

## AGAINST NATURE: YOUNG CZECH ART SCENE

### Schifting Present

Adam Budak

In the celebratory year of its 220th anniversary, the National Gallery in Prague is proudly launching a new exhibition project, devoted to the exploration of the youngest Czech art scene. Conceived as a cyclical event, it expresses the Gallery's genuine interest in following the most interesting and innovative developments that occur within the local art community. Anti-monumental at its core, focused and concise, the survey is thematically outlined by the curatorial approach and a careful selection process, provided by a double perspective of the local and international curators. Escaping such similar projects' clichés (*how the present is being defined, how the future is being foreseen and what is one's relationship to the past*), it delivers a lens through which the young artistic production can be seen and critically embraced; it, nevertheless, is a promise of what comes next, a prophecy as to what a new generation's concerns will be about and how will they contribute to the understanding and a perception of the world that surrounds us and shapes our identity and consciousness. Articulating both an individual and collective voice - a foundation of a possible paradigm to be born - is this project's ambition; moreover, catching a *Zeitgeist* formation, searching for a vocabulary of a forthcoming form and expression is its aim and desire.

It's my pleasure to introduce the inaugural exhibition of this new series. Tellingly entitled "Against Nature", conceived and curated by Prague-based Czech curator Edith Jeřábková and Mexico City-based American curator Chris Sharp and gathering the works of 12 emerging artists, born mainly in 1980s and based in Czech Republic, this exhibition is a statement in itself. The curators focus on the essentials: the materials and the artists' methods of working. In times of the hyper-technological and the post-human, a new tendency is being observed, the one towards the nature, and a possible new "turn" is being announced, as if reflecting French anthropologist, Philippe Descola's thesis that human experience must be understood as resulting from coexistence of two fields of phenomena governed by distinct principles: nature and culture. While outlining his ecology of relationships borrowing from different behavioral and life sciences, Descola asks the question: "How to recompose nature and society, humans and non-humans, individuals and collectives, in a new assemblage in which they would no longer present themselves as distributed between substances, processes, and representations, but as the instituted expression of relationships between multiple entities whose ontological status and capacity of action vary according to the position they occupy in relation to one another?"

The exhibition "Against Nature" constructs a similar relational space, and as such, in its overwhelming sincerity and humility, it touches upon what truly matters now. Its title unfolds the complexity of an approach. Through a loose reference to Joris-Karl Huysmans' "poisonous novel" of 1884, the authors semi-proclaim an anti-hero of an eccentric Jean des Esseintes' liminal character, as a possible *alter ego* of the current artistic stands. Drifting

away from Naturalism, Huysmans provocatively marked a paradigm change, which seemingly remains a powerful influence also for today's ways of thinking and perceiving the world, suffering of exhaustion and leading towards a new kind of decadence, as expressed, for instance in the most recent novel of Michel Houellebecq, "Submission" (2015) where Huysmans' work, and particularly his crepuscular masterpiece "À Rebours", serves as a palimpsest for a satire on Western values and a depiction of a contemporary society's total upheaval.

Let yet another French anthropologist, Marc Auge's prophecy act as a guiding-line for our new exhibition cycle's first iteration, shaping the path towards the new, forthcoming chapters: "At a time when the planets of the solar system are beginning to be seen as mere suburbs of the Earth, when scientific popularization offers us hypotheses whose language is beyond us, and which make the mysteries cobbled together by terrestrial monotheisms seem pale and tame by comparison, Nature is no longer either a refuge or a help, but a challenge. A challenge to human societies to give priority to the only thing that can give them mastery of the future, and the only thing that can give meaning to a singular individual human life by universalizing it: the quest for the true, the real. Perhaps it is at the center of the most vertiginous ambitions of science that the secret of the innermost wisdom of individuals is to be found. And perhaps it is awareness of the common future that can give each individual the strength to live through this shifting present which we call the future".

## Against Nature

### Christ Sharp

When Adam Budak extended the invitation to co-curate a survey of emerging Czech art for the National Gallery, I was both pleasantly surprised and delighted. But, not being a complete stranger to the scene, I should have perhaps not been so surprised. First invited in 2009 by Zuzana Blochová to visit Prague as a critic and curator, I was later invited back by Zuzana to curate an exhibition at the Meet Factory (*Being There*, 2010). It was at that time that I first met Edith Jerabková, with whom I even discussed the possibility of collaborating on an exhibition. For a variety of reasons that project unfortunately never came to fruition. Thus when Adam approached me about the survey, explaining that my co-curator would be none other than Edith Jerabková herself, I was both very pleased and struck by the almost literary sense of *kismet* that accompanied the invitation. We would make our exhibition together after all, even if under a completely different star and in a different context, several years later.

This survey is the result of three separate visits to Prague in which Edith and I conducted some odd fifty studio visits and/or met and talked with artists in cafes and exhibition venues and schools around the city (one trip alone of three days entailed a marathon-like twenty meetings). The artists with whom we met were generally under thirty, or not much older, sometimes still students, and either Czech natives or internationals working in the Czech Republic. As our so-called “research”<sup>1</sup> progressed, a number of things became increasingly clear to us: many, but not all the artists were working in a mode that was intuitive, idiosyncratic, and deeply invested in materials; craft, and the handmade played a major role in many practices; as well as a certain expressiveness that is not expressive in the traditional sense of the term: less about the self, and any personal psychology, the expressiveness tended to be more linked to the materials and media themselves. While this is not all that we encountered, it constituted a kind of majority or even a trend. As this realization grew, so did the shared understanding that we did not want to organize a random, disconnected survey of “art in Prague now” devoid of any curatorial structure beyond that of being a mere survey. Such a loose to non-existent curatorial framework would have – as is often the case – done no great service to the work on display.

The moment – and, please indulge me while I engage in a bit of pedantic *ars curatica* – a given work of art enters the company of another work of art, a reciprocal modification takes place, which can either be mutually enervating or invigorating. It follows that the task of the curator is to seek to ensure that that relationship is as invigorating and enriching as possible. In my experience, one of the best ways to ensure this general good will and vivacity is, at least initially, through the establishment of a concept, theme or open-narrative, as opposed to exploitative, framework. Subsequent to that is the spatial relationship between the works (possibly even more important than the conceptual or thematic affinity), which is to say, how they sit together and communicate in space. Indeed, in an ideal world, works of art are happy to together. Feeding of one another, they radiate felicity. I know it might sound a bit strange, but we all know when art is unhappy. Generally, the byproduct of being inconsiderately arranged or overcrowded in space, poorly installed, gathered together for unclear reasons, or, by the same token, with too much reason, i.e., subordinated and

enlisted to illustrate a cause it may or may not even believe in, art, for all its inanimateness, has a way unequivocally wearing its heart on its sleeve. You know when it is unhappy because you are often unhappy looking at it. The same could be said for happy art. Happy art, more often than not, makes for happy viewers.<sup>2</sup>

At the risk of sound pedantic, I state all of this with the intention of justifying my and Edith's decision making with regard to this survey. While we inevitably did not love all of the art we saw, all of the art we loved did not necessarily make it into the exhibition, for the simple reason that it would have not been happy there, and therefore would not have contributed to the precious, elusive and palpable quality of cohesion which ultimately justifies an exhibition. In this sense, it could be said that we failed to properly represent the broadness, complexity and diversity of the emerging art scene in Prague— but then again, failure is always already built into such curatorial protocols. Were two other curators commissioned to do the same survey, they would have most likely organized a different show, whose overall inadequacy and incompleteness might be no less conspicuous than ours.

So the question now is, what, in my estimation makes the thirteen artists who have been generous enough to accept our invitation to participate in this survey purportedly happy together? I would argue that it revolves around a certain attitude toward materials, nature, and the unnatural, as well as a belief in the truth of art being inseparable from its form, making, and the public elaboration of personal inquiries through form. Nature, as it were, becomes a very fluid and ambiguous notion in a lot of the work in the exhibition. Take, for instance, the elegant and delicate amalgamations of Anna Ročňová and the detrital micro-sculptures of David Fesl. Both of them repurpose everyday materials, whose sense of usefulness takes on an almost organic veneer. Something similar happens in the playfully moody dyed and painted tapestry-like paintings of Viktorie Valocká, while the steel and plaster sculptures of Ondřej Filípek assume a more fluid post-industrial quality. In each and every one of these artist's practices the sense of ontological promiscuity at the heart of nature, or better yet the so-called natural discloses itself for how strange it really is. And yet, it is never clearly articulated or declared as such. It, with relative inexplicability of nature itself, just happens.

