimil Tetiva, *Ceske Umeni XX. Stoleti(Hluboka nad Vltovou: Alsova jihoceska galerie, 2006)*, p. 83

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 83

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84



Fig. 4. Kolektiv CSC: Cumpelik, Sochor, Cermakova , 'Vam podekovani a lasku Vam ' ('Many thanks and love'), date unknown



Fig. 5. Druzba Ceskoslovenske a Sovetske armady(the Union of Czechoslovak nad Soviet Armadas), author and date unknown

The political control and the unilateral orientation of the arts divided artists into three major groups. The first group of artists fully accepted and celebrated the Socialist Realism program and used it to celebrate the reality of the new socialist society and its heroes ect. The second group compromised and while using the S. Realism principles tried to communicate, explore and reflect on the more serious issues and be more true to themselves in their work. And the third group which rejected the dictated program altogether carried on developing their pre-war or wartime work. This however came at price as they virtually lived in a creative isolation from the rest of the world and could not exhibit publicly. And not only that, as a result of rebelling against the official systematic program they were seen as a threat to the state and were prosecuted. As Marta Sylvestrova describes:

'Independent art provoked hate, repression and disfavour from the powers that be. 'Nearer to the people', was an empty slogan, proclaiming socialist realism as the only appropriate art style

for socialist society. The wall of Marxist ideology separated official art from an alternative underground culture and cut the roots of natural historical evolution.'²⁵

Many artists of this group saw the new situation of the totalitarian Socialist regime as a continuation of the Nazi occupation and a new threat to a national existence. Also under the pressure of the ideologically formed culture politics even the unofficial art had to be depoliticised to avoid persecution.²⁶ In their isolation and desperate effort to express themselves the artists looked for their inspiration in the historically distant (and therefore politically neutral) tradition of Czech culture. They took refuge in the spirituality of the gothic style, dramatic pathos of the Baroque and the mysterious, magic atmosphere of Prague under Rudolph II. and in particular the absurd labyrinth world of Franz Kafka. This was also the very point when due to the direct effect of the political climate in the society, the developments art of the Eastern Europe begun to take a very different direction to those in the West. As Jaroslav Anderle explains:

'While post war democracies allowed artists to re-examine their own experience and to continue to develop their views in constant dialogue with the past, the present and the future, totalitarian regimes prevented this vital exchange, trapping individuals in an artificial and historical system.'²⁷

The tension, frustration and conflict in the society during this period are very well reflected in the early work of Mikolas Medek. His work of this period is characterised by a figures placed in an empty subjective and emotionally charged space. In the painting *Hadka(Argument)*, 1956-57(Fig.6) the subtle colours and the emptiness of the background contrast dramatically with the severe contours of the figures creating a certain tension in the painting. The tension is emphasised by the composition of the two figures which point towards each other in a confrontational manner. The tension escalates even more with the transformation of the figures' fingers and hair into sharp thorns and razor blades.

²⁵ Marta Sylvestrova, *Invisible Walls*, J. Aulich and T. Wilcox, ed., *Europe Without Walls – Art, Posters and revolution 1989 – 93*(Manchester: Manchester City Art galleries, 1993)p. 110

²⁶ Jiri Sevcik, *Strategies for change*, *Passage Europe catalogue*(Milan:5 Continents Editions slr., 2004), p. 76

²⁷ Jaroslav Anderle cited in Marta Sylvestrova, *Invisible Walls*, J. Aulich and T. Wilcox, ed., *Europe without Walls– Art posters and revolutions 1989 -1993*(Manchester: Manchester City Art galleries, 1993)



Fig. 6. Mikolas Medek, *Hadka (Argument)*, 1956 - 57, oil on canvas, 134 x 180 cm

To summarize, the period following the revolutionary year 1948 and the political and social changes that it brought has had a massive effect on the developments in the Czech art. It was not only the forcibly installed one sided cultural program but also the physical and creative isolation from the rest of the world that has brought on a crisis in the Czech art and its relationship towards the society. The combination of the two has brought any further progressive developments to a standstill because the socially orientated, ideologically controlled official art has stopped to have any effect on people as it did not reflect their true feelings and the work of the underground artists who did try to reflect on society and create freely and spontaneously but could not show their work to the public. As a result, the attempt to replace the modern art by the Socialist Realism proved to be unsuccessful and in January 1956 the conference of the Czechoslovakian artists suggested a revision of the Socialist realism.²⁸ In October 1956 the revision was agreed by leadership of League of Czechoslovakian

²⁸ Vlastimil Tetiva, *Ceske Umeni XX. Stoleti* (Hluboka nad Vltavou: Alsova jihoceska galerie, 2006). p.85

visual artists (officially governed). This revision resulted in easing of the strict cultural politics and allowed artists to form creatively experimental groups (Maj, Trasa, Krizovatka, and UB 12). This however came under a condition that the artists would continue to support the building of socialism. From this point artists were allowed to create freely (no stylistic restriction) as long as they didn't oppose the system in any way. Also, art continued to be censored by the government officials. While this reform enabled artists to develop stylistically, it continued to force them to compromise in the choice of the content in their work. The relationship of the art and society has become somehow twisted as although the art was allowed to experiment and develop in its form it was not allowed to express freely in its content. In order to be publicly recognized and exhibited the artist had to either distance themselves from the contemporary society and its issues or express their feelings in hidden metaphors. The continuously tense relationship between the artists and the social regime of this period resulted in many artists to turn inwardly. This inward turn divided Czech art into two major directions which are both characterised by the underlining existential thought.

