

‘Invasive’ Writing: Exploring Subjectivity, Performance and Politics in the Art of Jiří Kovanda

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On 24 July 2017, I meet up with Czech artist Jiří Kovanda on Wenceslas Square in the capital of Prague. At this square, he produced the first of a series of actions and installations in the 1970s and 1980s at a time when action and installation art was regarded unacceptable by the Communist regime. Fascinated by photographs of his work,¹ I had asked Kovanda a few days earlier if he could take me to some of the locations he had used at the time. I hoped that a walking interview would trigger vivid memories of the events and create space for reflections on art production under communism.

I had first met the artist five months earlier when I accompanied a group of students from the Academy of Fine Art in Prague on a day out. Most of them studied with the artist Tomáš Vaněk, Head of the ‘Studio of Intermedial Production III’ where Kovanda worked as an assistant. I liked Kovanda’s quiet demeanour, especially after I became aware of his international success, not so long ago having performed in the Tate gallery in London. Despite this, he seemed very approachable and down to earth. My impression was reinforced when I interviewed him a few months later in the garden of the Academy, talking about his art, his approach to teaching and life more generally. The walking interview was our third interaction. As will become clear, as we strolled through the city, we tried to find common ground, determining the meaning and political relevance of his performative works.

The text that follows consists of two parts. Part I is written as a multi-vocal piece that describes the ethnographic encounter from two perspectives: Kovanda’s and my own. The stylistic experiment explores the relation between politics and

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¹ The photographs were taken by an unnamed friend of his, and were reproduced in several publications and on the internet.

performativity, investigates tensions and overlaps between artistic and everyday subjectivity, and zooms in on the interactive dimension of ethnographic knowledge production. Framed as 'invasive' writing, the narrative presents Kovanda's experience from a first-person perspective, creating an illusionary access to (or the 'invasion' of) Kovanda's inner feelings and reflections. Part 2 reflects on the advantages and challenges offered by the narrative style, and presents some final thoughts on the theme of this special issue: the interplay of politics, performance, protest and power.

Part 1: 24 July 2017

When I appear above ground at the Museum Metro entrance, I see her standing by 'the horse'² between some Chinese tourists. She rang me a few days ago, asking if I could help her with her research. She is writing a book on Czech art and politics... Good luck with that!

How old would she be? About ten years younger than me? She told me in March that her father had left our joyous Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1948 when he was in his early twenties. That's a plus, by the way. Not that her dad couldn't stand the situation anymore, and ran before the all seeing eye of big brother Stalin had fully opened, but that she's been here numerous times, visiting her grandma, having at least some knowledge of life under Communism. Awareness beyond the simplistic Cold War rhetoric that reduces everything and everyone to politics, and imagines 'The Communist East' as a place and time of pure terror and oppression...There was more to us than just that!

She wants to 'walk the walk', the one I have done on at least two occasions, once with my friend the art historian Pavlína Morganová and once with some of my students. It's almost a pilgrimage, a 'sacred' walk that connects locations in Prague where I made my small interventions many years ago. Unnoticed disruptions. Performances. Call it 'Art'. I remember so vividly feelings of shock and wonder, when I first saw that toilet by Duchamp³. The shock that anything could be art. How liberating! ... But wait, let me concentrate, here she comes, a camera around her neck. Well, well, she turns her head to kiss me on my cheek.

² This is how Prague citizens often refer to the equestrian statue of King Wenceslas, produced by Josef Václav Myslbek between 1887 and 1924. Czech independence was proclaimed in front of the monument on 28th October 1918.

³ 'Fountain' is one of Duchamp's most famous works and is widely seen as an icon of twentieth-century art. The original, which is lost, consisted of a standard urinal, usually presented on its back for exhibition purposes rather than upright, and was signed and dated "R. Mutt 1917". Tate's work is a 1964 replica and is made from glazed earthenware painted to resemble the original porcelain. The signature is reproduced in black paint. *Fountain* has been seen as a quintessential example, along with Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* 1914, of what he called a 'readymade', an ordinary manufactured object designated by the artist as a work of art (and, in Duchamp's case, interpreted in some way)', accessed 12/10/2018, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>.

Jirka Kovanda asked me to meet him at 10am near 'the horse' on Václavské Náměstí. I knew from several publications and the interview last week that this was where he had performed his first actions. I walk up the street, quickly get a cappuccino for the ridiculous price of 90 crowns, and approach the monument. As usual these days, lots of tourists, what a difference to when I came here as a child in the sixties and seventies. When I walk past the monument, I see the artist coming out of the metro. I wave, and we kiss each other, Dutch style.