The use and combination of textiles with unusual textile materials to generate amorphous and unidentifiable forms becomes no less strange and conspicuous here. From Johana Pošová's incorporation of plastic into woven textile abstractions to Tatiana Nikulina's costume sculptures, which combine plastic drop sheeting with regular clothes among other things to engender improbable wearable forms, not to mention Kateřina Holá's starched, used garments, which become free-standing sculptures themselves, the use of textile and its conjunction with unconventional materials obliquely weave themselves into a collapsed discussion of the natural vs the unnatural.

The general spirit of the work in the show is unapologetic in its strangeness, mystery and materiality. I am thinking here in particular of Rudolf Skopec's large, black-and-white photocolage. Seemingly big enough to feel like a one-to-one recreation, the photos are ostensibly re-composed images of an interior, but, unlike most photographs, their goal is clearly not to relay information so much as it is to obscure it. By the same token, the work of the painters Martin Lukáč and Ondřej Petrlík unapologetically enter well-trodden trajectories of

representation – in-deed, so well-trodden that they almost take on an organic character – but each in ways that effortlessly renew the language they use. Lukáč's painterly forays into the messy stuff expression-ism are blessedly devoid of the emotional baggage that generally accompanies the genre, while Petrlík's largely monochromatic drawings sidle into the murky, iconographic territory of fin-de-siècle symbolism, but feel as fresh and strange as anything around at the moment. As such, these drawings become almost iconic of the exhibition itself. For its title, *Against Nature*, is known as the English translation of J.K. Huysmans symbolist classic, *A rebours* (1884). But where the novel and its protagonist Des Esseintes embrace a form of idealism and mysticism over naturalism and materialism, the artists in the exhibition collapse many of these distinctions together, in an overall embrace of a variously personal and idiosyncratic formalism, in which form and method become wholly synthesized with content itself. It is precisely this collapse and scrambling of enlightenment binaries that puts the work being produced by this group of artists in the dialogue with many debates in contemporary continental philosophy and art production to-day. Nevertheless, this work, for all its contemporaneity is by no means a mere symptom of the moment. Committed to the formal and historical underpinnings of their respective disciplines, the artists in *Against Nature* achieve a certain timeless quality by virtue of their investment in the very stuff of making. And for all their many idiosyncratic similarities and differences, we hope the works that have been selected end up being happy together.

1 I very reluctantly use this highly problematic term which has become such a buzz word in contemporary art over the last decade. My reluctance issues from its origins in the sciences (which art is not), which is more often than not predicated on methods of quantification, analytical explication, and problem solving. I believe that art is the exact opposite: indivisible from idiosyncrasy (and therefore too unique to be quantifiable), ultimately resistant to explication, and fundamentally committed to creating (and partially solving) its own problems. Essentially anti-scientific, it does not obediently "produce knowledge" (that which can be quantified) so much as perpetuate forms of disobedience, instances of existential grandeur, and the kind of heart break without which the human animal is condemned to a meanness and poverty no amount of wealth can ever redeem.

2 I sound like I am writing a children's book about curating – but curating, I think, is, or should be that simple.

## How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?

(E. M. Foster, *Aspect of the Novel*, 1927)

### Edith Jeřábková

Taken figuratively, the well-known quotation from Foster above would serve as a good introduction to the range of themes addressed by the up-and-coming generation of artists. I could equivocate for a long time, but ultimately, it would be impossible for me to avoid a generalization about Conceptual art's insufficiency in describing the ways in which we relate to the world at present. The mantra of crisis which, in various manifestations, clatters like a broken machine throughout all philosophical, sociological, and political texts, as well as texts on contemporary art; repeated efforts and calls to find a new approach or modernity that would replace the current neoliberal system – all this acute pressure from the intelligentsia seems to have brought about a situation where artists no longer have the space to relate to this stream of verbiage in a conceptual manner.

It will perhaps be easiest to briefly borrow an idea from curator Zoë Gray's exhibition *Making is Thinking*<sup>1</sup>, which she realized in the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam in 2011, and in which she aimed to comment on the change in the working methods of contemporary artists. Very roughly speaking, artists are not implementing *a priori* concepts, but are "thinking through creation". Gray attempted to find in art a link between two activities of the living body – work and thought – which, especially in society during the age of rationalism, were strictly separated.<sup>2</sup> She took the title of her exhibition from Richard Sennett's book *The Craftsman* (2008), in which the author contemplates work in an industrialized society which has lost all direct relation to it. Work, like everything else, has become the object of privatization, whose main goal is not good work, but effective work. Sennett found a hidden, secluded domain in crafts, in which the continuity between the pre-industrial and post-industrial ages has quietly survived. We do not wish to thematize the processes of making crafts and making things by hand (as a possible critique, an emancipatory and activist program, or a conscious nostalgic regression), but we nonetheless find some similar principles, such as an emphasis on the material, the technology, the processual nature, the "slowness", and other attributes of the method of production, in the work of young artists.

Work and the creation process themselves have thus made their way to the center of artists' interests, often in their relationship (more analytical than openly critical) towards the production and circulation of goods, objects, and fetish commodities. Over the course of a few years, the method that artists use to create their works has transformed significantly. It seems that they have stopped believing in art's service as a critical tool and have turned their attention to art as a means of finding a path; in doing so, they no longer avoid the formerly prohibited spheres of intuition, instinct, and imagination. It can perhaps be said that, in contrast to the shift towards the object in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when objects were vehicles for critical commentary (Rachel Harrison, Claire Fontaine, Cady Noland, David Hammon, Martin Boyce, and others), the second decade has seen a process of

deobjectification, a shift towards subjective qualities. The up-and-coming artists of the Czech scene have not come out with radical manifestos (and indeed, they do not need them; their artistic program has its basis in contemporary philosophy and sociology, which have an unprecedented proximity to, and mutual friendship with, art, including on a personal level), but this does not mean that the current generation's attitudes are tame or inaccessible. The social and participatory attitude of the beginning of the century has not been buried with hate in the past, but rather, its model, which remained anthropocentric, is unacceptable for today's efforts to find a weak spot in the modernist canon and reevaluate the position of the central subject through a more balanced organization of human and non-human forces. The theory of the Anthropocene and a range of variants of object-oriented ontology go hand in hand with these artists' general interest in the object; nonetheless, for them, these theories are not binding or normative (some probably do not even know them). It is thus necessary to reevaluate them once more and, as the case may be, to break up some Enlightenment polarities – work/thought, subject/object, nature/culture, and others – and also to reformulate the fundamental question of our relationship to the natural.

Until relatively recently we could still say that standing in contrast with the natural were: the artificial, the cultural, language, tools, technology, and data. The cultural attained equality and emancipation with the term “second nature”, which replaces its ancestor, first nature; this shift took place when the virtual sphere and the internet opened up into their next phase, in which majority society in its daily life no longer made a sharp distinction, or any distinction at all, between the natural and the artificial. In many cases, such a distinction is no longer possible, and yet, the idea of this contrast survives. In fact, among certain segments of society, it has aroused a wave of interest in natural forms and materials, handmade objects, farmers' markets, and natural products. In the case of art, a relationship with nature usually manifests itself as a relationship with something fundamental, something primary, in the sense of nature before humans. In fact, the phrase “against nature” contains within itself an acknowledgement of nature. But what sort of acknowledgment, when philosophy cannot even reach a consensus on what nature is and what it means? Must nature thus only be acknowledged today by demarcation or by reference to it as some sort of abstract category? In the case of present-day art and its relationship to the natural, we can henceforth use Boris Groys's theory developed for the documentary trend in art, which states that art made on biopolitical terms – that is, in terms of an artificially formed lifespan – also explicitly thematizes its medium as features of the artificial nature of its lifespan. Thus, its relationship with the natural can be, at the very least, ambivalent.