The first direction was represented by groups such as Trasa, Maj, and UB 12. Overall all these groups had a strong humanistic undertone and celebrated the victory of human spirit over matter. There was a belief that art could become 'a planetary phenomenon and the new universal language.'²⁹ As an example of this humanistic orientated tendencies could serve the work of Kveta Valova. In her work she explored the dramatic moment of man's clash with matter and his fatal struggle with external and internal forces.³⁰ In her early painting *Zena a Chleb (Woman and Bread)*, 1958 (Fig. 7) this is manifested by use of the dark monochrome earthy colours and the exaggerated deformation of the women's hands as if to symbolize the everyday struggle of life. Although the works of K. Valova fulfilled the requirements of the official art of the Social Realism, we can find a great effort for an authentic expression in her work.

²⁹ Pavla Pecinkova, *Czech contemporary painting* (Reading: STBS Ltd., 1993), p. 8

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194

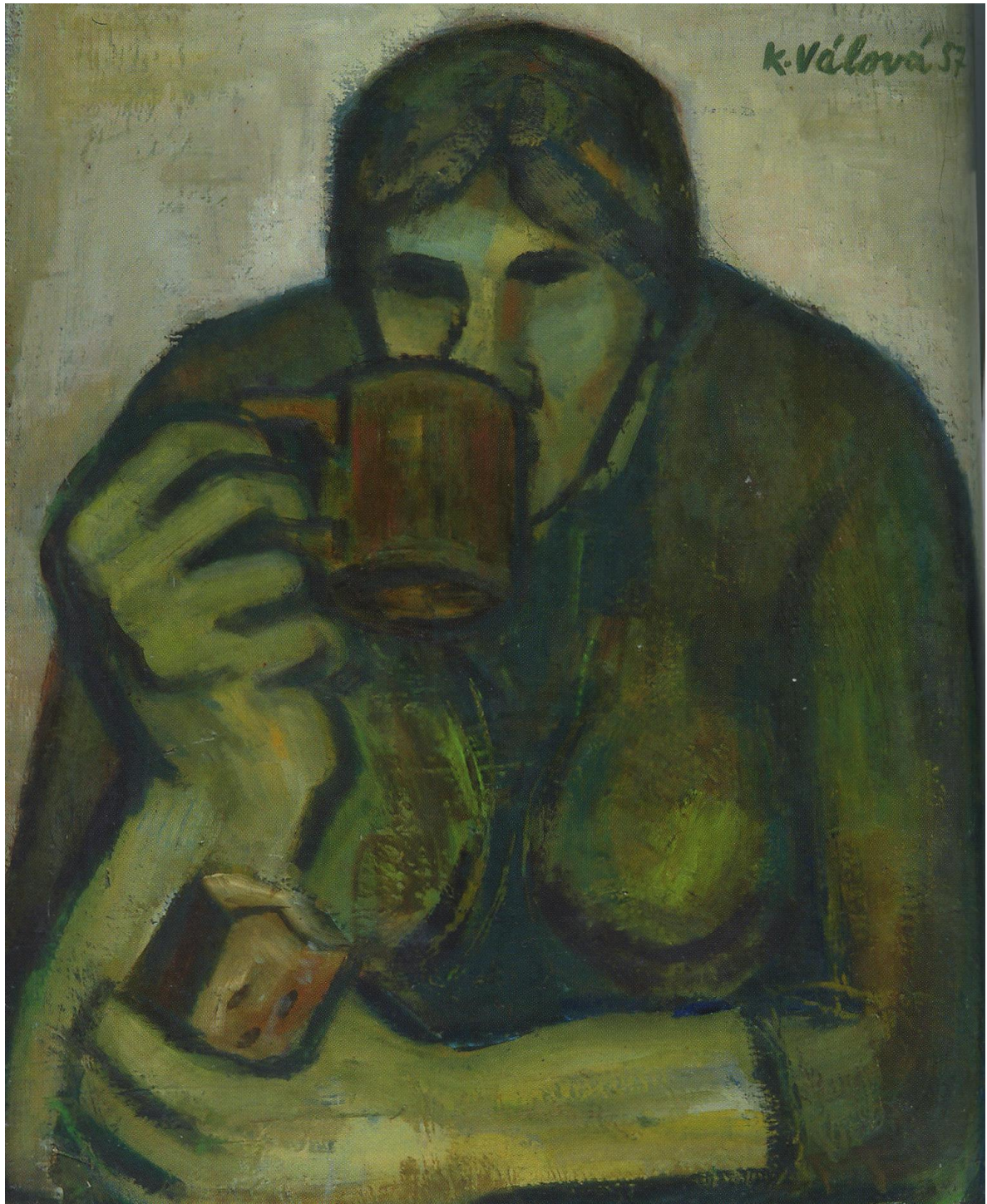


Fig. 7. Kvetta Valova, Zena a Chleb (Woman and Bread), 1957, oil on canvas, 93.5 x 73 cm