I am not fully sure what she wants. When I ask, she laughs nervously and jokes that 'this is a joint performance'. I take her to the fence behind the monument. Here we go again, but why not, the sun is shining and she is genuinely interested. And of course I don't really mind being the centre of attention. Who would have known, thirty-two years ago, that I would return to this spot, re-enacting myself? Now teaching at the Academy of Arts, no longer working in the dark depository of the National Museum. It's still weird... Let's concentrate, she's turning on the recorder.



Fig. 1: Kovanda stands on the spot of his first action

He smiles and says, 'This is where I stood, I acted as if I was waiting for someone (figure 1). I had created a script beforehand that described the movements I was supposed to make, so what I did was in fact theatre. It was like...I behaved according to the script. But of course, it was not obvious because my movements were completely normal. I was the only one who knew, and my friend, of course, who took the pictures.



Fig. 2: Looking at the catalogue

Later that day, when we sit in a café, we look at the photographs of his performances, printed in his catalogue (figure 2). There he stands in 1976, a younger version of himself. The accompanying text says: 'I follow a previously written script to the letter. Gestures and movements have been selected so that passers-by will not suspect that they are watching a "performance"'.⁴ I wonder about his assertion, the other day, that his art is 'not political'. He stressed that several times. In fact, it reminded me of the numerous times artists complained to me in 1991 that they were getting fed up of Western journalists who were not really interested in their work, but just wanted to hear an adventurous story of 'political dissent'. Yet I cannot help reading the political into his work. This has everything to do with my interest in the emergence of an official art world that was more or less controlled by the Party, a political regime that also controlled public space. As I see it, Kovanda has appropriated public space to create art that does not agree with the official Party line. Does that not make it into a gesture of resistance?

Back to 2017, to the fence. After taking a few pictures, we cross the road, turn our backs to the museum and start walking down the street. After about fifty meters we stop. 'I don't remember the exact spot', he says, 'I think it was a bit further down, where those people are

⁴ Edith Jeřábková, "A View of Jiří Kovanda," in *Jiří Kovanda White Blanket Secession*, ed. Annette Südbek, (Vienna: Secession, 2010), 7.

standing'. I suggest he takes on *The Pose*, it's the one that has been engraved in my mind since I first saw the photograph. A crucified Jesus! (figure 3) In this case my association with political dissent was even more immediate: surely this was a physical statement of suffering and defiance? Or do I misunderstand?

With anticipation and the photograph in my mind's eye, I see him spreading his arms wide. Here it comes, I somehow expect a magical moment, a cross-over into the past.



Fig. 3: The picture of the action in 1976 – copyright Jiří Kovanda

I stretch my arms out wide (figure 4). I am reminded of those days, when I so much felt the urge for human contact, and when I designed actions to reflect on the ways in which people are always formed by society. I thought that by acting out an everyday situation in a scripted manner, so in an extraordinary way, I could pose universal questions about human nature. People keep misinterpreting my interventions as critical commentary on the oppressive workings of the Communist regime. But it is more complicated than that. The art historians Jiří Ševčík and Georg Schöllhammer explained that very well in the transcription of an interview that appeared in one of my catalogues.⁵ Schöllhammer noted that '[o]ne of the biggest misunderstandings about conceptual work in socialist eastern Europe is that it is immediately seen as anti-communist, as a direct criticism of the regime'.⁶ He stressed that, if there is a political aim in my work, 'the political' is not simply a direct reaction to the political system, but rather a reflection on the way in which the individual is shaped by societal norms. He understood that well. It has never been my direct aim to take a political position through my work.⁷ He argued that my work 'is not political in the way the Prague Spring is political, or in the sense that the dissidents used politics by using

⁵ Jiří Ševčík, and George Schöllhammer, "Interview," in *Jiří Kovanda, 2005–1976 Akce a Instalace*, ed. Vít Havránek (Prague: JRP Ringier, transit.cz, 2006), 110-111.

⁶ Ševčík, and George Schöllhammer, "Interview," 110, my translation

⁷ Ševčík, and George Schöllhammer, "Interview," 110, my translation

the West to communicate their protest'. Instead, I used my art to critique and overcome 'the ossification of society in the 1970s', taking 'distance, refusing the socialization of [my] own work'.⁸ Ševčík noted that, unlike some of the earlier performance artists, I did not let myself, 'be limited by a moralising tone' but wanted to reflect on society, taking a step back 'to expose subjectivity' more generally, so that 'through a minimal variance between [my] own body and the societal body, [I would] understand and acknowledge [my]self'.⁹

I look through the lens, take a few shots... But then, the magical moment doesn't realise. What is it? I'm not sure. Something is wrong... In the original performance, was he not standing with his body turned in the other direction?