Humans are not complex like nature, but in the past three centuries, their thinking has attempted to be so complex as to encompass and outdo it. The question is what kind of influence this will have, not just on the planet, but also on their own psyche. In the nineteenth century, the phrase “against nature” expressed the program of the Industrial Revolution, when humans and their products were supposed to surpass nature and expand its limited possibilities. This exhibition takes its name from the title of a book by Joris-Karl Huysmans that is the essence of this type of “modern romanticism” – which is new to us in

this century – and which has interesting connections to our exhibition. We believe that the name of the exhibition will not be read by today’s audiences as a contradiction inherently, but only thanks to its relatively absurd revival in the present. It is, we hope, readily apparent that we are not concerning ourselves with products of nature in artistic motifs and artworks. The Czech translation of the word “nature” in the title of the exhibition is limited to just one meaning – the natural world. We, however, are interested in the entire range of meanings, whether in the sense of a person’s temperament or in the foundation to which we relate. For this reason, and also for its iconicity, we have left the title of the exhibit in English – we do, however, feel somewhat sorry for doing so.

It is likely that some viewers, when picturing a survey of the up-and-coming generation of artists, automatically imagine a format showcasing their works. On the contrary, we wanted to arrive at the format of an exhibition with heavy curatorial input whose themes would be held together in a more solid framework and proceed from the art of this generation, influencing the final selection of artists. Although we went thoroughly through about four dozen studios (or, in some instances, portfolios), the artists featured in the exhibition number five men, five women, and one trio of female artists. It follows from the work of the artists whom Chris Sharp and I selected for the exhibition that they either make no programmatic distinction between first and second nature, or make a conscious effort to connect the worlds of art, nature, and products. The relationship of their art to technology is not critical and can be ambivalent, but most of the artists do not make strong use of it in their works. From this, we can see that the foundation through which we relate to things has changed irreversibly. This does not mean, though, that our view of “nature” was hollow. It is reflected most visibly in the attention that the artists pay to the materiality of their works and the processes that these works undergo.

In the introduction to his text *Does Nature Stay What-it-is?: Dynamics and the Antecedence Criterion*, Iain Hamilton Grant quotes Friedrich Schelling saying: “a purely logical concept of matter is meaningless, and the real concept of matter itself first proceeds from the synthesis of those forces by the imagination.”<sup>3</sup> According to Grant, the fundamental question influencing our perception of nature, which is founded on the dualism of atoms and energy in Newtonian mechanical materialism, is: Is matter a substance or a force? Without the ability to make any further theoretical claims on this issue, I will say rather laconically that the artists provoke in both forms, and it seems that they find in this very relationship motivation and new possibilities.

Anna Ročňová’s objects often arise in groups whose key is a commonplace action that she knows well, such as fishing, swimming, or picnicking. Although they have a common theme, or rather, a framework, their form arises from the artist’s communication with her materials and with the technologies that these materials enable or that foist themselves, so to speak, upon the artist. Difficult though it may be to speak today about experimentation, Anna Ročňová’s methods certainly fulfill the criteria, in that, by making attempts and mistakes while working in her studio, Ročňová finds forms for connecting various materials and things. These processes are not divorced from logic; on the contrary, they have great respect for the logic of the possibilities of various materials and objects and the numerous changes

they offer in reaction to one another. For the most part, then, her area of interest involves nature and its processes, and our relationship with civilization and its products. This does not mean, though, that she would have the natural and the cultural be entirely separate.

Although we realize that humankind cannot return to the Garden of Eden, and although many artists today operate just as comfortably in a natural framework as in a virtual one, the voices of certain beloved philosophers resonate strongly in our time; among them is Michel Serres, who uncompromisingly calls upon humankind to be attentive towards nature: "I say that not only can nature be considered a subject of law, but it should be considered a subject, period; that is to say, it is full of information and we must listen to it... And this has nothing to do with nature in the eighteenth-century sense, which was a kind of decor, if you will, for human life. Rousseau, and in fact everyone who talks about nature in the eighteenth century, posits a version of a contract with nature as a master-slave relation. Whereas now, quite the opposite: It's a partner, you see? It's not decor, it's a partner. It's not an environment, it's something that resembles us."<sup>4</sup>

The partner about whom Serres speaks so passionately is able to provide Anna Ročňová with inspiration for many approaches and forms. Her thinking excludes naturalism and formal resemblance to nature as goals. It is, on the contrary, as though the visibly processual character of her objects acts against the representational function of the artistic object which wants to neither depict nor stand in for nature, but rather be a part of it. Her objects manage to be not just amiably poetic, but also poetically dark and cruel, and we can sense in them a certain deliberate level of naïveté or innocence, a phase at the boundary of original sin, which can itself subconsciously connect to the boundary between work and thought. Ročňová is not implementing any initial idea; rather, "a creative hand and a working mind" operate simultaneously, or, if this is not possible, supplement each other very harmonically in the process of creating a piece. An *a priori* concept would be, for her, an obstacle. Rather than inspecting her materials, she forms a mutual relationship with them, allows matter to be made by its own movements and speech, to which she usually reacts with just a few essential, though material, steps in layers or collage. She enables the physical properties of the materials – artificial and natural – to become involved in the formation of "her" sculptural forms.

These forms are absolutely not without some modernist foundation, and in them we can recall the work of artists of the Arte Povera movement, Eva Hesse, and Barbara Hepworth; or, in our artistic circles, Eva Kmentová, Běla Kolářová, Mária Bartuszová, and later, Denisa Lehocká. The difference in the modernist approach of the artists of the 1960s is nicely encapsulated in a quote from Stanislav Kolíbal, who, like Anna Ročňová, likes to work with plaster. In his catalog for a 1967 exhibition at the gallery Nová Síň, Kolíbal writes about this material: "Its banality doesn't bother me. I like it because it is nothing. It doesn't suggest ideas, but is obedient to our ideas. It doesn't lie in the grass like a stone and it doesn't grow like a tree. It only comes into existence..." For modernist artists, matter represented a state of emptiness, a state without shape or content. Contemporary artists attempt to read sense and a future into the material itself before giving it form, composition, and meaning. In this sense, Ročňová's work may instead have its foundation in the work of artists like Jiří Kovanda

and his installations from the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, as well as his recent work.

Anna Ročňová would like for her work to express her thinking through the most direct route and for its content to be communicated in the simplest way possible. Sometimes, to do little, so to speak, in transforming material into a final piece requires a certain courage, just as the Minimalists had. Here, though, objects are not participants meant to stand in for the human body, even though they sometimes recall the movements and states of human figures or are wearing a human t-shirt. They make stable the temporary and reversible states and transformations of the natural into the artificial and vice versa. In a greasy roasting pan we can, thanks to a small lamp lighting an image of the moon, experience the romance of a full moon on the surface of water. Elsewhere, by contrast, the artist hits pansies with a hammer to drive the flowers, full of intense colors, into a tablecloth reminiscent of the plastic tablecloths of weekends at a cottage or of practical grandmothers imitating a fantasy of rustic comfort from the turn of the century. As can be seen, Ročňová is not commenting on any theoretical concept, nor does she dismiss any humanistic content in her work. This content, as mentioned above, remains immersed in the everyday existence of the world as the artist and most of us know it. The connections in the materials and objects that Anna Ročňová takes as her theme are uncommonly fragile and reversible and foreshadow the possibility of collapse. Their artificially maintained stability serves as a general metaphor for the delicacy of both human and non-human relationships.

“Artifice, besides, seemed to des Esseintes the final distinctive mark of man's genius. Nature had had her day, as he put it. By the disgusting sameness of her landscapes and skies, she had once for all wearied the considerate patience of aesthetes. Really, what dullness! The dullness of the specialist confined to his narrow work. What manners! The manners of the tradesman offering one particular ware to the exclusion of all others. What a monotonous storehouse of fields and trees! What a banal agency of mountains and seas!”<sup>5</sup> The main protagonist of the novel *Against Nature*, a remnant of the aristocratic class, has a very ambivalent relationship to his time. His sensibility tempts him to love everything cultural, admire objects of the modern age, locomotives, factories, chemistry, engineering. He believes that humankind will overcome the work of nature and broaden its poor imagination. At the same time, though, he hates the rise of the new bourgeois society; he is disgusted by the bourgeoisie and society as a whole.