The second movement was less optimistic in their relationship towards their situation and far more radical in their approach. They were anti-traditional and anti-aesthetic. In their work they also exercised nonconformity, authenticity of expression and freedom of imagination. Its activities ignored the boundaries of artistic and social standards so resolutely that it was officially unacceptable even in the atmosphere of

the political thaw at the beginning of 1960s.³¹ Stylistically, the experimental art of this group build on the roots of surrealism and the distress, grief and despair of the existential thought, their work has developed into an emotionally charged abstract form – their style is often called the Czech Art Informel. As one of the main representatives of these developments is the work of Mikolas Medek. In his work of this period Medek has progressed from the figurative, anxious and intense scenes with an undertone of aggression of his period early work, onto more abstract emotionally suggestive densely coloured planes. In his new work of the early 1960' he reduced the body of the figures into geometric shapes (square, rectangles and ovals). Eventually the surface of the body filled the whole area of the painting, the painting itself becoming the surface of the body. The gradual abstraction and generalisation of the figure was Medek's way of merging of the existential with the spiritual.³² A painting titled *Oslava 21 870 červenych cm2* (Celebration of 21 870 red cm2), 1962(Fig. 8) is a typical example of Medek's work of this period. In this work he explores the relationship of the title and the actual painting. By dividing its surface into thousands of cm, he compels one to look into the most intimate depths of the picture and get lost in it. The title, composition and the use of deep colours evokes the feelings of physiological decay and the fear from exposed tissues. Overall it incites reflection, however this contemplation has got an undertone of violence which ignites the fear and stimulates the feeling of metaphysical anxiety.

During the course of the 1960s the political control of the culture began to alleviate. This was partly caused by the criticism of Stalin in USSR but mainly by the realisation that that it was not possible to maintain the centralised control over the economy in the long run. There was a general agreement that the economy needs to be reformed. In 1963, the discussions begun on the role of the market in socialism. At the beginning of January 1968 these discussions culminated in the direct criticism of the leadership of the communist party. As a result Alexander Dubcek was elected the party's leader and he was able to quickly gain the support of the vast majority of the people for reforming the society. The principles of democratic plurality began to be slowly renewed in Czechoslovakia.³³ The increasingly liberal atmosphere in the society was reflected in the culture also. A major difference in the development in art

³¹ Ibid., p 7

³² Ibid., p. 94

³³ Special Issue of *Welcome to the Heart of Europe Magazine – Bohemia picta*, Review of the Czech Republic, Jaroslav Panek, ed.(Pardubice:Theo Publishing, 2000), p. 33

was the end of the isolation from the rest of the world. The ideas of Pop Art(Fig. 9), Kinetics(Fig.10), Performance art, Fluxus art and others begun to leak into the Czech Art. The artists quickly absorbed these ideas and begun to explore them in their work. A new found optimism and a sense of freedom brought on by the changes in the society altered the perspective of the artists and it reflected in their work.



Fig. 8 Mikolas Medek, Oslava 21 870 cervenych cm² (Celebration of 21 870 Of red cm²), combination technique on canvas, 162 x 135 cm

In 1968 a large exhibition of contemporary Czech art was organised under the heading of New Sensitivity, the catalogue which was filled with a great optimism:

'The world we live in , formed by human brains and hands, which was the object of disgust and repugnance to whole generations of romantic poets, is today finally accepted again by majority of contemporary artists as a positive reality. Thus after decades of dominance by the philosophy of alienation and anxiety, the concepts of hope and confidence in the meaning of human existence are becoming topical again, projected onto a background of the new humanism which is fundamentally different from the old metaphysical conceptions...'³⁴



Fig. 9. Rudolf Nemeč, Rozhovor (Conversation), 1967, oil on canvas, 135 x 150 cm

³⁴ Cited in Pavla Pecinkova, Contemporary Czech Painting, p. 10



Fig. 10. Karel Malich, Kruhova plastika (Circular sculpture), 1966, aluminium, sand, 100 x 100cm

Alongside the developments inspired by the world movements, this new found optimism and renewed positive belief in mankind brought on by the events of Prague Spring³⁵, has brought a new figurative trend (Fig. 11) encouraging individualism as opposed to the uniformity of ideas and pessimism of the previous abstract experimentation. The New Figuration embraced the increasing freedom of expression and was thought to express and challenged the social consciousness of the public.

Tragically, this new found optimism in the arts and the society was destined to be short lived as once again, the political events in the society has had decisive effect on the cultural developments. On the night August 21 1968 the reformation of the Czech art and the society was brutally ended by the invasion of 600, 000 soldiers of Warsaw Pact Armies. This happened as a result of the new economic reforms which have run into opposition with the interests of USSR and other states in the Eastern Bloc. The occupation aimed to suppress ‘the right-wing counter-revolution and was justified with the slogan: ‘the joint defence of socialism.’³⁶ The occupation came as a big shock to Czechoslovak people. Nevertheless they did not accept the occupation. And in November 1968 the university students went on strike. They were however brutally suppressed by the troops of People’s Militia and it did not bring any changes. In January 1969 the self immolation of student Jan Palach was a pure act of

³⁵ Wikipeda. cz

³⁶ Cited in special issue of The heart of Europe magazine(Pardubice: Theo Publishing(CZ), 2000), p. 33

desperation. In April 1969 Alexander Dubcek was replaced as a head of communist party by Gustav Husak, who quickly begun to the process of Normalization³⁷ .