Fig. 4: Kovanda spreads his arms

I also performed everydayness in other performances, for example in the one where I softly bumped into passers-by, and the one where I turned around on an escalator and stared into people's eyes. I am quite a shy person so that felt really awkward... But that was intentional, putting myself in a awkward position... Hang on, what is she saying now? Did I not face this way in 1976? But I did! She says she saw the photograph in the catalogue a few days ago, might she be right? ... Wait a minute, I remember it now, she is!

He looks puzzled, then laughs and says: Yes, you are right, it was like that! You remember it even better than me! He turns around and I take another photograph (figure 5)

⁸ Ševčík, and George Schöllhammer, "Interview," 110, my translation

⁹ Ševčík, and George Schöllhammer, "Interview," 111, my translation



Fig. 5: Kovanda turns around, now facing the right direction

We cross the road and walk on, downhill, until we reach the escalator where he performed another scripted action, turning around on the escalator to stare into the eyes of people behind him (figure 6). He says it is the exact same escalator, but that in the 1970s, many more people used it because there was no crossing above ground. When I ask him whether people laughed at him when he turned around, he says 'no! And that 'it wasn't funny!' I try to picture the action, back then, and remember how people used to be suspicious of unfamiliar others, careful because anybody could be an informer. During one of my visits in the mid-seventies, my relatives became very worried because one of them, who had had too much to drink during a dinner party, had sung an anti-Communist song when we returned home by tram. Their fear did not surprise but still shocked me as it made the everyday effect of repression so real. I was 14 year old, it was 1975.

But still...might the action on the escalator not have been perceived as a comic moment? 'Why not funny?', I ask. He frowns. 'It created a terribly uncomfortable moment. It was as uncomfortable for me as for them'. 'So why put yourself in that position?'

Why did I? It is hard to explain. 'Well', I try, 'I think it's good, sometimes, to put yourself in an awkward position, to overcome barriers, overcome shyness and embarrassment. It was *really* a bit embarrassing, but that was good.' 'So does that mean that it made acutely aware of your physical presence', she asks. She hesitates, '... like self-harmers... people who cut themselves?'...'You mean like Štembera?', I reply, referring to Petr, an artist whose action art comprised of inflicting pain on his own body. He called one of his works 'Grafting', inserting a small branch into a cut in his arm. If I remember it correctly, he did that performance in 1975. I look at her. Would she find that horrifying?



Fig. 6: standing by the escalator

Luckily, Jirka does not seem to be taken aback when I bring up the theme of self harm. In the role of the anthropologist, you always have to walk a fine line, gauging what is an acceptable question and pulling back when you have crossed a line. But he is ok, he starts talking about the body artist Petr Štembera. 'I heard about his work', I say. A black and white photograph comes to mind of Štembera with his left sleeve rolled up, holding a small branch against a cut in his skin while another person is about to tie the branch to the artist's arm. 'Didn't he strive for self-empowerment and self-experience through these kinds of actions?'

I later read on the website of the Centre for Contemporary Arts Prague, an excellent resource that presents Czech art history from a post-Communist perspective, that Štembera's events were, 'based on post-war existentialist thought. In an uncertain world man could only confirm his existence through acting in the here and now. Performance was a personal act demonstrating free will in an unfree world. It was a method of liberation as well as an expression of anxiety'.¹⁰

Existentialist thought was not specifically related to Communist oppression, but linked to a broader sense of uncertainty in Europe and the US. The question remains, however, whether Czech performance art was not also shaped by the specific kind of non-freedom during the Normalisation of the 1970s and 1980s. This was a period of increased oppression that started soon after the Warsaw-pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. It made an end to the more liberal politics of the late 1960s.¹¹ So I wonder, apart from providing commentary on power

¹⁰ Pavlína Morganová, "Petr Štembera," Artlist, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.artlist.cz/en/petr-stembera>.

¹¹ Jan Rychlík and Vladimír Penčev, *Od minulosti k dnešku: Dějiny Českých zemí* (Prague: Vyšehrad, 2018), 566. Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89: A Political and*

dynamics inherent in the human condition, to what extent did Czechoslovak action art directly relate to the concrete experience of a particular kind of state repression: Politics with a capital 'P'?

Back to the wider theme of existentialism. If Štembera's action art enacted self-autonomy, how can I relate Jirka's actions to Štembera's approach? Jirka did not use physical pain to feed a sense of independent self, but instead, produced a moment of self-inflicted awkwardness. Directing a staged activity, he purposely disturbed everyday routines. The key, it seemed to me, was taking control through self-scripted action. I think I have gained some insights.¹²

As we move down the escalator, Jirka explains that the experience of awkwardness made him realise how unspoken rules always regulate everyday behaviour. 'Through that action I became conscious of unconscious psychological barriers with regard to private space'.

