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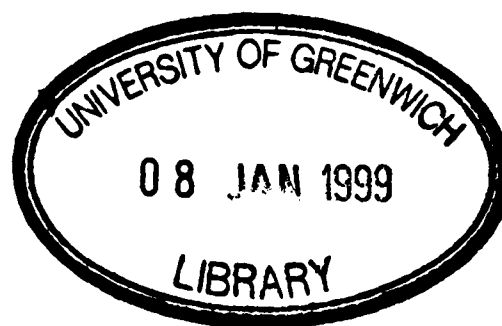
**SURREALISM SINCE THE SECOND WORLD
WAR
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO
SURREALISM IN
CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

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STATEMENT:

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ABSTRACT

This research contends that the public image of Surrealism is grossly misrepresented and therefore misunderstood in terms of its nature, its manifestations and its duration. Widely seen as an art movement of the inter-war period that tried to combine Marxism and Psychoanalysis to produce irrational images, Surrealism saw itself as nothing of the sort. In fact Surrealism was, and is, an attempt at an entirely new and revolutionary understanding and experience of life, entailing both social and internal transformation. The art works issuing from the movement are therefore a byproduct not an end in themselves. Several typical examples of this misrepresentation are cited and the surrealist perspective given.

The theme is developed by outlining the post-war history of Surrealism in France. This is not the main area of research, but is contextually important to what follows.

The main section is concerned with a critical history of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia. Within the Surrealist Movement the activities of the Czech and Slovak surrealists, both individually and collectively, are considered to be of the greatest importance, perhaps along with Belgium second only to manifestations in France. The reason for this resides not only in the evident quality of individual artists, but in their collective activities and their whole, very distinctive, intellectual approach, employing a range of disciplines from linguistics to Hermeticism.

The most important reason for the Czechoslovak surrealists being so little known until now is shown to be due in large measure to their

having been forced to work clandestinely under hostile political regimes, first under the Nazis and then the Communists.

Key works are critically examined in their internal and wider surrealist contexts and in the context of general artistic and social issues of the time.

The collaborations between the post-1969 surrealist group around Bounoure and the Czechoslovak group on the journal *Bulletin de Liaison Surrealiste* are discussed, and their importance in promoting the continuation of surrealist activity.

In the last years of the Communist regime the work of Jan Svankmajer became well known and since the Velvet Revolution along with the growth of his international reputation as a film-maker his fellow members have become better known. This recent period and its likely consequences are discussed.

Having brought the historical aspects up to date, it is possible to place Surrealism in its wider cultural context, its conflicts and parallels with other movements in art, philosophy and politics, such as its relationship with Critical Theory and Post Modernism.

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PREFACE

At some point in the course of this research, it occurred to me that it would not be the same project as that I had originally envisaged. Admittedly, my original idea had been a more global account, and far more definitive than it could, in truth, ever hope to be. The present work became more and more focused on Surrealism in Czechoslovakia, which, although intended from the start to be the centre of my thesis, became the overwhelming priority. Although this renders my account of a continuing and vital Surrealist Movement incomplete, I would consider that as a case study of later manifestations of Surrealism it was by far the best choice. I have attempted to present a balanced account, but the reader will quickly understand that my basic argument is unashamedly partisan. My participation in surrealist activities in general, and in particular, my fascination with its manifestations in Czechoslovakia, were determining factors in my decision to pursue this research.

The greatest problem in discussing Surrealism is that it defies conventional categorisation. It is not an art movement, but is best known for its artistic expressions, it is not a political movement, but has developed a political critique that is integral to it. Furthermore, Surrealism is both homogenous and deeply differentiated in the sense that the surrealists share a certain attitude of mind, and a common origin, but the expressions of the surrealist spirit are often very different to each other. It is vital to the understanding of Surrealism that the reader look beyond simple formal identifications of surrealist and non-surrealist and towards the functional spirit of Surrealism.