Fig. 11. Adriana Simotova, *Obnazovani (Stripping)*, 1968, oil on board, 122.5 x 122 cm

³⁷ Normalisation – term describing a period in between years 1969 – 89, after the invasion of the soviet troops into Czechoslovakia and followed up by the rebuilding the socialistic society

Chapter 3

From Normalization to the 'Velvet Revolution'

The aftermath of the invasion and the onset of Normalization had a tragic impact on the Czech society and its cultural scene. The tragic events of the year 1968 caused the disintegration of values in the society as well as in the arts. The sudden end of optimistic hype of the liberal and progressive 1960s caused by the invasion, followed by the quick restoration of the totalitarian leadership, has made people feeling shocked, helpless, hopeless and eventually resigned to the situation. People lost any interest in social problems and retreated into their private life, focusing on family life and hobbies. In their disillusionment, although they didn't agree with the totalitarian government they had no more energy to actively fight and resist the system. The inner conflict was reflected in the 'double standard behaviour', when people behaved differently in private and in public – this 'double standard behaviour is reflected in the culture in the form of 'second culture'.

The artists have once more fallen into a forced isolation. All the mass media and the forms of publishing came under the official control and censorship, thus preventing any spontaneous means to reach the wide public. Under the Normalization's doctrine the only accepted art was once again only the art that served in the promoting and celebrating the Communist Party. The controlling apparatus of the Communist leadership of 1970s became even more vicious and manipulative than the one in the 1950s. In an anxious awareness of its fragility it became more vicious and vindictive. The officials of the totalitarian government were in constant pursuit of anyone who seemed to be in opposition and also anyone who didn't succumb to its requirements. In their manipulative nature they no longer prosecuted only the 'guilty' individuals but also penalised their families and friends. Artists, writers and intellectuals were on the front line of this pursuit as they were seen as a potential threat of the stability of the system. The new manipulative way of control made many artists to lower to a self-censorship of their work as they were painfully aware that the consequences of their actions would not only apply to them but also to anyone close to them (family, friends).

The dramatic shift in the society and its values was reflected by general resignation, demoralisation and scepticism.³⁸ The optimistic ideals of new humanism and the renewed belief in the strengths of the human spirit became absurd and irrelevant in the new situation. Many artist and leading figures of Czech culture could not succumb to the new situation and emigrated. The rest once again went back to the isolation of their studios and retreated from the public life. As Pavla Pecinkova explains:

'Utopian hopes soon faded when it became clear that the reformed communists had lost everything and that there would be no assistance coming neither from the outside nor from above. The development of Czech art, so recently hopeful and dynamic, was stifled by the loss of inner energy, a lack of communication and by isolation from the outside world.'³⁹

As a reaction the artist has once more turned inward in the world of symbols metaphors and hidden meanings. The progressive ideas and developments which came from the west became irrelevant under the new circumstances. The one form out of the developments of the 1960s that managed to prevail and reflect the new conditions in the society was the New Figuration. The content in the work however has changed. It no longer celebrated the human spirit but it has returned to the existential feeling and agony of the presence. The trauma and pain of the period is reflected in the 1970's work of Kveta Valova – Vykrik (Outcry), 1970(Fig. 12).

As a second example of the conceptually reformed New Figuration could serve the work of sculptor and mix media artist Vladimir Janousek. In his work created during the 1970s and early 1980s we can clearly see the existential tension and frustration with ones situation. The collage titled Ptaci nad mestem(The birds above the city), 1981(Fig 13) could be seen as a metaphor of the frustration and feeling of being out of control that many people felt following the sudden end of the happiness and euphoria of the Prague Spring. It pictures a torso of a bandaged (= emotionally wounded) figure falling into emptiness of brown mass (= out of control, no future).

³⁸ P. Pecinkova, *Contemporary Czech painting*, p. 10

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.10, 11



Fig. 12. Kveta Valova, Vykrik(Outcry), 1979 -80, oil on canvas, 162 x150 cm



Fig. 13. Vladimir Janousek, Ptaci nad mestem(The birds above the city), 1981

In his sculpture called Aseptické odnetí ruky (Aseptic removal of the hand), 1984 (Fig. 14), he again expresses himself through metaphor (this time a bit more explicit) in which the oversized threatening scissors cutting the hand of the figure, metaphorically represent the power of the totalitarian system cutting one's freedom.