'So you created the extraordinary to make the ordinary visible?', she asks. This is turning out to be a pleasant walk. I think she gets me. 'Exactly! I used the same principle in my installations, which were rather minimal interventions. You don't need large, aggressive statements. A small change is enough to create awareness of the everyday.'

As we walk in the direction of Old Town Square, we speak about his clandestine get-togethers in the nineteen seventies with Petr Štembera, Honza Mlčoch and Karel Miler in the Museum of Decorative Arts (Uměleckoprůmyslové museum or UMPRUM), where Štembera worked as a night guard. They would invite a small group of trusted friends and perform action art, using the back entrance to get in (Figure 7).

When we arrive at Old Town Square, I describe my last action to which I invited eight friends. (Figure 8) 'I asked them to gather here', I explain, 'and as they stood around chatting, waiting for me to start, I suddenly ran away. When I did not return, they eventually understood that the disappearance was the actual performance'. I smile a broad smile, recalling it.

So he purposely acted against the audiences' expectations 'to witness an action'. This would be in line with his earlier work, wanting to create an awareness of normality. While abnormal for most people, for the small circle of people around Jirka and other underground artists, actions and performances were, if not normal, at least familiar. His vanishing act reminds me of a more recently staged absence, when he hid behind a pillar during the opening of one of his exhibitions in Berlin. He told me about it during our last interview. 'As I see it, in both cases, there was a tension between presence and absence,' I suggest.

Social History (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 147-151. For photographs of the 1968 invasion, see *1945...Liberation...1968 Occupation: Soviet Troops in Czechoslovakia* (Prague: Prague House of Photography), 2008.

¹² Interestingly, he only got to know Štembera after a visit to Poland where he was first exposed to conceptual art. This seems typical of the situation at the time. Due to the lack of a public space for conceptual art, those involved in performances did not necessarily know each other. See also Pavel Humhal, "Jiří Kovanda," *Artlist*, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.artlist.cz/en/jiri-kovanda-100538/>.



Fig. 7: Pointing at the back entrance of the Museum of Decorative Arts

Presence and absence. 'You mean the idea that a person is physically there, but at the same time isn't?' That seems an interesting way of framing it. 'I like that', I respond. She smiles. I did not understand her earlier when, at the start of our walk, she already mentioned the idea of presence (*přítomnost*) and absence (*nepřítomnost*), suggesting that this may be something I am working with. I thought she referred to presence as the opposite of an absent past, which is not my theme. But presence as 'being-there' as opposed to absence as 'not-being-in-the-same-space', yes, that does resonate with my work.

He looks at me with a focused expression, and says that this certainly resonates with his fascination with 'hiding'. I want to push him further. 'Why do you do that?', I ask, 'where does it come from? Do you simply not want to be there, or is it a game, or an ironic statement? Is there a psychological reason for hiding? Or is it all these things at the same time?'

'I'm not sure', I tell her, 'certainly during the exhibition opening in Berlin there was a clear expectation that I should be there, so my absence signaled a deflection from the usual, the normal, the ingrained...and then, I don't know...if...'

He is searching for words. Perhaps another question helps. 'Or do you want to surprise people by doing something unexpected?' Psychological reasons might be relevant', he says, 'because I use the idea of hiding quite often. When I think of my childhood, one of my most favourite games was hiding. Whenever I managed to hide myself so well that nobody could find me I would feel complete victory! And in the nineteen seventies, I created a few actions where I hid myself in street corners. The act had no function outside the action.'



Fig. 8: The Old Town Square with the Jan Hus Monument in the background

She looks at me with interest. I think more about the things I liked doing as a child. 'Hiding might be part of a game,' I continue, 'you may observe or follow something while not wanting to be seen. An animal photographer, for example, wants to see without being seen. When I was very young I found that a romantic idea, to be a nature photographer who needs to hide. Perhaps that is why hiding has appeared in my art.'

As he is speaking, I reflect on our unfolding dialogue. Ethnography is so often a mutual search for interpretation, a negotiation of perspectives. My questions have led him to speak about childhood. It seems we are getting further away from the idea that his art had anything to do with Politics - the political situation of the time.

I think about the difference between hiding through physical absence and hiding despite physical presence. He has done both in different actions. Standing behind a pillar is a clear example of staged physical absence. By contrast, the act of inconspicuous performance in public, hiding artistic and documentary aims, exemplifies the latter. In both cases, he used his body to reveal the workings of social 'normality'. Phrased like that, there is an obvious comparison to the work of the nature photographer. Is that the link to his childhood?