Whatever the shortcomings of this work, it does present a wide range of material, previously unavailable, on Surrealism in Czechoslovakia

and its successors the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This should be of some benefit to future researchers in a field that I believe offers great scope for further research. The quality of material is often extraordinary and the quantity of material available - still mostly in Czech - has grown enormously since beginning my research, and new work continues to appear. Yet, even in Prague, much remains to be done, and important artists, poets and thinkers await their reassessment. Furthermore, it is not merely a field open to historical study, but a living tradition in which much interesting work is being done; not only the films of Jan Svankmajer, but the paintings of Stejskal, Baron, Nadvornikova and Svankmajerova, the collages of Marencin and Jan Gabriel, the photographs of Jakub Effenberger, Roman Kubik and Jan Dahnel, to mention only the visual work. A growing body of creative and critical work continues to appear in the journal *Analogon*.

I can only hope that my own efforts will prove of sufficient interest to others for them to take up the challenge of researching further into an area that has remained almost unknown for too long.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his *Sublime Object of Ideology*¹ Slavoj Zizek refers to a "curious detail" concerning Habermas's treatment of Lacan and Althusser in his *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*². The terms "curious detail" and "curious accident" are used in a "Sherlock Holmsian sense," he tells us. The reference is to "the curious incident of the dog in the night". When Watson remonstrates that the dog did nothing during the night, Holmes replies "That was the curious incident." The dog did nothing because he knew the intruder, it was in fact his master. In Habermas's book Lacan is scarcely mentioned and Althusser not at all, Zizek sees this as a "traumatic kernel which had to be quickly forgotten, "repressed"; it is an effective case of theoretical amnesia." I refer to this Holmsian metaphor to indicate another lack, in this instance it is the curious incident of the account of the Surrealist movement since the Second World War. Not only is it as if the movement had ceased to exist in 1939, but several commentators actually say as much, in which case they may have some difficulty in explaining the text *Hermetic Bird* which appeared in the journal *PRAXIS INTERNATIONAL*³ in January 1987. Like Zizek, my starting point is Habermas.

Hermetic Bird is a short text signed by 25 surrealists from 5 countries intended to correct certain views put forward by Habermas who relates "surrealism to the phenomena of the loss of aura analyzed in Walter Benjamin's writings" and claims that its aim "is the liquidation of art", and finally that "surrealism has the intention of implementing "a false AUFHEBUNG of art into life.""

¹Zizek, Slavoj: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, London 1989.

²Habermas, Jurgen: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Polity Press and Basil Blackwell, Cambridge 1987.

³*Praxis International*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford. Vol 6 No 4 January 1986

In the course of their refutation we learn several interesting things. Firstly, there is the very fact of the continued existence of surrealism. A document signed by 25 people from 5 countries is evidence of some kind of activity, even though it is at present difficult to determine either its quality or quantity. Secondly, we are given concise definitions of surrealism and its objectives as "a magical experiment with words...." using the arts not as ends in themselves, but "in order to reveal the inner model" and to reorient both life and art "towards a common pole which is the freedom of the spirit..." Thirdly, the existence of a publicly little known surrealist group in Czechoslovakia is revealed, constituting half of the signatories of the text.

My own participation in recent surrealist activities underlines my desire to show, not only the continued existence of Surrealism, but also its continued relevance in all the spheres it has concerned itself with.

It would seem that, despite a quantity of research that reflects an accurate picture of Surrealism, in most published accounts at least in English, the movement has been frequently and substantially misrepresented. Despite the growing availability of translations of surrealist texts, many writers have thought fit to comment on surrealism without the slightest knowledge of the subject. What is worse, certain authors have deliberately misrepresented surrealism for their own ideological ends. The first section then analyzes this problem of misrepresentation, giving examples of several writers whose ignorance or ideological predisposition leads them to define Surrealism in terms other than its own and therefore to argue erroneously concerning its success or failure, its activities and duration.

The main thrust of this study is concerned with the history of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia since the Second World War. However, the context of this needs to be set out in some detail, so I have included a sketch of Surrealism in Paris from 1947 to 1969, the year that Jean Schuster controversially announced the dissolution of the movement.

Surrealism in Czechoslovakia has had far less critical attention in any country than it deserves. Although there are some publications in French, there is, at the time of writing, almost nothing in English. I make an examination of how Czechoslovakian Surrealism developed from the Poetist and Artificialist Movements and emerged as the Surrealist Group of Prague.