Fig. 14. Vladimír Janoušek, *Aseptic removal of the hand* (Aseptic removal of the hand), 1981

Nevertheless the New Figuration as well as other of the artistic forms and styles that didn't submit to the renewed communist ideology fell deep into the underground of society, forming a so called 'second culture' which offered artists salvation in search of a different life. A culture formed to design to change of society, which would serve as tool of the existential revolution. In the need to disguise the real content of their work the underground artist looked for their inspiration to the work of the underground art of the 1950s, Czech Art Informel, mystical text and psychedelic

music.⁴⁰ One of the leading founding figures of the 'second culture' Ivan M. Jirous describes the Czech underground as:

'The aim of underground culture in our culture is the creation of a second culture – culture which will be totally independent of the official communication channel and social recognition as well as the hierarchy of values powered by the establishment: - a culture whose goal is not to destroy the establishment because to do so would be to run into the arms of the captor. Instead, a culture that frees those who want to joint it of scepticism that there's no way to do anything and shows them that there's plenty to do if those who do it want little for themselves and more for others. '

From Jirous's words we can gather that although the reaction of the artists to the new political system was to distance themselves from the society, depoliticised their art and be passive, it was done in order to preserve any form of free expression and to maintain a culture that is free from an ideological dictate. During 1970s -80s the Czech underground culture and the conditions under which they worked can be seen as the reminiscent of the original Modernist ideas of the notion of artists seen as a lonely figure positioned outside society in order to protest against it. . Due to the political oppression this notion remained in the public opinion, and also the way artist perceived themselves. This view contrasted sharply with the position of artists in the Western World where the ideals of Modernism and the notion that man can change the world begun to cease after the World War II.

However this prevailing opinion in the Czech art begun to change during the second half of 1980s as a new generation of young artists emerged. It was the generation of young people who grew up during the Normalisation, therefore never experienced living in a free non totalitarian society. The experience was reflected in their views. They did not actively strive to change the society and resigned to the idea of changing it. This could perhaps be explained by the fact they didn't know any other. They felt they could no longer grasp or control their environment, however they still believed they could touch people through their art and they concentrated on the primary forms and functions, symbols, myths and rituals.⁴¹ Although they were striving for the right of free expression they were not interested in the conflict of art and power, their work was non- traditional and non-authentic. In the attitude of the young generation of painters of the 1980s we can see the first signs of the post-modern disinterest and aloofness.

The work of Jaroslav Rona (Fig 16) and Petr Nikl (Fig17) which were both members of the artistic group Tvrdohlavi (Stubborn) could serve as a typical example of the 1980s generation of young painters. The approach and aptitude of the young painters came as a shock to the older artists of the underground culture as the disinterest in the society undermined the core morals and aim of the underground culture.

⁴⁰ Jana and Jiri Sevcik, *East Art Map; Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*(London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design,2006), p. 185

⁴¹ P. Pecinkova, *Contemporary Czech Painting*, p.12



Fig. 15. Jaroslav Rona, Hlava, Pochoden, Dzban (Head, Torch, Jug), 1989, oil on canvas, 110 x 120 cm



Fig. 16. Petr Nikl, Nenarozena zvire (Unborn Animal), 1987, oil on canvas, 120 x 116 cm

However the Post-modern orientated young painters weren't the only movement which begun to emerge during the second half of the 1980s. A new and more radical movement of performance artists and sculptors slowly begun to lift the passivity in the Czech underground culture. This was only allowed to happen due to the political relaxation brought on by succession of Mikhail Gorbachev to the leadership of the USSR and his new economic program - Perestroika⁴², in 1985. And although in Czechoslovakia, the growing crises of the regime made the Communists step up their repression and cruelty, people and specifically artists and intellectuals began increasingly to be heard and seen, they abandoned the world of metaphors and began to openly express their opinions as if they sensed the nearing end of the long lasting

⁴² Perestroika – a Russian term for the economic reforms introduced in June 1987 by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Its literal meaning is ‘reconstructing’, which refers to reconstruction of the Soviet economy (Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia), p 1
<File://C:\DOCUME~1\Locals~1\TEMP\JUD9JW7B.htm>, 22/02/2007

oppression. The strict ban on public exhibitions was no longer obeyed and exhibitions, spontaneous actions and happenings were on the increase. They were organised in unremarkable places: spaces where exhibits could be quickly dismantled, from which people could quickly disperse, walk or in some cases even run away. As an example of such protest could serve the action happenings of Spolecnost za veselejši současnost (Society for a merrier Today) who organized runs through the Politických vězňů (Political Prisoners Street) in Prague to demonstrate on behalf of all jailed dissidents. Their actions also included the collecting of the symbols of Communist power (pictures, sculptures, posters, billboards, banners and decrees) which they transported to a village called Bezprávi (Lawlessness) where the exhibits gradually piled up into a monument of horror.⁴³



Fig. 17. Joska Skalnik, Rozzpominani (Memories), 1987, created as an advertisement for a drama play of the writer Bohumil Hrabal

⁴³ Marcela Pankova, Report from Bohemia, in J. Aulich and T. Wilcox, ed., Europe Without Walls – Art, posters and revolutions 1989 – 93 (Manchester: Manchester City Art Galleries, 1993), p.



Fig. 18. Bratrstvi (Brotherhood), Probud' se duše ceska (Awake Czech soul), 1989, created as a advertising poster for an event of the music underground group Bratrstvi (Brotherhood)

During the course of the year 1989, the artists have also started to use the art of posters (Figs. 17, 18) in order to protest against the regime. The medium of posters was very useful in the awakening from the self imposed apathy of Czech people. The succession of protests finally culminated on 17th November 1989 when a crowd of Prague Universities' students went on the peaceful march through the streets of Prague to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the closure of Universities and in 1939, and the consequent death of Jan Opletal, a student killed by the Nazis. The peaceful march was however brutally attacked by armed police. The brutal beating of the young people was proved to be the last straw for Czech people, who put up with the totalitarian oppression for so long. Following the events on 17th of November, the angry students organised the strike of all Universities in the protest of the brutal beating which happened on Narodni Trida Street and they appealed to the Labour workers to join them. The students were promptly joined by intellectuals and artists who were in association with Charter 77⁴⁴ which could be seen as the representative of the underground culture who has been waiting for this moment for years. Finally the moment, they have been preserving themselves for so long arrived and they immediately began to scheme an organised protest against the regime. By this point people of all ages and backgrounds started to pour on Prague's Wenceslas square wearing the symbols of national tricolour. This was the onset of the so called 'Velvet Revolution' which ended the totalitarian era of the communist rule in central Europe.