We have almost reached the Municipal Library. I think more about the theme of hiding and tell her that one art critic, Karel Císař or Pospíšil, I can't remember, once wrote that I often place things in the corners of larger spaces in my installations. The works won't be completely hidden, but they won't be directly noticeable either. 'Maybe this has indeed a psychological dimension', I say, 'the wish to be present while not being noticed!' She is right, the theme appears in both actions and installations. I smile. 'A psychoanalyst should analyse this!'

As we stop in front of the Municipal Library, he jokes about needing a psychoanalyst to analyse his fascination with inconspicuous presence. I make an instant association. Could I say it? Is it too risqué? I take the chance. 'So did you ever want to be a secret agent?' I use the word 'estébák', referring to the STB (Státní bezpečnost), the Communist secret police force that served as repressive intelligence agency from 1945 to 1990. With the help of a widespread network of informers, the organisation's aim was to suppress activities considered to be anti-Communist. 'No', he says, with a neutral voice. 'I never wanted to be that.' Perhaps I have gone too far? I try to lighten the conversation, making a more obvious connection to his artistic approach. 'It seems interesting, secret observation. You know, you are there, but nobody knows you are there, it resonates with your work.' His face lights up. 'That is interesting, it never occurred to me. You mean a spy?'

She surprised me there. She laughs, perhaps relieved? 'Yes, "spy" does sound more romantic than "estébák"!', she says. 'No', I repeat, 'I did not want to be that. The idea of a spy is of course adventurous, full of drama. But I don't like dramatic things. Perhaps I am not so interested in following someone, but rather in being unseen.' We turn to the building behind us (Figure 9).



Fig. 9. In front of the Municipal Library



Fig. 10: a poster advertising the exhibition by Richard Deacon in the Municipal Library



Fig. 11. The Municipal Library

He draws my attention to the building in front of us (Figures 10 and 11). 'So', he says, this is the Municipal Library. There is obviously a gallery on the first floor, the Gallery of the Capital of Prague (Galerie hlavního města Prahy), as you see there is an exhibition on of Richard Deacon's work'. I don't know the artist, but later find out that I should. He is a famous British abstract sculptor who won the prestigious Turner Prize in 1987.

From a longer term historical perspective, the exhibition has strong political significance. There is no way that Deacon's work would have been presented in an officially funded Czech

gallery during the Normalisation period. Its presence indexes the transformation from State-Socialism to Democracy, from a politically censored artworld to an artworld that, while not completely unconnected to state politics, is partially shaped by transnational trends in global Biennales and art markets. But why has Jirka taken me here?

'Well', I say, 'before 1990, the building housed the depository of the National Gallery, and I worked here for seventeen years. Karel Miler, also an action artist, was my superior, he was curator of the collection. The space still exists. It looks differently, at the time the paintings were stored on wooden shelves, today they are hung on metal grids. But otherwise it is completely the same.' She asks if the National Gallery organised exhibitions in the building. I explain that they did, but that they looked very different to today's displays. Of course she understands me, she's done enough research. These would have been displays of officially accepted art, vetted by the Communist Art Union. Behind the scene, however, a lot more went on. 'Between the official exhibitions', I explain, 'I used the space to take pictures of my own work, and we organised illegal exhibitions for small groups of invited friends. Václav Ztratil, for example, had an exhibition here and I presented an installation together with Lumír Hladík, a good friend of mine'. In the 1970s, Lumír performed numerous actions in and around his hometown Český Brod. At one point he placed a sheet of white paper on the pavement in front of a shop. He basically tested whether people would ignore the object and walk over it, or perceive it as an obstacle. Their reactions revealed something about people's confrontations with the unexpected, a theme that goes beyond people's life choices during Normalization.¹³

I don't know Lumír Hladík's work, but do remember Václav Ztratil's drawings from an exhibition in the early nineties – large sized works consisting of criss-crossing and parallel lines. I'm sure that Morganová mentioned Hladík in her book on action art. I'll have to look it up later. I find the idea of unofficial exhibitions in official exhibition spaces fascinating. And the fact that these spaces still exist while political times have changed also strikes a note. 'If only walls had eyes', is a cliché, but a powerful one. I so often try to picture my father in 1948, walking through the streets of Prague and Brno, just before he decided to escape to the West. I want to be back in time and observe him. Seeing while not being seen.