The main section of this research is concerned with the period after the Communist coup of 1948 to the "Velvet Revolution." During this period Surrealism flourished as a clandestine phenomenon, isolated from both official culture and the dissident underground. This section covers the period of the *Signs of the Zodiac* and the *Circle of Five Objects*, unpublished albums recording the activities and discussions of the group during the greatest period of political repression. A gradual liberalisation of the regime allowed the surrealists some opportunity of public expression, culminating in their collaborating with the Paris Surrealists during the "Prague Spring". This resulted in a document, *Le Plateforme de Prague* (Prague Platform), which I analyze.

Following the Russian invasion the Czech surrealists collaborated with the small re-formed Paris group during the 1970's and 80's. I outline this period and how the surrealists emerged at the end of the

Communist regime into the public eye, publishing their magazine *Analogon*, and exhibiting both in Czechoslovakia and internationally.

The conclusion examines some of the parallels between Surrealism and Critical Theory and contrasts it with the "postmodern mood" that has gripped our society. An analysis of a text by Vratislav Effenberger, *The Raw Cruelty of Life and the Cynicism of Fantasy* sums up the critique of the Czech surrealists in relation to imagination and society. I hope that through this I will be able to show that Surrealism, far from being an outmoded art movement, is a system of ideas and a mode of experience that is of great and continuing significance to our situation today.

The False Mirror: Misrepresenting Surrealism

In order to proceed I must briefly define Surrealism so that I may give a context to my claim that Surrealism has been badly misunderstood and misrepresented. As we have seen, the text *Hermetic Bird* has described Surrealism as a "magical experiment with words", a concept found in the very origins of the movement. In the *First Manifesto of Surrealism*⁴ (1924) André Breton defines Surrealism as:

"Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."⁵

By 1929 and in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* he finds that:

"Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, ceased to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point."⁶

Between the two manifestos we find a growth in Surrealism's motivation from a concern with the liberation of language to a more total concept deriving in part from Breton's interest in Hegel. By this time in fact Hegel, Freud and Marx have slotted into place among the primary co-ordinates of a system, but Bréton warns us in the *Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else* that all systems are to be treated like a set of tools on a carpenter's workbench:

"Unless you have gone stark raving mad, you will not try to make do without all the tools except one, and to stand up for the plane to the point of declaring that the use of hammers is wrong and wicked. This, however, is exactly what happens every time a sectarian of such and such a persuasion flatters himself that he

⁴Breton, André: *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. University of Michigan Press, Michigan 1972.

⁵Ibid. p.26.

⁶Ibid. p.123.

can explain the French or Russian revolution by "hatred of the father" (in this case the deposed sovereign) or the work of Mallarmé by the "relations between classes" in his time. With no eclecticism whatsoever, one ought to be permitted to have recourse to that instrument of knowledge that seems the most adequate in each circumstance."⁷

This points us beyond the network of ideologies that have ensnared both many of the commentators and, regrettably, some of the surrealists themselves. It is with this in mind that I will now proceed.

Starting with two books whose subject is not Surrealism, but which nevertheless give us erroneous judgements concerning Surrealism, we find that in the first, *The Element of Fire*, Anthony O'Hear has no qualms in finding Surrealism to be:

"...that most spiritually modern and humanly bankrupt of all artistic movements....based on aggression and destructive impulses, more powerful than any creative urge."⁸

O'Hear is certainly entitled to his opinion that Surrealism is "humanly bankrupt", but ought he not give us concrete reasons for such a sweeping judgement? O'Hear reveals that he has read a book, it is even a good book, it is Luis Bunuel's autobiography *My Last Breath*⁹. It is unfortunate that he appears to have read no other book than this, for it is not concerned with explaining Surrealism. It is certainly by, and about, the movement's best known film-maker and it gives a fair deal of space to that subject. It contains an idiosyncratic account of the movement, valuable for being at first hand, but certainly not wholly representative of the central impulses and activities of Surrealism as shown in many other writers.

O'Hear reveals his ignorance in considering Surrealism to be an "artistic movement" which is precisely what Surrealism claims not to

⁷Ibid. p.287.

⁸O'Hear, Anthony: *The Element of Fire. Science, Art and the Human World*. Routledge, London 1988.