Tatiana Nikulina also yearns to further develop themes of the real world. Her formal language is very organic, even though she uses a range of materials, including unecological plastic bags and synthetic fabrics. Another fundamental issue for her is materiality, and the individual components of her work often have a symbolic nature and show a relationship to the real world: felt recalls earth and clay; plastic bags, air; foam, muscles and tissues; hair, capillaries; and so on. Nikulina does not use anything “readymade” – everything is made by connecting and creating. The earlier collage-style nature of her work has given way to assemblage. At present, her most frequent techniques are sewing, stuffing, inserting, and wrapping. She creates bodies and cavities into which she places further objects and materials, as though wanting to replace organs – trapped inside the body, condemned to

eternal work, hidden from our view, without the possibility of seeing the outside world, and only accessible to contact from doctors – with objects which look at us from the inside of the body just like we look at them and with which we can communicate. She is also drawn to the organicity and materiality of ocean environments. Nikulina does not take critical or feminist stances, or at least, they are not particularly visible – this is a significant difference between her work and that of other artists who resemble her formally, such as Cosima von Bonin. Nonetheless, one of her pieces, in which stuffed hands and ropes rhythmically alternate with stuffed seashells, contains a commentary on the ocean as a significant region of advancing globalization and denaturalization.

If we were to look for a society that admits the possibility of a connection between the natural and the cultural, we would most likely find it in nations and cultures grounded in animistic religion. Animism is a topic that has, in recent years, been the subject of much attention in the study of modernity. We can also find some parallels to animism in Tatiana Nikulina's work. Without having any idea of what her found objects were originally, she designs a society for them full of similar "comrades", and by the way she places them in a constellation of objects hung from above, she creates an environment for them and hints at possible relationships. For example, in *Lonely Visions*, she takes a completely ordinary found construction made of rods and attempts to create a similar, but not identical, partner for it out of paper. Of course, this moving altruism is not just Nikulina's attempt to find the purpose of her existence in helping others – in this case, neither people nor animals, but things. We must ask why things, in this case manufactured objects, usually come about only so that they can serve people. Nikulina is perhaps trying to highlight this limitless servitude and form of slavery through the fact that she makes things for other things.

The surrealistic style that has asserted itself in her objects from the very beginning of her artistic career is borrowed from history, but also developed further; as I mentioned earlier, it emphasizes the need to expand the catalogue of what is real. Nikulina yearns for her objects to have a life, and the same time, people serve them by carrying them. The roles of things and people are, in this theater, reversed. In the gallery, though, they can also stand on their own and wait for further animation. Some of the objects thus take the shape of articles of clothing, while others call for being taken up and manipulated in a manner that they themselves demand through their form. This is also the case in a film in which human figures animate objects. Their movements are derived in detail from the language of the objects themselves, although they are, in general, subject to a vaguely narrative script. They carry out strange, quite mechanical operations going back and forth in a way that only seems to have meaning in the world of things. Nikulina does not wish to let her imagination run free; the choreography of her film is culturally grounded in Russian and Mongolian myths, albeit in an almost imperceptible way. Instead, her performing objects give us the impression that they would like to address visitors from another planet, communicate with someone who has an entirely different cultural background and language from them. They, on the other hand, are mutants of this world, cloned from parts of jellyfish, mussels, human bodies, and other basic objects which approach the early stages of objects or materials: various tampons, balls, ropes, and beads. With her animation of the living and non-living, Nikulina, in

a non-programmatic way, touches on this modernist separation and attempts to overcome it by using none other than transgressive movements between them.

Many of the artists represented in the exhibition believe that art is not obliged to convey knowledge or information, nor disprove beliefs, mark out territory, or assert the idea that these objective intentions often miss their mark, even with good intentions. They believe that certain kinds of subjectivism and authenticity (despite the fact that subjectivism, in its extreme forms, does not offer many directions in which to proceed and authenticity is a very slippery term that is difficult to insist on) provide a chance for more open, direct, and intensive communication. In *Against the Novelty of New Media: The Resuscitation of the Authentic*, Erika Balsom writes: “Gioni’s exhibition (The Encyclopedic Palace) was very much about (amongst other things) the notion that the internet constitutes but the latest iteration of a long-standing desire to create totalizing system of knowledge... The three spiritual fathers governing the exhibition – Jung, Steiner and Breton – embrace a depth-model of the subject closely tied to the notion of authenticity as a moral imperative, one that is exceedingly far from both the depersonalized intensities of the Deleuzian subject and the anti-anthropocentrism of the speculative realists... What is at stake in such a resuscitation of authenticity? Can it be anything other than reactionary? How might this new fetish for the authentic function as a significant, if sometimes spurious, post-digital cultural formation?”<sup>6</sup> Although we all spend at least half of our free time on the internet, we nonetheless all read the same texts and see the same images. The internet does not lead us to discover unknown territories; we only share the same texts and images more quickly. Our identities thus do not become differentiated, but rather the opposite.

It is interesting to follow how this relates to the question of authenticity, which I believe highlights a significant difference between the work of the artists represented in this exhibition. Martin Lukáč is determined to further examine this shared identity of ours, and he is excited by a method of creation that is distinct – programmatically so, even – from the modernist longing for originality (even though almost everyone wants to be an original artist). At the same time, modernism serves for him as a sampler and perhaps a foundation of sorts. For Lukáč – just as for many members of the internet generation – the concept of originality is grounded in something else: in the freedom with which he can use forms and content from anywhere and thus be original by distancing himself from the modernist doctrine of individual intelligence for collective benefit. This does not mean, though, that anything is possible. The means by which individual elements are brought into circulation in a network are specific and react to the social, economic, and power systems that are imprinted into the artwork. It is not just a matter of using shared information and images, but also of the hierarchy among them which must be perceived. Old symbols are also read in a transformed way, as they do not operate in the same way as they did in the literary system of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, even though they may look the same. Despite being an intellectual, Lukáč, I believe, holds the view that visual art, due to its naturalness, generally refuses to be captured by words. In our Euro-American environment, though (especially in schools), we still encounter the idea of the work of art as something that already offers within itself its own deconstruction, explanation, rationalization. Art is a language that

should not be retold, but rather, we should know how to perceive it in its inherent form.

Artists of the “digital native” generation are confronted right from the start with the need to adopt and work on an identity, to follow their own fates. Lukáč, with the rest of this generation, lived through its rapid stages of development, which gives him greater freedom to react to his own development and rid himself of any figurative dependence on individuals brought up on images. This contains the authenticity and subjectivity that Lukáč is now seeking – the concept of authenticity at play is not one in the sense of a return to the original (natural or past), but rather one of seeking the “real” or “intrinsic” (more unstable terms) qualities of the present. Even though Lukáč’s recent images have an abstract effect like a scrum of energetic lines, we still have a compulsion to read some sort of reality from them, whether this is due to the hint provided by a distinct frame – a window, whose possible meanings I will not even begin to discuss – or due to the way in which they are painted. As our eye follows the stream of individual squiggles, we see that they have been painted rather carefully; this is not just quick, automatic scribbling. Thus, the aforementioned attempt to “think through creating” is present here as well. I imagine that Lukáč considers the further fates of his undulating figures in the very process of painting them. The fact that the lines, which are not exactly lines, originate in drawing is also appropriated by the open spaces, the scrawls that arise as if from smudged and erroneous movements. Lukáč thus thematizes the process of painting itself in the process of painting, using error as a motif. In the new diptychs selected for the exhibition, these tangles of lines with psychedelic effect begin to yield uncertain archetypal forms, which the artist has constructed such that we long to figure them out with our brain, sick with rationality, rather than in some other way. This moment of longing is the tool that the artist uses in an educational process intended to change our addiction to the way images normally function and is also connected with the interesting and very frequently discussed issue of fetishes. I do not really know why he creates diptychs, but it seems that they once again point out a certain fundamentality, making use of complementary colors, filling and emptying, the horizon and its loss, the motif of, and an attempt at, its disappearance, and the view from the earth and of Earth.