Isn't that weird', I tell him, that these building are still here? There were Nazis, Communists...and we standing here now, in different times. The texts and photographs that you produced are also still here...' My thoughts go further, to themes that I have written on in the

13 The entry in Artlist reads as follows: 'Hladík was loosely associated with Prague's body art triage (Petr Štembera, Karel Miler, Jan Mlčoch) and he cultivated an intense friendship with Jiří Kovanda. Some of Hladík's early action pieces were performed in his native Český Brod and its vicinity. In his action piece 'Innocent paper, innocent people!' (1976), Hladík laid a sheet of white wrapping paper on the sidewalk in front of a shop he singled out for this event. Passersby had to decide how to deal with this "impediment"; whether to jump over it, walk around it or step on it. Hladík documented this action piece. It is evident from many of the photographs that people of the Czechoslovakia's "normalization" era tried to avoid this obstacle at all cost by stepping into the street, lifting up and carrying baby carriages or jumping over it' (Morganová 2011, "Lumír Hladík." Accessed February 18, 2019. <https://www.artlist.cz/en/lumir-hladik-107287/>).

past, the potential of things to outlive their creators¹⁴, the dialectics of materiality and interpretability,¹⁵ the.... But Jirka has other thoughts, he mentions the dilapidated state of the buildings before 1989 and their transformation after restoration. 'Before, the grey, ramshackle buildings might have looked romantic', he says, 'but they are in a much better state now'.

We walk further down the street. When I ask if he was not afraid to be found out by the secret police when he organised and participated in illegal events, he says they were careful not to attract attention, and that only small groups of up to ten people would gather to attend. And they did not turn on any visible lights. 'So somehow we again touch upon the theme of presence and absence', I suggest. I think about the provisional title of the book that I am working on, 'The Politics of In/visibility: Czech Art and Politics in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century'. While I now understand that I should not condense the issue of presence and absence to questions around political domination and resistance, it can of course not be denied that the need for Jirka and other action artists to be invisible was directly related to Normalisation Politics.

So where should we go now? I know, I'll take her to UMPRUM, the other place where we held secret meetings. After that I'll show her some of the locations of my interventions. As we walk in the direction of the museum, I tell her how hard it was to find books about art beyond the officially accepted genres. During the more liberal nineteen sixties, the situation was better. I give the example of Jindřich Štyrský, one of the leading Czech surrealist artists who co-founded the art group Dvětsil in 1920. His works were of course forbidden during the Nazi occupation and the Stalinist years. But when, from the earlier nineteen sixties onwards, censorship started to relax, articles about avant-garde art began to appear in the official art journals. After the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, however, censorship was reinstated. 'When the conditions worsened in the nineteen seventies', I explain, 'it was hard to get information about Czech avant-garde or Western art. Up to about 1973, 1974, you could find something if you knew where to go. Behind Department Store Máj was a publishing house that sold technical literature. At the back there was a small exhibition space where they used to display books on various themes. Around Christmas they would always display art books, also foreign ones. So I used to go there and spent a lot of money. But that ended in 1974. After that, there was nothing. Really, nothing at all! I was twenty-one at the time.'

1974, that's when I was 15 years old. By then, my father had been unable to visit Czechoslovakia for twenty-six years,¹⁶ and I had visited my Czech grandmother about six times.

¹⁴ See Maruška Svašek, "Affective Moves: Transit, Transition and Transformation," in *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects. Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*, ed. Maruška Svašek (Oxford: Berghahn, 2012), 1-40. See also, Maruška Svašek, "(Memories of) Monuments in the Czech Landscape: Creation, Destruction, and the Affective Stirrings of People and Things," in *Negotiating Memories from the Romans to the Twenty-first Century: Damnatio Memoriae*, eds. Fuglerud, Øivind, Kjersti Larsen & Marina Prusac-Lindhagen (New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2020).

¹⁵ See Maruška Svašek, 1996 "What's (the) Matter? Objects, Materiality and Interpretability," *Etnofoor* 9(1): 49-70.

¹⁶ That only happened a few years later, when refugees who had left in 1948 were given the opportunity from the Czechoslovak government to get a visa, but only after paying a large amount of money to 'pay off' their citizenship.

Jirka says that he still has the books on surrealism that he bought in the early seventies. 'I also managed to buy a publication that was really important to me,' he adds, 'it was called *Environments and Happenings*. In that book, I first read about Knížák. I must have bought it in 1974.' When I look it up, I see that the book was written by Adrian Henri and published in the UK.¹⁷ It introduced Jirka to work by the main representatives of Action Art and similar movements: Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Edward Kienholz, Milan Knížák and others. Another book, entitled *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*, had been written eight years earlier by Allan Kaprow, a major figure in the scene of Fluxus.¹⁸ His credo was that 'the everyday world is the most astonishing inspiration conceivable'.¹⁹ I can see links between this statement and Jirka's choice to perform and place installations in the streets of Prague.