⁹Bunuel, Luis: *My Last Breath*. Translated by Abigail israel. Cape, London 1984.

be. The presence of works of art within an intellectual movement does not make that movement an artistic one. On finding the vast number of art works arising from Christianity we do not consider it to be an art movement any more than we suppose that, given the original professions of its founders, it must be solely concerned with carpentry and fishing. Certainly no surrealist would be naive enough to suppose that art alone could possibly explode the social order and transform life itself, which O'Hear tells us (rightly, for once) is Surrealism's intention. But who, apart from O'Hear, supposes that Surrealism is based solely on "aggression and destructive impulses"? Certainly not the majority of surrealists. Dali tells us that Surrealism is destructive, but only in order to create and in fact the whole Surrealist endeavour is revealed in the Manifestos and other writings as a constructive one. It can certainly be argued that Dada, which could be described as midwife to the surrealist movement, was founded on nihilism and destruction, (and even this is, to some extent, debatable) but one of the reasons for the future surrealists breaking with Dada was that they felt that such an attitude was a dead end and that one must grow out of nihilism into a new understanding of life and ways of achieving that. O'Hear compounds confusion with a note:

"On the tantalising connections between this aggressive nihilism and the espousal of Marxism, which was, of course, the creed of many of the surrealists, see Roger Scruton's chapter on Sartre in his *Thinkers of the New Left*."¹⁰

But what is this connection between aggressive nihilism and Marxism? More to the point, how are we to consider such connections in relation to a discussion of Sartre, a writer of a very different Left to that of the surrealists, and one largely hostile to the surrealists, who certainly did see Marxism as a way out of his own nihilistic urges and into engagement with the world.

¹⁰ibid.

What we have here is a kind of intertextual gordian knot where one writer propagates the prejudices and misunderstandings of their own sources by relying on them rather than first-hand accounts that, whatever their shortcomings, can at least be thought accurate in describing the ideas of their authors. Both O'Hear and Scruton can be fairly called conservative, but writers of the left are usually no better in their accounts of Surrealism as we have seen from the previous brief discussion of *Hermetic Bird*.

Rather further to the left is Mike Featherstone's *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*¹¹ which is, as the title suggests, a survey into that range of ideas we have come to know as postmodernism and its critique of consumerism. Generally he covers his ground quite well, but in discussing Postmodernism's origins in, and break from, Modernism, he repeatedly refers to Surrealism and in doing so reveals an ignorance of the subject. More than this, in quoting Baudrillard on this matter he creates a double distortion.

To begin with, Featherstone makes no distinction between Surrealism and its predecessor, Dada. In every reference he pairs them together until they almost become Dadandsurrealism. Secondly he suggests that Surrealism:

"sought to collapse the boundary between art and everyday life to show that the most banal consumer cultural objects and the kitsch and detritus of mass culture could themselves be aestheticised and introduced as the subject of, or incorporated into, the formal structure of artworks."¹²

In this form, the argument is entirely misleading. It would perhaps be true of Pop or neo-dada, but it is not true of Surrealism. We can see that his assumptions are similar to those of Habermas refuted in *Hermetic Bird*. Although the first surrealists were certainly nearly all

¹¹Featherstone, Mike: *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. Sage, London 1991.

¹²Ibid.

involved in Paris Dada the particular trajectory of Surrealism emerged out of a very definite rejection of Dada's nihilism. Having noted the repetition of the idea that Surrealism sought "the collapse of the boundary between art and life" we might question just what this boundary consists of. Certainly, looking well beyond the confines of Surrealism, for writers like Wyndham Lewis or W.B. Yeats, the two are antagonistic and in the case of Lewis, art becomes a protective carapace of all that is good and eternal against the flux, uncertainty and stupidity of life. Yeats sought to fuse the two so that art and life could indeed be one, but perhaps by collapsing life into art rather than the other way round. For the surrealist however such an antagonism does not exist, at least in any intrinsic sense, although a distinction does. The work of art, in whatever medium, has the status of a laboratory experiment, attempting to chart some area of the unknown, within or without the artist. Its purpose is not primarily aesthetic, indeed Surrealism specifically rejects all conventional aesthetics, and the introduction of this "detritus" into a work of art is meant to act as an mental abrasive and a generator of meanings, not as a merely formal element in an aesthetic composition¹³. I shall refer back to this several times in the course of my argument.