For Ondřej Petrlík, authenticity and the real work somewhat differently. Like Lukáč, he is also an artist who draws almost every single day. During this time, these artists are disconnected from the network (although it is questionable whether this is still possible). It is as though they are using drawing to compensate in turn for mouse clicks and staring at a monitor, a window stuffed with all knowledge. Focusing on a blank paper evidently brings them the privacy that is associated on multiple levels with drawing. It separates the hard drive from the head. In the collection of drawings that we have selected for the exhibition, Petrlík offers us a return to Symbolist and Decadent landscapes. What does this regression to psychologized nature, with all its mix of the spiritualist, surrealist, and psychedelic repertoire, mean? The eye of God, stars, crowns, mouths, eyes, limbs, moons, a dragonfly, a skull, thickets virtuosically drawn and carefully hatched with pastels, as though in a state of delirium. The imagination let loose. We think that this is not possible today, but Petrlík most probably says: Why not? It was once possible and it remains possible when needed. And this

need evidently exists here. Petrlík has a gift for a certain innocent impudence to show us that it works. A found theme, a literary impulse, an image, model, or type of the imagination works for him as a skeleton key, as a door through which a person enters into unexplored territory; it broadens the world by broadening its cultural aspect, its imaginative avatar. From a small number of motifs, he is able to develop an entire picture with an almost contagious interest.

Although Petrlík certainly employs this style of painting and a flow of automatic thinking, he is, at the same time, intentionally making contact with another, distant world, with these recollections of landscapes and images of revolution from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He also finds meaning in returning to childish drawings. The nostalgia and sentimentality he carries around with him are not some scary spirits that leave him helpless. On the contrary, these forbidden areas interest him through the potential to become aware through them of the psychological shift in the way we presently perceive the wilderness, which now strikes us as unreal and made up for adventure stories. We are still left, then, with the question of where a denaturalized and secularized society finds a foundation that could, at least in the imagination, preserve its psychic stability. In modernity? Hmm?

Petrlík's alternately controlled and automatic thinking is like the metamorphoses in his drawings – one moment, people; the next, animals, plants, or mere shapes. This alternating current brings further strategies with which the artist steers our course. For example, the monumental hatching which covers all or nearly all of the area of his larger images can investigate the effects of meditation, play hide-and-seek with the viewer and pretend to be concealing something, or serve as procrastination, as a mistrust of empty voids, or as a hand, going on forever. It is the record of an event of which only a mere symbol or a small fragment of unhatched space remains. And it is the event itself. Petrlík thus also sometimes photographs his pieces and displays the photographs as enlarged prints, as pieces of documentation that also have autonomy. In the drawings in the exhibition, we are again forced to move along the area of the paper in a way different from that of reading a central motif or a work in perspective. As in the works of Hieronymus Bosch or illuminated manuscripts, we are led to proceed from motif to motif, without a map; to lose ourselves in the details and curlicues. Wandering is most likely the activity that Petrlík wishes to recommend us, or at least some subjectivity in going on journeys and a more lively approach to them. We are thus reminded of the artist's subjectivity in perhaps every image, most certainly in every drawing of the cycle, on display in the exhibition, taking the form of his autographed initials, O.P. He carefully builds them into the picture in a chosen location as a self-portrait staring at the viewer with curiosity. Perhaps this almost therapeutic assertion and acknowledgement of the artist's identity serves as evidence of his existence. Perhaps these self-portraits are like states of mind or ways for the artist to reassure himself and us of the existence of this world. A sting that checks whether we are awake or sleeping, as though it were important to read the work not just as a lone image, but in relation to its creator.

If at some point we would like to mention the handmade aspect of the work of the artists chosen for this exhibition, no artist, other than David Fesl, provides us with a better opportunity than Viktorie Valocká. Valocká is suspicious, perhaps even anxiously so, of

contemporary artistic trends, and her relationship to the craft in her work can thus seem romantically uncritical. Critique, as I mentioned before, is not the dominant program of the artists we selected, but despite this, we do feel that in Valocká's work, and perhaps also her attitudes, a certain kind of critique is present. She believes that the subject, with its imaginative potential, can change the values of society more than the calculated strategies of which we are the victims in our economic and political system. To imitate these systems in art makes no sense to her. Art has a certain autonomy; it involves not just our system of rational thought, but above all, our subconscious processes and senses, and knows other ways to have an effect. It is thus no coincidence that she shares some of her formal foundations with Artificialism and Poetism, more with the works of Jindřich Štýrský than Karel Teige – and their conflict between the avant-garde and autonomous conceptions of art perhaps have a distant echo in Valocká. The elements of Lyrical Abstraction, whose chewed-up forms remain in the memories of an older generation of Czechs from the tapestries and ceramic walls of socialist realist public buildings, here do not allow any inspiration that is uncritical or sentimental. Her relationship to the public sphere is underscored by numerous references to graffiti and British grime music.

This kneading of various approaches, movements, times, and styles; of forms and symbols; the fragile and the raw; the lyrical and the crude; the abstract and the self-evident; and lines and areas is significantly bolstered by her experimentation with technologies and materials. Even in her approach to painting, Valocká proceeds primarily from the medium of collage, to which she devoted herself while still in school. I remember, for example, a series of collages in which she used fragments in several variations of brown attained from baking parchment paper. Recently, Valocká has been working for a long period of time on an extensive cycle – or rather, cycles – of textile images created from exploiting more and more possibilities of tie-dye. The fabrics, which, at the hands of the artist, undergo a long process of soaking, boiling, wringing, folding, drying, bleaching, waxing, ironing, and dyeing, already have a past life. Valocká is not interested in new terrycloth bedsheets, but collects sheets that carry a piece of history, their own drawing or painting, which then combine in an accelerated artistic process. This reminds me of Ruskin's rather commanding view of products made by machine, which we can certainly, with a grain of salt, apply here: "Dead things communicate their deadness to those who use them." Valocká uses materials – bedsheets – with traces of life. In an earlier series, she placed them directly on a wall, and the imprecision of their form heightened the tension between the image and a fabric that references physicality through its original purpose, which, as it turns out, is not entirely lost through the artist's intervention. The material used in the work can also serve the body, but its visuality wins out, so it will only represent and suggest the body on the wall of a gallery or a home. At present, Valocká, seeming to accept this fact, has decided to anchor the fabric in a more stable way by hanging it on a rod that also reveals the other side of the piece to the viewer; this, again, makes the processual aspect of the work more accessible.

The almost alchemical approach of creating a work in a pot (not entirely, of course) is typical for Valocká not just in its process, but also in its formal aspects, which link varied, but not arbitrary, sources in collage-style assembling and layering (even in the case of coloring,

bleaching, and painting fabric), sometimes on the principle of contrast. This contributes to the images' ultimate expressivity and to their often darker coloring, which foists their set form on the senses and emotions of the viewer. This "culinary" approach to artistic creation, to make light of it, cannot help but evoke the feminist experiments of the 1960s, and even though the majority of Czech female artists from the postwar generation through the present reject feminism in their work, this link can be found in Valocká's work. After all, she herself admits an affinity to several artists who are spoken of as part of the feminist discourse in this country, primarily by curator and theoretician Martina Pachmanová. Valocká, in her master's thesis, writes: "A great source of initiative for me was the exhibition *Grey Gold* at the Brno House of Arts. The exhibition surveyed the recent works of Czech and Slovak female artists who emerged on the artistic scene after World War II and in the fifties and sixties. Daisy Mrázková and her abstract drawings, automatic and intuitive; Ludmila Padrtová and her paintings on textile; and Eva Cisárová-Mináriková's large felt book. The latter two strengthened me in the way I naturally treat fabric. I appreciate the continuity of these artists' focused work irrespective of trends of the period and tendencies that come and go. I was also influenced by an exhibition of designer Iva Vodrážková, who creates images by stitching together various patterned textiles."<sup>7/</sup> That Viktorie Valocká's work is not merely a display of private, reclusive imagination is also evidenced by her publication – several years ago, while still at school – of the beloved fanzine *Victory*, "a magazine for people interested in information".