⁴⁴ Charter 77 – a document produced and signed by the Prague intellectuals in 1977 calling on the government to respect human rights as international treaties they signed obligated to do.

The revolutionary atmosphere of November 1989 is poignantly captured and summed up by Miroslav Holub's poem *The Third Language*⁴⁵:

The Third Language

It was empty
Inside the head
and speechless.
People were neutralised
by statutory people.

And so it happened
That something like a disinherited idea
thought people up.

People from holes, people from houses,
people from cold storage, people from fly ash,
people from hot water,
people from the conflagration of trees.
And suddenly They were one flash.
And suddenly it was Josef Hora's
at last.

People
Came from everywhere, gathered,
went one way, equal to themselves,
identified with one another,
like stem cells from the bone marrow
of the idea.
The idea thought up people
with three hand, people
with three colours above grey dirt,
people with three languages,
Czech , Slovak,
and another one.

An uproar rose over the heads.
to the heavy, overcast sky.
It had no words.
It couldn't be bugged.
But they all understood.

The dictionary of the third language
lay in the square
and the new born wind
was leafing through it. In this language
Oxygen is oxygen
and a conic section passes through a fixed points

⁴⁵ Miroslav Holub, in Marta Sylvestrova and Dana Bartelt, ed., *Art As Activist –Revolutionary posters from Central and Eastern Europe*(London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1992) p, 94

and intersects a fixed line.

A statutory man
in a Mercedes with special license plate
left without deciphering
the code of the third language.
He was silent.

Because too many people
for the first time in life
were really speaking.

Art and the culture on the whole played a major role in the overturn of the regime. It was the existence of underground culture with its belief in the right of free expression that preserved the spirit of resistance and hope that kept the artists going for so many years in hope that thing could change one day. Although the need to survive under the totalitarian oppression has forced artists to be passive and depoliticize and self censor their art they have nevertheless maintained the hope than one day the circumstances would change(like in 1960s) and they could assist in the process of this change. For years they were waiting for the right moment and when the moment arrived they came out of the isolation of their studios with renewed passion and conviction that eventually paralysed the oppressors. This is not to say that the artists alone changed the situation as this was partly due to the fact that the system was on the verge of economic collapse and mainly due to the violent end of the Prague Spring 1968 and the invasion of the Warsaw Pact soldiers which has damaged the public's belief in the socialism and the Communist Governments beyond repair. As writer and poet Miroslav Holub tellingly describes:

'A regime, basically and definitely undermined by the intervention of Soviet tanks in August 1968, after which belonging to the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia was like having venereal disease.'⁴⁶

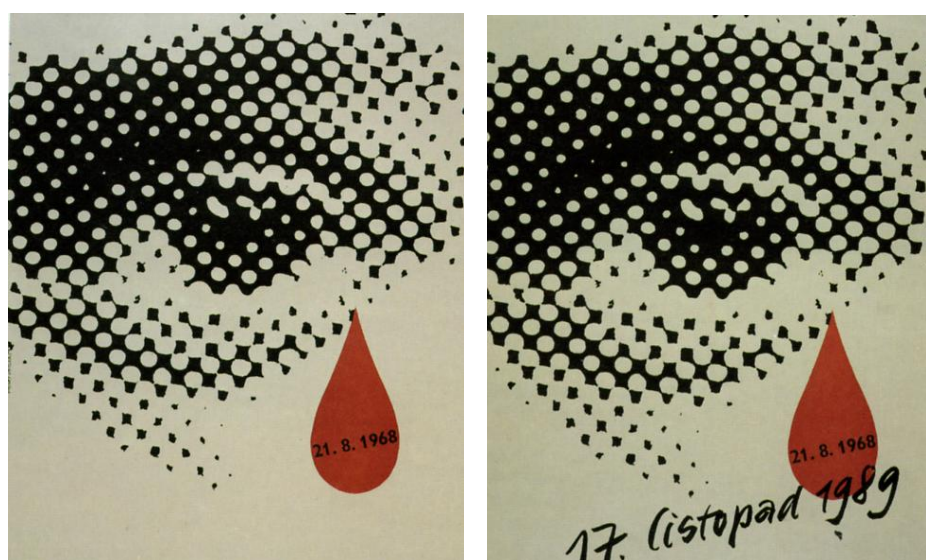


Fig. 19. Vaclav Sevcik, 21.8. 1968/17.11. 1989(Aug.21, 1968/Nov.17, 1989)

⁴⁶ Miroslav Holub, *Contention and Friction*, in M. Sylvestrova and D. Bartelt, ed., *Art As Activist*, p.92