When Featherstone quotes other authors we find meanings blur and reverse. Quoting Baudrillard's *Simulations*:

"It is reality itself that is hyperrealist. Surrealism's secret already was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only in certain privileged moments that are still nevertheless connected with art and the imaginary. Today it is quotidian reality in its entirety - political, social, historical and economic - that from now on incorporates the simulating dimension of hyperealism. We live everywhere in an "aesthetic" hallucination of reality."¹⁴

¹³ In any case, why is a piece of paper, tinfoil, or a broken plate to be considered to be detritus and a piece of cloth smeared with mud mixed with oil an object of aesthetic contemplation? Is this not a confusion between the formal *means* of the work and the significance it embodies?

¹⁴ Ibid. p.69.

Here, due to the context of his own remarks, we have a confusion - and equation of each with the other - of the terms Surreal and Hyperreal. (Not necessarily the intention of Baudrillard). Superficially they look and sound as if they might possess similar meanings, like supermarket and hypermarket, but in fact they do not exist in any such relationship at all. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is concerned with the proliferation of signs and meanings until they obscure and finally replace the "real" world. Rather like the phenomena of inflation in economics, the more there is, the less it is worth. We have thus learned to live in a simulacrum which is experienced as more real than reality itself, therefore hyperreal. But hyperreality is a delusion that eliminates real meaning, Baudrillard paints a picture in which Marcuse's one dimensional man journeys across a gleaming or fluorescent two dimensional surface. This, I must emphasise again, is the opposite of surreality. Surrealism is an experience of depth. It is not a denial but an affirmation of reality. "We have not ceased to be realists" said the surrealist J.-L. Bedouin. Surreality is not opposed to the real, but is, in fact, found within it and is the most complete expression of the real, not its supersession by its simulated image.

Sadie Plant's study *The Most Radical Gesture*¹⁵ has shown that one of the main sources for Baudrillard's ideas is the Situationist International and more specifically Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*.¹⁶ Situationism itself derives in part from Surrealism and has, in turn, influenced some surrealists. Debord argues that life has become progressively reduced to a series of images in relation to which we are passive spectators - hence the Spectacle. The masses are controlled, not by an overt show of force combined with a lack of

¹⁵Plant, Sadie: *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. Routledge, London and New York. 1992.

¹⁶Debord, Guy: *The Society of the Spectacle*. Rebel Press 1987.

information, but rather a glut where information no longer points to something real but merely to its image. One no longer differentiates between real information and disinformation and becomes passive in relation to the Spectacle. Although the similarities between Debord's and Baudrillard's ideas are apparent on another level they are significantly different. Debord demands the creating of situations, which, rather like the old Dada scandals are intended to shake us out of our lethargy and complacency and encourage us to truly live our lives again. For Baudrillard this is no longer possible. The Situationists see the Spectacle as a screen obscuring reality, Baudrillard claims that it has replaced reality and that reality has vanished. For the Situationists the only possibility of emerging from the Spectacle is to engage in revolutionary activity, for Baudrillard revolution has already been accommodated by the spectacular nature of Hyperreality.

Featherstone seems to make his misidentification of Surrealist aims and means on stylistic grounds, for instance the surrealist appropriation of pre-existing material such as in collage, the ready-made and found objects. These are elements found not only both in Dada and Surrealism, but in later art movements such as Pop and the Neo-Dada of Rauschenberg. Although Surrealism employs strategies derived from Dada among many other sources, within the surrealist context the meaning is changed. Referring to Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* Featherstone differentiates between "the distanced appreciation demanded by the artwork" and Benjamin's celebration of:

"...the fragmented images of mass culture and the shocks and jolts of the perceptions in everyday city life from a theoretical perspective clearly influenced by surrealism, Dadaism and montage (see Wolin, 1982) which resonates well with postmodernism".¹⁷

At one level this is fair enough, Benjamin was greatly influenced by the surrealist Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* an investigation into

¹⁷Featherstone, 1991. p.101.

the surrealist perception of the city, dwelling on an arcade, the Passage de l' Opera. For both Aragon and the surrealists on the one hand and Benjamin on the other the "shocks and jolts of the perceptions" are indeed valued ("Shake the eye before use and with the shocked eye..." Matta) Breton in his *Nadja* speaks of the image of a train jolting but not moving in the station, always about to leave, but never leaving. "Exploding-fixed" images such as this are one of the keys to Surrealism, an entrance into the Marvellous, a concept parallel, at the very least, to that of Benjamin's aura. One could perhaps say that as the surrealist understanding of this is dialectical, although such jolts overcome aesthetic distance, its reflective core is preserved within the immediate Marvellous¹⁸.