A gender perspective can also be found in the works of Kateřina Holá. Their materiality, the technique of sewing, and their corporeality could be taken from a gender studies handbook. Despite this, Holá's approach is very personal and intimate, and is instead postgender or feminine. The way in which pieces of individual materials are tightened onto the stretcher in some cases resembles hanging laundry, and elsewhere, stretched leather. An image intrudes of the artist stretching pieces of textile onto the frame, which is perhaps connected to the limits of her body; this reminds us of the process art of the 1960s (Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Ana Mendieta, and so on), which was closely linked with an era of open social dissent and the battle for civil rights and ethnic, social, and sexual equality. The craftwork techniques of that period were used to highlight the marginalization of a range of social groups and the need for a new humanity. The technique of sewing, which is used to very visual effect and in which Holá does not hesitate to use red thread, literally tempts a feminist interpretation. It seems that the author is aware of this and addresses the problem directly. Despite all this, her work shows more than just the world of women.

A word which, surprisingly, has yet to appear in relation with contemporary art in this text is "existential". For Holá, this term is directly linked to the materiality of her work. The material which she uses is, to a considerable extent, referential; as in Valocká's work, it has a past, at some times more concrete than at others: soiled pieces of sewn fabric, bedsheets, and scarves, but also of old newspapers, wrapping paper and packaging, plastic bags, and painting canvases. It is as though in her work – her paintings – she would like to avoid at any cost what is essential to them: the technique of painting and a stretched canvas as a foundation. For this foundation is today not complete and empty; there is no place on Earth

unknown to humankind except perhaps the bottom of the ocean. The world is filled and crowded with humans, it is becoming more and more fragmented by their personal needs and has to a considerable extent been defiled, so to speak, by those who came before us. It is no tabula rasa of unprimed, or even primed, canvas redolent of white chalk. The materials used show their existentiality, which is linked with various modes of existence, including the artistic mode. It is, in any case, the result of activities other than painting – it bears the impressions of stains, marks from wiping paintbrushes, from warehouses and crumpling, from getting dirty. The long stitches – harnesses, even – of red thread evoke a sexual and traumatic subtext, the effort to keep a shattered identity in one piece. Some of the cuttings used are so narrow that they nearly escape the image of them as fabric and the possibility of bearing anything at all; despite this, the author stretches them onto the frame and onto other pieces of fabric in the attempt to give them a function and keep the whole thing in one piece.

In a truly existential way, Holá works with the motifs of tearing apart, tearing off, cutting out, detaching, absence – a disruption of completeness, a disruption of stability and normality. At times, the darned and heterogenous “canvas” stretched onto the frame looks like a pillory or, if we are not afraid to be a bit theatrical, like a crucifixion. At other times, the relationships between the materials are awfully prosaic, to the point that we are afraid to breathe and risk disturbing them. At still other times, we are afraid that they will disappear under our voyeuristic gaze or that the mood of a stormy afternoon, a morning coffee, or a sunset will vanish. This is to say that her catalogue of expression is very rich and that nothing is *a priori* forbidden. If, for example, she wishes to simply use a drawing, she will do so, but she will draw with silicon, or she will glue gold stars onto the picture. The materials’ link to corporeality is indicated by various traces and stains; the corporeality of the images is underscored by various creases and corners pushed through, going outside the edge. Some of her recent sheets are only held up by soaking and starching into some loose impression of a body. Holá puts humans into objects that are capable of capturing their presence and their thoughts, but often, from a materialist standpoint, have an ephemeral nature and do not promise survival. Perhaps she wants to express that even objects have their end, and that an inscription carved in stone (much less a sheet that has been slept in) need not go beyond human life. Although she grabs pieces of fabric and artificial materials from her vicinity, she does not use ready-mades as materials, precisely for their weak existential potential and overly distinctive indexicality, or in other words, for their close semantic connection with the context of their creation. She has come closer to ready-mades in her recent objects, in which she actually uses clothing, which is starched onto a support such that the human body has already left it and the object, instead, stands in for it. The clear and striking monochromaticity of the objects creates a significant difference between them and assigns them an unknown role in an unknown drama. They are, to a much greater extent, representatives bound to the script of an epic drama or a zombie film.

If with Holá we spoke of fragmented images that work with the psyche and existential themes, but also with the poetics of material connections, then we find similarly fragmented images in the art of Johana Pošová, whose working method combines two approaches: the intellectual and the sensual. She is interested, too, in everyday topics, ordinary human

relationships and fates, but also in more mysterious issues of civilization, as well as cultural and artistic topics, which blend with the others organically. All of these themes spread out equally on the surfaces of her photographs, which gladly cross into the surrounding space, aware of their relationship with their environment and also thematizing it. The process of an object crossing into its environment or into another object or body is the metaphorical principle of the world on which Pošová is commenting. She thus, in her installations, combines photographic prints with other works made with various techniques, such as woven textiles and objects (she works on this sort of combination primarily in collaboration with Barbora Fastrová). For example, in “...we let our hair down and turn the fan up to five” (2014), she fastened incense sticks to a picture of melons printed on dibond. The way the photographs are lit is often a part of the installation as well, and Pošová pays great attention to the lighting, because light has the ability – both symbolically in the photograph and physically on the surface of the photograph – to develop an atmosphere which, in connection with the incense sticks, can bring the viewer closer through experience to points that cannot be conveyed by reason. Pošová’s works provide not just profane leisure, but an incitement to sensual experience as another form of understanding. She thus also takes advantage of the effects and symbolism of elements like fire and water, where we can perhaps experience a relationship to the real that we think does not or will soon no longer exist, or exists only through us.

Themes from everyday life – speech bubbles, a heart, a stuck-out tongue, an eye – behave more like signs than in Holá’s work. Pošová has a need to relate to the world, especially the cultural world, in a strongly analytical way; the same applies for media and technology. She has been on the art scene for just a few years longer, and this links her to the previous generation of “post-conceptual” artists more than the other artists in this exhibition, or perhaps this link is due to the character and development of the medium of photography. This aspect of the connection is also suggested by the analytically grounded work of Rudolf Skopec, who works with photographs as well and studied in the same studio.<sup>8/</sup> Thus, when Pošová works with the technique of weaving, it is as a way of experiencing that sort of artistic activity; for the atmosphere, including the nostalgia, that that technology brings to its contact with the “cold” medium of photography; and because it bears a memory of women’s culture from the previous century. Pošová does not subordinate her photographs to analytic deconstruction in the way that artists did a few years ago in the search for the medium’s authenticity or objectivity and in attempts to metaphorically call for truthfulness in neoliberal politics and economics and show, through art, a more direct and transparent means of relating to reality through analog technology, photograms, or even working directly with photographic emulsion. For Pošová, the authenticity and subjectivity of life are more important in these processes than the capabilities of the medium. At the same time, though, she senses that photography and art in general will always relate from a distance, despite their alchemical (chemical) foundation. This conflict leads her not to experimentation with the photographic negative, as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde, but to collage-like approaches both within and outside the framework of photography and to photographing these physical processes. Her artistic language works on three levels: the factual, the signifying, and the abstract. Things, signs, and abstract spaces appear in her

photographs in various combinations – next to each other and across each other even within one category, for example when she uses signs and abstraction (a fur rug or a kimono spread out over space) as décor for an image of an object. These photographs serve as commentary on humankind's hierarchical relationship with the world. The principle of layering is thus also an engaged attitude, even though it has a poetic or purely decorative effect. Pošová is both a patient observer and a wild dancer, and this brings a melancholy look into her works, whose materiality and handmade nature add primitivity and whose ornamentation adds a sense of defiance.