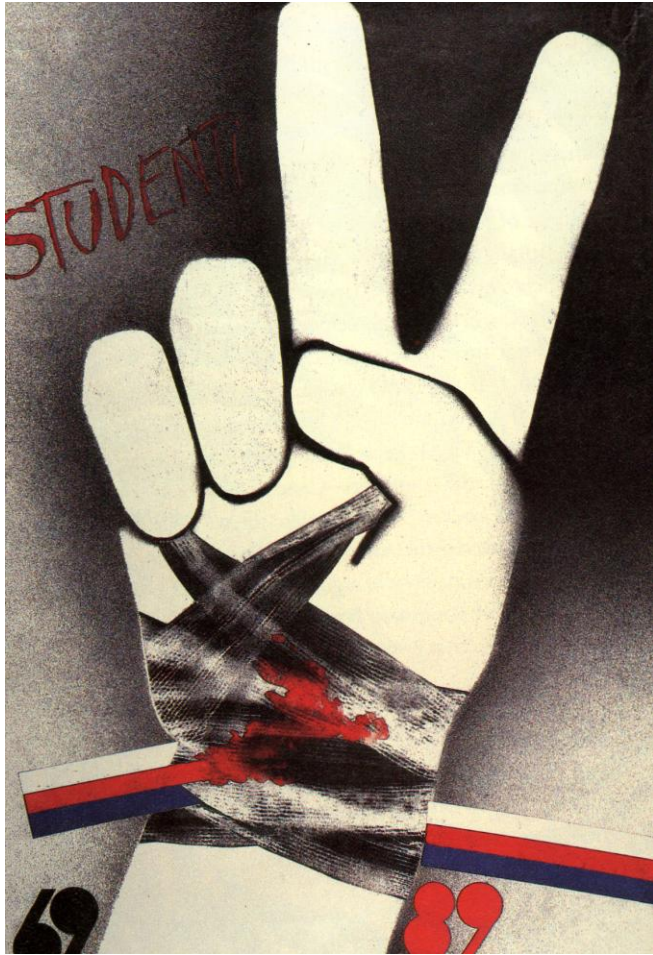


Fig. 20. Dusan Zdimal, Studenti (Students), 1989

Nevertheless the series of exhibitions, actions, organised protests has helped to stir up the common public emotions and reach out and awaken people from the self imposed apathy towards the happening in the society caused by the years of oppression and therefore speeded up the end of the oppression. Having said that, one art form did play a very decisive role in the success of the revolution. During the months coming up to the revolution and mainly during the course of it, power of poster played a vital role (Figs. 19, 20). Posters served as a very direct and powerful way of communication to the masses. As Marcela Pankova describes:

'Not only the professional artists but ordinary people, used posters in their non – violent struggle against the totalitarian powers, while the official mass media were still under the communist control attempting to manipulate public opinion. Posters appeared and reappeared on the walls and shop windows of towns and cities, people marched with them, pinned them on their bodies, hung them on monuments, parliament and party buildings, covered central squares, subway corridors, carriages and trains.'⁴⁷

From what Marcela Pankova says we can gather how important the posters were in the overthrow of the regime. Ironically, the very power of poster which has helped to install the idealism of socialistic society, has also served in the ending of it.

⁴⁷ Marta Sylvestrova, Invisible Walls, p. 113

Conclusion

At the beginning of this study I have asked myself a question: Can art change the world? Living in a contemporary society, I believe every artist should ask himself this question as we live in an age when we should begin to take responsibility for our actions and the consequences for our actions. In order to answer this question I have had a look at art developments of the past in a relation to the society.

In my search of wanting to understand of how and whether art can have any effect on the society I have begun looking back to the beginning of Modernism as I believe this was the changing point in the perception of art by the public and mainly by the artists themselves. It was in the Renaissance period when its intellectuals first began to turn away from the dogmatic rule of the Church. The idea of man coming before god eventually culminated in the ideas of Enlightenment putting the search for the truth above anything else and the celebrating of the science. The resulting scientific discoveries which have brought the Industrial Revolution caused a major shift in the structure of the society and gave rise to a new phenomenon Capitalism.

The first form of Capitalism which was purely interested in making a profit without considering the conditions of the workers and its effect on the environment has triggered a separation of opinion in the Enlightenment movement and resulted in the rise the Romanticism movement. In their ideals, the Romanticist artists rejected the blinded celebration of science and its discoveries which gave rise to the Industrial Revolution and eventually Capitalism. In order to escape its pressure they turned inward and to nature and in their protest against the society they put themselves on the outside of it. This has been a very important moment in the history of the relationship of art an society as it marked the first disconnection of art and society, making art elitist, it caused the beginning of the process of alienation of art from society and vice versa.

Not only artists reacted to the bad aspects of Capitalism. In the late 19th century philosophers Karl Marx and Fridreich Engels devised a new economic and sociological ideology which sharply contradicted with capitalist principles – Socialism. At its basic the socialist theory strongly opposed the class system in which an elite of small number lives in comfort while a big part of people works for them and lives in poverty. They called for revolution of values, in order to install more even and fair society. The Socialist ideology inspired many people and due to the instability in the societies caused by World War I and later also World War II gave rise to a number of Socialism inspired states. The Communist governments of these states however twisted the core of the Marxist ideals of Socialism. Not long after the Revolutions have taken place, instead of country run by its people, the citizens of the Communist states found them living in a totalitarian regime of one party's dictatorship.