Fluxus, an international network of artists and composers, was founded in 1960 by the Lithuanian-American artist George Maciunas. It promoted 'anti-art', purposely blurring boundaries between art and life. When Jirka mentioned the name 'Knížák', he referred to Milan Knížák who, like Kaprow, had been part of Fluxus. Jirka was 11 years old when Knížák got involved with Fluxus in the mid-sixties and organised actions and happenings in Prague. For obvious reasons, he did not know the artist. 'We were of a different generation', he says.²⁰

We arrive at the Museum of Decorative Arts, and I take her to a corner (Figures 12 and 13). 'This is where I placed my first installation, my installations were made of sugar cubes and other impermanent materials'. We cross Jan Palach Square to the Rudolfinum²¹, and I show her another place where I realised a work. 'In this corner', I say, 'I pushed three wooden wedges in the gaps between the cobblestones. They

¹⁷ Adrian Henri, *Total Art: Environments, Happenings and Performance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974).

¹⁸ Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1966).

¹⁹ "Allan Kaprow," The Art Story, accessed May 5, 2019, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-kaprow-allan.htm>.

²⁰ Before he got to know Fluxus, Knížák co-founded the group Actual Art (later renamed Aktual) with some of his friends, and began organising actions and happenings in 1964, like 'A Walk around Novy Svět' and 'Demonstration for Oneself'. Maciunas gave Knížák the title 'Director Fluxus East' in 1965. Pushing against State-Socialist censorship, several Fluxus festivals activities were organised in Eastern bloc countries, including in Prague in 1966. Milan Knížák organised the first Fluxus concert in Czechoslovakia in Prague in October 1966, where he performed with Ben Vautier, Jeff Berner, Alison Knowles, Serge Oldenbourg and Dick Higgins. Other Fluxus concert took place in Vilnius (1966), Budapest (1969), and Poznań (1977). On invitation by Maciunas, Knížák was granted a visa to the US in 1968, and participated in several Fluxus events. He realised 'Lying Ceremony' in New Brunswick and delivered 'Difficult Ceremony' in New York. Maciunas published Knížák's collected works as a Fluxus Edition. When Knížák returned in 1970 to Czechoslovakia (after the 1968 invasion and the start of Normalisation politics), tough censorship over the arts had been re-introduced, which explains why Kovanda only learnt about Knížák's existence through a foreign publication. See also, Pavlína Morganová *Czech Action Art*, 2015, 50-79, and Milan Knížák, *Génius Milana Knížáka* (Prague: Agentura Lucie, 2010).

²¹ A famous concert hall on the bank of the Moldau river, built in a Neo-Renaissance style and opened in 1885.

were just simple interventions. The wedges were almost invisible, but at the same time, if someone would see them, it would appear very strange. I just put them there, took a picture and left.'



Fig. 12: Kovanda at the site of one of his interventions

'It is interesting' I respond, 'that even though the installations were not permanent, you still have a presence in Prague, not just in your own memory but also because of the existence of photographic documentation.'

Documentation was in fact a major part of happenings and installations, and many people only knew about particular works through photographs. 'When I walk around Prague', I say, 'I am aware of locations where artists once created works. Not always because I saw them with my own eyes, but because I saw the photographs.' I look around to give an example. Ah, I see one. 'Karel Miler had an installation somewhere here I believe, on these steps'. I point with my finger. 'And he had another piece, somewhere there, in that corner, where carefully placed some old papers on the ground'. I take her to the Manes Bridge and point in the distance. 'And there, in that little house, Miler and Štembera created a few things.'



Fig. 13: Kovanda points at the gaps between the cobblestones

He laughs, remembering how Štembera juggled with his new white tennis shoes, until they fell in the mud. I picture the scene and smile too. 'You are right', he says, 'memories of particular actions are attached to specific places.' 'Turning the locations into memorials, personal memorials', I suggest.

I guess that's how you could look at them. We start walking over the bridge and I stop half way. 'Somewhere here I created the work "White stacks", I say, 'placing a heap of plaster powder on the railing.' I can't remember where exactly, but that's irrelevant. 'I left a second heap on Charles Bridge', I explain, 'so that it served as a mirror image, the two bridges had one white stack each' (Figure 14).

We walk on and I ask him whether his parents knew what he was up to, doing his actions.

I tell her that they knew a bit, at least my mum. My father didn't want to know, he was afraid that I would get into trouble. 'Because of the political situation?', she asks, 'or was he scared that you were going insane?' 'Because of the political situation', I reply, 'he worked for the army and he risked losing his job if they found out what I was doing. Personally, I wasn't in any danger, I didn't go to school and I had the lowest of the lowest job.