I am not sure if the materiality of Rudolf Skopec's photographs on paper that he does not crop or straighten or sometimes even hang evinces a need to prove the authenticity, reality, or truth of the medium, but still, he is interested in examining precisely this sort of universal quality in art. The materiality of "classical" photographic technique and the formats of photography, which often relate to human corporeality, are suitable for the general and canonical nature of his work. The artist's philosophizing, psychologizing, and aesthetic deliberation and the conceptually determined goals of his projects are accompanied by some deviations from the path, which sometimes lead this process to a slightly different place or give it new content and make its clear direction uncertain. In his master's thesis, he writes: "Working with light-sensitive photographic paper is difficult; it is a process that requires precision. In my work, I have long followed the change in nature of my intent in connection with the possibilities of the material. In the course of my work I manage to investigate not just artistic expression itself, but also the limits (under ideal circumstances) of the technology of this precise medium. The method of my work consists of creating a highly precise image of how my result should look. As the work progresses, this image is considerably modified and corrodes, so to speak. The photographic material requires, as was mentioned above, precise treatment, but this is impossible given the size of the works that I make. I am thus constantly running up against the limits of the physical and of physics and am consequently forced to revise my own intent, which satisfies me artistically."<sup>9</sup>

Skopec's effort to achieve stipulated qualities through his art sometimes come off as almost absurd – why would someone want to prove something like beauty or monumentality with just one work of art? A work of art born as proof of an aesthetic quality? Nonetheless, these lofty goals serve as a good framework for experimental work with photography. Skopec dedicated one inquiry to the nature of things in his work *Vase*, in which he photographed the title object in the same setting using four different methods. What was important for Skopec, he says, was not the vase, but light. This repetition of the object in a notional series nonetheless comes off as a reaction to the approaches and aesthetics of Conceptual photography. Philosophy, in turn, would most likely see this work as based on Heidegger's discussion of the "thingness" of an object using the example of a jug – that is, a different hollow container. And we could most likely keep going. We can see how the work's declared goal suddenly appears alongside other issues, which grow in number over the course of its creation like a sponge soaking up history and art.

Skopec, too, finds importance in the method of decomposing an object into fragments and searching for a new logic with which to put it together as a whole. He places classical

photographic enlargements next to and across each other and thus points out the thought process encapsulated by this assembly. At the same time, he is assembling the shape of the medium itself, although the whole, despite the monumental effort to fully grasp it, in the end continues to show its fragmentary basis, which will never again be inherently homogenous; some traces of the dismantling will always remain. The goal of the work shown in our exhibition was to achieve a monumental effect. This sounds like a mockery of critics and theoreticians of art. What a substitution of qualities for content! Nonetheless, in carrying out this strange concept, he touches on a range of interesting issues including, for example, sincerity in art, as Skopec returns more than once to the avant-garde idea of art joined with life. Sincerity leads him to a continuity between artwork and artist, quoting Skopec: "The artist's responsibility is thus nothing else but the correlation between personality and artistic output. In this regard, a work must be a direct consequence of its artist. The artist, then, is responsibly communicating himself through his work. Through the work, he communicates himself outward, to the world; he exposes himself. In this he must be firm and responsible."<sup>10</sup> As I mentioned before, it seems as though Skopec chooses his themes based on how much they irritate art theory and criticism. The aforementioned sincerity serves to distinguish monumentality from cheap spectacularity.

It is evident from Skopec's thinking that even contemporary artists are seeking foundations for their work – their world – which could offer them some sort of stability. Nature is filled with forces synthesized together, a holistic approach, while culture, on the other hand, joins elements attracted to each other, but also excludes, impedes, and expands. Artists are so bound to culture that they can no longer relate to the natural directly, but only through the cultural. Rudolf Skopec, who has an analytical foundation, explored himself in this way both as a "natural" model and as an artist, and studied naturalistic depiction's place in the codes of contemporary art. The resulting self-portrait of the nude artist in his parents' bedroom has a rather Freudian effect in the context of his portfolio; nonetheless, the confrontation he creates between naturalism and contemporary movements in artistic thought opens new possibilities for interesting investigation.

*Unmonumental* was the name of an exhibition prepared by Richard Flood, Laura Hoptman, and Massimiliano Gioni for the New Museum in New York in 2007. David Fesl collects fragments of various materials from his immediate vicinity and joins them together to make new entities – plastics, cookies, wafers, gingerbread, netting, rings, corks, rubber bands, wires, threads, small pieces of metal, scraps of paper, images from magazines and printed material from the internet, or fabrics, withered organic waste, crumbs, peels, moss and lichens, needles, beads, marbles, dice, worn-down thumbtacks, pins, screws, clips, device cases and cables, SIM cards, little pieces of plastic products and caps – so that we can no longer even tell what they once were. David Fesl's objects are distinguished by their miniature scale, and in some cases also by their potential for monumental forms. The largest of the objects is no bigger than 18 cm, but the composition of their elements surprisingly attains the large-scale qualities of modernist objects surrounded by an aura (as if we were continuing with Rudolf Skopec's qualities). At the same time, they recall the art of jewelry workshops, home-soldered transistor circuits, a jumble of objects found in pockets and very

carefully assembled into a beautiful form, as though they were intended to attract the attention of bees, trash on a dustpan held together by a sedge-fly larva.

These objects must certainly be treated with as much care as expensive jewels, and with even more, because their material composition is by no means stable. Fesl does not care about his objects' utility, but develops fragile relationships among the individual bits of the things he uses as material. The choice of materials and the way they are put together is not random and have, if not a narrative function, then an associative one. In the framework of Fesl's pieces, even texts and images are handled like things or their casings. It is clear that they come from the artist's apartment or his surroundings; we can make out in them things that we, too, own, that everybody owns. They are thus also a portrait of us, and in them we become aware of the monolithic nature of the culture of our homes. As such, they also serve as anthropological pictures. One interesting aspect of Fesl's objects is the way he initiates a kind of action in them using identifiable and unidentifiable sections – parts in which we can orient ourselves and parts in which we are lost. The ways in which he connects small pieces of objects emphasizes the relationships between them; this could even be, to a certain extent, the legacy of relational aesthetics as formulated by Nicolas Bourriaud. The contrast between their preciousness and the disposable nature of their materials could even give them a critical radicality hidden in the beauty of their forms, as could their strong relationship to craft, which, especially in the past few years, has been perceived as a dynamizing force in the context of art, the critique of modernism, and the critique of capitalist labor stolen from individuals. In his text *Thinking through Craft*, Adamson derives the radical and subversive potential of craft from the fact that it is not art and that it has second-class status in the Industrial Age. He names five different principles which are incompatible with modernity, but paradoxically inseparable from it: the supplemental, the material, the technical, the pastoral, and the amateur.<sup>11</sup>

The emphasis put on the material heterogeneity of the objects, small pieces joined together into a shape by filigrees of steel wool and a hot glue gun, at times remind us of the large-scale composite sculpture of, for example, Rachel Harrison, and at other times, due to their thorough composition assembled from the smallest possible pieces of already unidentifiable objects, are abstract almost to the point of Vladimír Boudník's Structural Graphics or Art Informel. Sometimes, too, the shape of one of Fesl's objects is so harmonic, so absolute, that its fetishistic magic reminds us of the works of Vincent Fecteau. Nature, for Fesl, is thus a whole microcosm of things, and their parts and components, which surround us and show that there really is something one can use as the foundation of one's identity, so long as we have enough joining materials, even though the result will be fragile and require constant care as in a museum.

“We were supposedly liberated, but the cost was that we buried ourselves in technology, to which we became completely subordinate. While people in the distant past supposedly suffered in an order where they were subordinate to God and had a predestined monarch, both of whom had to be served, people in our times experience the euphoria of freedom in disorder, where they are subordinate to nobody and nothing, and thus have to serve Nothing and Nothingness.”<sup>12</sup> Ondřej Filípek attempts to find a new order and adjust the

relations between technological and “organic” things, which are homogenized in his works made with plaster. The morphology of his objects derives from industrial products, frequently construction materials, plastic pipes, and screws. He is testing to see what kind of world would emerge if cast from a matrix of industry and created by an artist. Roy Ascott believes that art is a way of creating reality. Filípek creates figures whose physicality is connected to people. These semi-technological figures are in a standing position and have a body stretched out vertically like Giacometti’s sculptures. Their poses can also be found in our catalogue of body language. They remind me of de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings, and their eternal poses speak to the long span of a lifetime, even though they were created from molds like plaster casts. They also, however, resemble stalks of tropical or carnivorous plants that did not grow from the ground, but were constructed out from the center of the body, from a found part.