Although the avant-garde modernist artists welcomed Socialist ideology and played active part during the transition period of the revolution in promoting its ideals, the new totalitarian system has eventually turned against them. The modernist ideals with its focus on the unbound freedom of individual its expression were seen as a residue of Capitalist bourgeois. This change of political opinion and dictate, and the resulting effect on the art developments show how these two are irrevocably connected. I have demonstrated this close relationship in the second chapter of this study by taking Czech art as an example. Although the original Marxist ideas envisaged that society ran by its people to be freer and more fairer society for all people, in reality it turned

out to be exactly the opposite. The totalitarian Socialism not only didn't ensure freedom of expression, it forbade it and forced those who believed in it into the underground.

After the World War II the economical and political changes has divided further art developments in between the East (Socialism) and the West (Capitalism). And while in the free Capitalist society, following the horrific events the of World War II, the disillusionment with the humankind caused the end of Modernist ideals that art can make a better society to disintegrate, and to focus on the contemporary consumer culture, taking the modernist notion of creating Art for Art's sake into a different direction, in the East, the existential feeling brought on by the war was prolonged by the succession of the totalitarian dictatorship. As a result, in order to cope with the new situation in the society and to remain sane, the artists continued to maintain this notion. On the contrary to western artist the artists in the East sustained the idea that they can change the society for the better and that with their art they can make a difference. This belief has helped them through the years when they could not express themselves freely and eventually they did play an important role in overthrowing of the oppressive regime and changing the society for the better. When the totalitarian regime ended and with it also ended the idea that the ideology of Socialism could be successfully put into practise. Drawing on my own experience, I believe that the post communist states stood in front of a unique chance to start again. They strived for the renewal of democracy and individual freedom of expression. They had a unique opportunity to learn from their experience of Socialism but also from the mistakes of developed capitalist countries. Nevertheless, they didn't and instead of trying to find a balance between the two extremes they went on to full heartedly support the Capitalism in order to create a consumerist society and wasted this unique chance. In my opinion this had probably happened because the painful memories of what have become of the Socialist ideology were too painful to revisit and even consider.

The failure of Socialism has left the world with only one remaining social and economic system - Capitalism. In today's Capitalist society art has lost its social function, as I explained in the first chapter of this study, as a result of the Modernism and later its disintegration of its values. The only function of art is to be aesthetically good and commercially marketable. Art is seen as a commodity that can be purchased and as such is treated by the public. As members of the capitalist society themselves, the artists don't believe they can change anything and therefore they don't strive to do so. And the few, who do believe in the power of their art and want to participate in the society, are defeated by the disinterest of public which does not perceive art as something that should be taken seriously.

The problem with Capitalist society is that it focuses on the individual freedom above all. The disintegration of social values and the focus on the consumer culture have made the members of such society to focus only on themselves. This individualist and egoistic focus on oneself causes alienation, irresponsibility and creates number of social issues. To name a few: community, family, and relationship problems, environmental problems, drug problems.

Coming back to art, although it has lost it active social function in the capitalist society it hasn't lost the freedom to be exhibited and to be seen by the public and its freedom of expression and continues to reflect the society. On the bases of this I believe there is a future for art in society. Currently, we once more stand on the threshold of major changes in society. By our selfish and irresponsible behaviour towards the environment, we have put ourselves in the situation where we are forced to change our values and views on how we live. As if this doesn't happen we will

destroy ourselves. Luckily, for our own sake this uncomfortable truth is beginning to seep into the awareness of the public. And where does art stand in this? As Suzi Gablik puts in her book *The Reenchantment of Art*:

'The question of whether or not art will ever change the world is not relevant anymore: the world is changing already, in inescapable ways. We can no longer deny the evidence at hand. The need to transform the egocentric vision that is encoded in our entire world view is the crucial task that lies ahead for our culture. The issue whether art will rise to the occasion and make itself useful to all that is going on.'⁴⁸

Finally, coming back to my question: Can Art change the world? I believe it can, and the answer is YES. But it cannot change it alone, but neither can anyone else. It would be very naïve to think that art can change the world alone. The Czech artists didn't overthrow the hated totalitarian regime through their art by themselves. It only happened because there were fundamental problems and the need for change in the society already. But what they did achieve was awakening of people from the apathy, instilled in them by the regime, towards what was happening in their society. By their attitude, actions, art and posters they awoke people's consciousness and gave them the strength and belief to change the situation in their society for the better. I cannot see any reason why this couldn't happen again. There will always be problems in society. In fact, there are a lot of problems in the contemporary society (religious wars, racism, and pollution of the environment).

In my opinion, the reconnection of art with the society has to come from the artists. When someone chooses to be an artist, they should do so with awareness that it carries a great responsibility. We live in a changing world where not taking responsibility for our actions could cost more than we ever anticipated. We cannot afford to be on the outside of the society or creating meaningless Art for Art's sake anymore!

11, 204 words

9,806 words excluding quotes and captions

⁴⁸ Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*(London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 141

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Visit to Czech National Gallery, Prague, 28th July

Visit to Galerie Kenova/Klatovy

Video

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