

## Jiří Skála: Morals, Transcription, the Czech Scene

How important is Jiří Skála's age? His age itself isn't as important as the fact that he started studying at the Academy a bit later. This meant he was spared having to participate in the aberrant struggles about the direction that contemporary art was to take, which took place between the professional public (in the worst sense of the word) and the new post-communist generation of artists in the early 1990s, and which concluded with general antipathy (by the professional public) toward (for the most part) the curators Jiří and Jana Ševčík. Nevertheless, he inherited a scene that was not much better off than before. Its persistent exclusive character kept any such discussion to a personal level. The early projects by Jiří Skála, made mostly in collaboration, penetrated into this environment. They appropriated the strategies of institutional criticism, which, at that time, had still not emerged in our environment, and placed them in the Czech reality. This occurred, paradoxically, at a time when hardly any exhibition institution (in the true sense of the word) existed in the Czech Republic. And so his attention turned to the art schools AVU, the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, which was internally divided by personal antipathies, and the more open VŠUP, Prague Academy of Applied Arts, in the project *Conceptual and Intermedia Art* (2005); to the stratification of the art scene with the number of 90 as the sum of all of its members in the work *Plan* (2002); or to the claustrophobia of the Czech art discourse in the exhibition *Take It Personally*, (2002). In some cases his activities dealt with issues related to art in general, such as the video-installation *Local Stigma* (2004), where videos of four different artists, each painting a canvas white, is projected on their final rendered works. The content of the frame (the art) is merely the reserved space for art, everything else is superfluous; only this way can art be democratic.

Just how important is Jiří Skála's personal background, for example, in the context of his earlier work? These apparently purely formal works hide personal messages. This is most evident in the installation *The Volumes of All the Members of My Family* from 2002, where he transformed each member of his family into simple rectangular shapes based on their volume. But in other works, such as *Wheelbarrow* (2001), a wheelbarrow with a rusted bottom, or *Ruler* (2000), a ruler with an intentional 2mm error, there lies concealed a code that alludes to some sort of blue-collar origin, or the metrical rigor of a metal turning lathe. Is it in their content, necessarily is a part of any art work, even a conceptual one, and which in the end no one wants to see, or, is it an utterly essential part of the artist's work? To what extent is the locally adapted institutional criticism, or personal level, of Skála's work comprehensible outside of the Czech art scene? Here we need to emphasize the difference between the post-revolution generation of artists, such as Kateřina Vincourová and David Černý, who vociferously endorsed the illusion of international art, which only emphasized their local limits. On the contrary, the conscious awareness of local starting points for artists, who began to work after they year 2000, enabled the Czech scene to participate in international art projects.

All of these paradoxes combined have helped to constitute the current work of Jiří Skála, with its dominant element of transcription. In the work *Handwriting Exchange* (2006), ways of understanding it may fluctuate from thoroughly derived conceptual work all the way to an obstinately physiological and personal need to break through the defining features of one's own body, while making a written record. In the exhibition space, a chosen volunteer was positioned sitting back to back with the artist, while each endeavored to learn how to write in the handwriting of their counterpart. In this work, as in the utopian project of teaching an illiterate to write, institutional criticism is delicately unveiled in a more objective form. What are the possibilities of an exhibition space? In some cases the exhibition space makes certain things impossible. For instance, the political engagement is stripped of its consequences and responsibilities - it's placed between quotation marks. On the other hand, some things are only possible in an exhibition space (even on a political or social level). Teaching an illiterate to read and write could be understood as social work, although in the human context it could also be perceived as aggressive and arrogant. Yet, the exhibition space brings the meaning into sharper focus: this has nothing to do with social work, the art work does not replace the function of education, instead it examines, from art's point of view, the structure of a human skill and its influence on our consciousness.

Such a project can only be carried out on a more human level thanks to the exhibition space. Anything is possible in a space that places things within quotation marks.

The project *Two Families of Objects* (2008), also initially concerned transcription. The original goal was to photograph the means of production, machine tools, from the factory where Skála's parents had worked, owned by ordinary private people. This was a transcription of the beauty of machines (against the backdrop of early Czech capitalism) into pictorial and photographic form. While working on this project, and a subsequent book that further developed this project, Skála came across the reality of what had happened to these assets, sold off, by a factory going bankrupt, to its soon to be unemployed workers. Thus, he came up against the issue of morality - a very problematic theme in art. Following the modernist understanding of morals as something that needs to be destroyed, morality has made a reappearance on the stage, paradoxically, a legacy from the 1960s. As in many proclaimed politically engaged actions, after breaching the gap between independent artistic expression and political activism, the only thing that remains is their moralizing aspect. This problem was also addressed in the *DOS* (Union House) project made in 2004, when Skála placed a photograph of the Czech workers union's headquarters on a billboard in front of the Hypernova supermarket in Prague. If we leave aside the ambivalence of the beauty of the functionalist building, that exemplifies the fact that the theme is reviewed from the position of art, we cannot claim that such a project could in any way change the working conditions in Czech supermarkets. The building itself lacks emphatic symbolism. What's more, the political reality that Skála touches upon is more gruesome than the one which a project of this type could change. It acts as an unanswered question, to be taken up by those who are among the potential viewers of contemporary art. And their number is not in any way restricted. Actually, it encompasses everyone, and that's where the strength of the project lies.

The paradox of thorough conceptual work, and reference to its own background and personal disposition that undermines the former, always surprises the viewer of the works by Jiří Skála. The element of surprise does not happen all at once. Instead, it sneaks up when the viewer starts to think about the work. It's like retracing the steps by which Skála reached this point, identifying this thought process with one's own thinking, and then putting everything into the context of his past projects, which compose an even clearer picture of Skála's interests. Together they verify the themes that he introduces. In the end, you only have to back as far as where he comes from, and where he has lived his whole life.

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