Construction material is distinctive in that it is predetermined for joining, building, continuing, for growth, and this may be another reason why it attracts the author’s attention. Filípek focuses most of all on points of connection, where the dramatic moments of the sculpture occur; he exposes its construction, which, despite being reinforced with iron wire, tubes, and poles, reveals its handmade origin and its potential instability – in one place Filípek has even, alongside iron rods, used a wooden branch as a connector. These important nodes and joints are further wrapped in gauze like an injured human body. Iron tubes and wires, resembling calf bones, go into the plaster body in a very unkempt and emotional way. One figure’s collapse has helped it into some kind of balletic pose; the others stand like mannequins in a shop window for displaying merchandise – but they themselves contain the merchandise, in their construction and in their body, as their origin, and so they stand and show themselves, their creation, and their being. White plaster is a very appropriate material for this: it knows how to be quiet and classical, to speak about process and its sudden hardening into its permanent shape. Plaster was a favorite material of dematerialized art in its incomplete form in Czechoslovakia, perhaps for its whiteness and its proximity to the body, as the material from which a body is cast or from which a record of it is made. It is, however, also a favorite material of contemporary artists, who, on the contrary, emphasize its materiality, its aesthetic quality, its openness to a range of technological approaches, and thus its potential for experimentation and process. Last but not least, it is beautiful for its cheapness and accessibility, and thus becomes an ordinary thing. Filípek wants to end mechanical processes of creation, and as such, his manufactured object follows a process of naturalization – he creates from it a natural form that is original and has its own subjectivity, just like humans supposedly have, to the greatest extent, immediately after birth. The shape of the technological item that serves as the DNA of Filípek’s future sculpture represents the complex of characteristics and relationships that it brings to the new work, though transformed in the process of organically creating a form, which once again stands in for the complexity of the new object whose nature is neither technological nor human.

Unlike the other works on display, the collaborative work of Alžběta Bačková, Lucie Rosenfeldová, and Martina Smutná has been created specifically for an exhibition and a

given space. The trio of individually distinctive young artists has been working together for just a short time. In fact, they had previously created just one work together, an exhibition called *Open Call* that was realized specifically for the UM Gallery at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. In essence, this exhibition was an institutional critique of the selection process for the projects that dominate the gallery's program; at the same time, it pointed out the bias and oversimplified understanding of this field of art. In a staged open call, the artists reflect on the possible merits of the open call format in both film and gallery settings. They themselves had to win a competition to put on the exhibition in the UM Gallery with a concept that established this format as its theme. The main protagonist of the film, the winner of the open call and the creator of an "organic set design" based on the creation of a realistic background for films computer-generated from a mycosystem of fungi, emphasizes the advantage of his method in a fictional documentary: "I think that your film in particular calls for an unusual way of dealing with a virtual environment. The sets should not be just dead witnesses to the story, but quite the opposite. Imagine a film in which everything is alive, where all things breathe and grow." We know of similar environments from several theories connected with O-O-O and the Anthropocene which emphasize the link between all the elements of the world in one great organism, in which the smallest movement is reflected in the other parts of the system. The artists' work is thus also a current way of coming to terms with these concepts, as is also shown by another component of the work – paintings used as theater set pieces.

The film – which in itself is an interesting combination of, on the one hand, objective and documentary approaches, and on the other, fiction and the potency and difficulties of an imaginative story – appears in the gallery space surrounded by the equally dominant set pieces, which, in defiance of their artist's viewpoint, retain their classic, stationary form and their symbolic language and transfer the forms and themes of his "progressive method" to archaic theater diction. They depict a setting taken from the film *The Last of Aporver*, which here represents the "organic set design". Pieces of fungal formations and symmetric oriental decoration cover the entire surface of the set pieces. One of the set pieces has old cultural symbols and figures of the Industrial Age germinating like a collage. These physically emphatic set pieces, rigid as they are, are important players in the installation as a whole: they make the scenery for the film, so to speak, and at the same time occupy space and assert their own autonomy. One represents figural painting, while another stands for ornamental style, and another, a computer desktop. They thus comment on the spaces of a range of cultures and hold the key to the interpretation of the entire project. The film is also a film about the creation of a film and a critical contemplation of both the established mechanisms of individual and collective labor in the production of a piece and the creative potential that these mechanisms do or do not enable – both in film and, figuratively, in art in general. The film alternates evenly between acted scenes in which the set designer explains his method – that is, a rational approach to thinking – with imaginative takes from the as yet unfinished film *The Last of Aporver*, which will apparently be a dull fantasy film. The third component is a set of directions that sounds like a recording from a supposed discussion during the open call, presented as post-internet hypertext: "For both sides and the project itself, the clash of critical opinions is a better chance for the realization of the project and for

increasing its market value. It is this very manner of conflict which provides an opportunity to create a lasting work relationship.” This is thus a project commenting on its own creation and on stable procedures of production (creation), but also on the conditions and processes connected with the realization of these genres – in the words of the artists: “A young creator is applying for a position with a movie. The emphasized uniqueness of his project combats its purposefulness and his ambition to succeed. In the heat of the moment, individual skills are stretched to the max. We are interested in how the subject matter of creative activity is bent by the current demands determined by the fictitious market. It can only grow through the net of requirements when it takes on the form of unavoidable compromise. It seems to be predetermined which aspects will be allowed to develop and which will remain inchoate. Internal and external pressures affect not only the man but also the project.”

The trio’s new work, called *Fading Relationship*, has been realized specifically for the goals of this exhibition and concerns the topic of love. In essence, the new piece works with the exhibition space in a similar way, placing in it a short film together with objects. This time, the two components have been created in a more closely linked process that is conditioned on the use of the same materials, which also become one of the work’s themes. Reflections on the properties of functional textiles and on the technologies used to produce them are freely interwoven with the construction of a narrative about the twists and turns of a contemporary relationship. Safety fabrics, with their exceptional properties, form the symbolic background of the story and, at the same time, a foundation for experimentation with objects in a general sense.

*Against Nature* is a survey of the Czech artistic scene concentrated primarily in Prague, as well as a search for the artists’ themes and for an overarching curatorial concept that would not violate their works with an *a priori* gaze. It presents a generation that is still connected with the school environment which they have recently departed or in which they are still developing. The themes that they address, the tendency towards a subjective approach that opens up new possibilities for learning and once more gives artists a chance to relate to empirical exploration, represent what is still a very much open and unfinished chapter in the general course of contemporary art, and one which we will attempt to develop further in the program of events accompanying the exhibition.

1/ Zoë Gray, *Making is Thinking*, e-book, Rotterdam, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2011.

2/ One contribution to the catalog that is interesting in this respect is Gavin Delahunty’s *Thinking / Not Thinking*, which urges us to be careful in equating creation and thought, as this assumes a correlation between a creative hand and a working mind. Work does not easily equal thought. In his argument he uses a text from Hannah Arendt: “the underlying tie between the laborer of the hand and the laborer of the head is the laboring process, in one case performed by the head, in the other by some other part of the body. Thinking however, which is presumably the activity of the head, though it is in some way like laboring—also a process which probably comes to an end only with life itself—is even less ‘productive’ than labor; if labor leaves no permanent trace, thinking leaves nothing tangible at all... Whenever the intellectual worker’s wishes to manifest his thoughts, he must use his hands and acquire manual skills just like any other worker. In other words, thinking and working are two different activities which never quite coincide; the thinker who wants the world to know the content of his thoughts must first of all stop thinking and remember his thoughts.” (Hannah

Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1958, p. 90.)

3/ Iain Hamilton Grant, "Does Nature Stay What-it-is?: Dynamics and the Antecedence Criterion", in: (Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, ed.) *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne, reprint 2011, p. 66–82.

4/ Michel Serres, Paul Galvez, "Second Nature", in: *Artforum*, September 2013; URL: <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201307&id=42638>.

5/ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, 1884, <http://gutenberg.org>, p. 19–20.

6/ Erika Balsom, "Against the Novelty of New Media: The Resuscitation of the Authentic", in: (Omar Kholeif, ed.), *You Are Here. Art After the Internet*, Manchester, London, Cornerhouse, SPACE 2014, p. 69–70.

7/ Viktorie Valocká, *Bad Sheets*, master's thesis, Prague, Academy of Fine Arts in Prague 2015.

8/ The photography studio at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague.

9/ Rudolf Skopec, *Rozvaha Umění*, master's thesis, Prague, Academy of Art, Architecture and Design in Prague 2016.

10/ Ibid.

11/ Glenn Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, Oxford, Berg Publishers 2010, p. 2; *Thinking Through Craft*, Oxford, Berg Publishers 2007, p. 4.

12/ Jan Stern, *Media, psychoanalýza a jiné perverze*, Prague, Malvern 2006, p. 4.