I think I can ask this question: 'I suppose your dad was party member?' He does not seem to be bothered, replying 'Of course, he had to be!' I feel more confident that he doesn't mind talking about it. 'And your mum?' 'She was' he says, 'but she left the Party in 1968'. I guess that would have been out of protest, because of the invasion? 'That's right', he replies.

She tells me that she also had some relatives who became party members, mostly for pragmatic reasons, and others who strongly opposed to the regime, refusing to comply. She must have some understanding of the moral and political complexities of the times.

It starts to rain, so we decide to walk to Kampa and have a coffee. No need to see other locations. I think I have learnt enough for today. In the café, we look at one of his catalogues that I have brought along and I ask a few more questions. After an hour or so, we each go our own way. I promise to stay in touch and send him drafts of texts about our encounter.



Fig. 14: Standing on Manes Bridge, Pointing at Charles Bridge in the distance

Part 2: Possibilities and Challenges of Multi-Vocal Narration

It is quite remarkable how liberated I felt when, during a creative ethnography workshop led by Kayla Rush, I wrote the first line of this essay ('When I appear above ground at the Museum Metro entrance, I see her standing by "the horse" between some Chinese tourists'). The decision to take Kovanda's viewpoint, choosing a first-person perspective, was somehow invigorating. In the emerging text, I could think 'his' thoughts and look at 'myself' through 'his' eyes. It pushed the notion of intersubjectivity beyond the more common anthropological representation of interconnected life worlds. I now found myself in the realm of literary imagination. The stylistic shift did not only enable me to textually reproduce a selection of verbal interactions, (a well-known ethnographic strategy), but empowered me to produce 'his' inner voice. Of course, the inner reflections were not based on pure fantasy as their content resonated with fieldwork findings. But still, they were

largely imagined as I could never truly *be* Kovanda. The resulting perspectual ambiguity was further enhanced when I shifted to my own perspective in the next section, ('Jirka Kovanda asked me to meet him at 10am'), and continued to move between the two I-positions in the remaining text.

During the workshop, I sometimes felt like a naughty child, roaming around in forbidden places. The style undermined a clear-cut distinction between ethnographic and autoethnographic writing. As an academic, I had overstepped the boundaries of professional convention, disregarding common rules of research ethics and ethnographic writing. I was not too concerned, however, as I regarded the stylistic adventure as a private experiment. The emerging text was not meant to be published.

Continuing the experiment after the workshop, however, I became increasingly aware of the insights the dual perspective could produce into fieldwork dynamics. The narrative style gave the reader a sense of the hesitations, anxieties, considerations and negotiations that commonly shape knowledge produced through fieldwork. I soon wondered if I could develop the text into a publishable ethnographic contribution, making sure that it was firmly based on various research materials: interview transcriptions, field diary entries, texts in art catalogues, digital sources and photographs taken during our walk. The major challenge was of course ethics. While I had promised Kovanda that I would send him the draft of any planned publication, consent was all the more urgent if I wanted to write up it as a multi-vocal piece. When I emailed a sample of the text to him, I asked him to consider four options: not to publish, to rewrite the text in a conventional ethnographic style, to make a few changes, or to publish it as it was. Luckily, he had no objections to its publication, and later agreed to its final version. In fact, he also agreed to a stage performance of an adapted version of the text at the 7th PACSA conference by two drama students at Queen's University Belfast, in October 2019.²²

To conclude, the above has shown that invasive writing can successfully address the theme of this special issue: the interplay of politics, performance, power and protest. As the editors argue in the introduction, the realms of 'politics' and 'performance' should be conceptualised as a relational process that involves moments of on-stage and off-stage actions. My contribution demonstrates that both politics (understood as the more general power dynamics underlying all human interaction) and Politics (understood as the practice and impact of governmental actions) were relevant to Kovanda's performative art. The tension between public and hidden aspects of his work, and our exchanges about his insistence that his work was 'not political', reflect these dynamics. Throughout our walk, we stretched the term 'politics' in different directions. Sometimes it referred to the fact that any choice, conscious or unconscious, deletes a plethora of other possibilities. Kovanda addressed this in his work when exploring the 'taken-for-grantedness' of people's inclinations, habits and tastes. At other times, we spoke about the impact of the state-apparatus on art and everyday life during Normalisation, and discussed the

²² The play was entitled 'Under the skin' and included stage directions. I will discuss the transformation of the narrative into a play, and the additional performative dimension, in a different publication.

effect of censorship on his biographical trajectory. Ironically, this meant that while he performed his actions publicly, in the streets of Prague, he remained invisible as an artist. It was only through the circulation of photographs of the performances and installations, that his work became visible as 'underground art', and was incorporated into the history of Czech art.

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