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Art of Action of 1960s and 1970s in the 20th Century and Its Documentation in the Permanent Exhibition of the National Gallery – Commented Tour with Pavlína Morganová

Tomáš Kubart

Umění akce 60. a 70. let 20. století a jeho dokumentace ve stálé sbírce Národní galerie – komentovaná prohlídka s Pavlínou Morganovou [Art of Action of 1960s and 1970s in the 20th Century and its Documentation in the Permanent Exhibition of the National Gallery – Commented Tour with Pavlína Morganová]. 12 Feb 2016, Prague, Czech Republic.

[events]

Vědecko-výzkumné pracoviště AVU (AVU Research Centre – VVP AVU) and Národní galerie (National Gallery) organized several events at the Trade Fair Palace on 12 February 2016. In addition to the release of a DVD titled *České akční umění. Filmy a videa, 1956–1989* (Czech Action Art. Films and Videos, 1956–1989) and presentations of *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny* (Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones) there was a guided tour of the artifacts of performance art in the permanent exhibition of the National Gallery.

Pavlína Morganová, who led the tour, is not only an expert in the field of action art (*akční umění*) in the former Czechoslovakia, but also introduced the term to the vocabulary of Czech art historians. Her publication, *Akční umění* (1991), *Czech Action Art* (2014), ‘coloured in’ a white space of Czech art history. Until then there were only a few notes of Jindřich Chalupecký from 1991 titled *Na hranicích umění* (On the Borders of Art), a magazine article by Jiří Burda and Miloš Horanský in *Divadlo* (‘Fluxus, Happening, Event’, and ‘45 Paragraphs on Theatre and Happening’, 1967) and notes from Jiří Mucha’s memoirs,

Černý a bílý New York (Black and White New York, 1966).

Her undeniable contribution to the research of action art in the early 1990s is also associated with the introduction of terms *happening* and *event* (they are used in the English form) to the vocabulary of Czech researchers and with their definitions. Although time has shown that Morganová’s definition of *happening* as, ‘[...] any unusual event with participants’ active involvement’,¹ is now outdated in the fields of art history and theatre studies, she laid the foundations, allowing for scholarly research.

While Morganová created the academic discourse of *action art* in Czechoslovakia, on the tour were also personalities who had shaped the discourse of action art itself. Tomáš Ruller and Petr Štembera often complemented and specified Morgan’s commentary. The tour nevertheless drew attention to the general problem of access to art history (Czech art historians) and to the issue of action art.

When Morganová talks about the *presentation* of action art, she is actually referring

1 ‘[...] jakákoliv neobvyklá událost, do níž se aktivně zapojili její účastníci.’ (MORGANOVÁ 1999: 12)

to its *re-presentation*, but she makes no differences between these two concepts. She doesn't work with concepts of *liveness* or *performativity*, not daring to enter the uncharted field of theatricality and performativity, which began being termed within German Theatre Studies in the 1970s (Fiebach, Fischer-Lichte). She only focuses on a final artifact (a photograph) and she does not work with an idea of an event's autonomy as such.

The issue of the role of a medium in action art has been handled by many theorists, the nearest to us (Czech theatre researchers) may be the work of Austrian artist and writer Hanno Millesi (MILLESi 1994), or Austrian art historian Hubert Klocker (KLOCKER 1983), who followed American researcher Herbert Blau's findings about the performance art from the 1980s. Klocker focused on events of Viennese Actionists, and perhaps because of that their actions are captured by Kurt Kren in a very specific way, Klocker came to the conclusion that it is necessary to record events in order to award artistic autonomy. Morganová points out that the authors of actions wanted to procure records only for themselves and they were never intended to be presented in galleries as autonomous works. However, this relationship between the record of events and action does not change the status of the action. Action art is specified by; temporality, unrepeatability, the limited role of the screenplay, dialogue and normal language.

All the makers of action art have tried to point out the shortcomings of conventional language (not only in response to Wittgenstein's criticism of language), and structured their own – the language of actions and the language of the body (refer VERGINE 1974). Artifacts are never

able to submit satisfactory evidence on the shape of an art action. Kren's records of Muehl's events demonstrate this very convincingly (in this case, convulsive dynamics replaced the immersive nature of Muehl's events). No artefact, for which documentation is factor predominant (such as records of events encountered by Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro between Tokyo and New York) can revoke the actual course of events.

Action art must be experienced. Any attempt to reconstruct, whether on the basis of photographs, films, screenplays and evidence of participants can not give a complete picture of its nature. Everything that remains after the event, is merely a relic, as well as a separate and autonomous artistic artefact.

Guided tours of events recorded in the collections of the National Gallery pointed to this special and significant problem. Action art, at its nature – whether it be about happenings, performance art or body art – is very close to the theatre. Also, theatre resists a theoretical grasp, which 'exists' only for a moment, and what remains after it, is no longer theatre. It prevents the grasp, it is hard to hold onto, to catch: we can only get closer to it by interdisciplinary cooperation and by dialogue, to which theatre researchers together with literary scholars, art historians, linguists and film scholars accede.

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