There should be no doubt that this has at least been the stated intention of the surrealists. Remember that passage from the Second Manifesto "a certain point of the mind at which.....cease to be perceived as contradictions." So if our reflective capacities distance us from our experience and the immediacy of experience eliminates the faculty of reflection, or to put it another way, if we have the choice of being an impotent intellectual or a stupid action-man (Woody Allen or Arnold Schwarzenegger!) our only real option is to find a third way in which the positive aspects of both tendencies are preserved and expressed. Surrealism's ability to realise this resolution of contradictions in real life has been partial, but perhaps the most

¹⁸Benjamin identifies three phases in the decline of aura; in the first phase art is *cultic* and its aura is intact. Possessing the quality of sacredness, it demands distance, the barrier between the sacred and profane. This phase is followed by the *courtly* in which the representations of the monarch as an earthly power retains an echo of the sacred. Finally we have in modernism an art that reflects the "self-understanding of the bourgeois". Here the aura of the art-work is further diminished. At this point the uniqueness of the art-work is undermined by the advent of technology, photography and film for instance, so that the endless reproduction of the image makes the idea of a unique original piece of art irrelevant and shatters the last refuge of aura. For Surrealism the problem must be to restore the experience of aura without surrendering to a phoney mysticism. Here we find the return to ritual, to the assumption of magical power, is not considered in a religious fashion, but through the use of analogy.

important thing is that the surrealists have consistently tried to resolve them, and unlike many of their commentators, have never given up.

I have spent some time showing how authors treating Surrealism incidentally, as part of a larger argument are often content to use secondary, and misleading, sources, thus perpetuating the misrepresentation of Surrealism. What of the critical literature on Surrealism itself? The surrealists have often been hostile to interpretations by academic commentators, a common enough reaction in any movement or individual finding their self a subject of study. If the researcher's conclusions do not match those of the subject it is hardly surprising, and Surrealism has been as badly, and as well served in this matter as anyone. I shall, therefore examine two very different accounts of Surrealism in order that we may see just what the surrealists objections might be.

William Rubin's *Dada and Surrealist Art*¹⁹ is a massive tome, well illustrated, often with material not easily found elsewhere. Its very size seems to tell us that it is authoritative, if not definitive. The problem is that the text reveals an ideological fixation with a particular art-historical view that amounts to a very badly hidden agenda detrimental to a proper exegesis of Surrealism.

The first problem is that Rubin's approach is almost exclusively that of an art historian, almost to the extent of being incapable of dealing with the poetic, philosophical and political aspects of the surrealist endeavour. He is, in fact, frequently hostile to the framework of ideas and actions that have little to do with the actual production of paintings and sculptures and tends to dismiss the bulk of surrealist theory in its entirety. The second problem, arising to some extent from

¹⁹Rubin, William: *Dada and Surrealist Art*. Thames and Hudson, London 1969.

the first, is that he resolutely ignores those aspects of Surrealism that do not fit the procrustean bed of his own purpose. Why is there no mention of Styrsky or Toyen, or indeed any other major Czechoslovak surrealist? Why is there almost no mention of any woman surrealists? Why does his account stop abruptly at the death of Arshile Gorky? Why does he append an "album of post-surrealist art"?

We find the answers to these questions when we realise that at a certain point Rubin ceases to be concerned with discussing Surrealism and begins an implicit promotion of American Abstract Expressionism. Fundamentally, Rubin is concerned with showing a somewhat linear progression through the styles of Modernism, of which Dada and Surrealism are seen as phases, surpassed by their increasingly modern successors. This progress is seen in the formal terms that dominated art criticism for many years until the return of figurative painting and the popularisation of post-modernist concepts in the 80's.

Rubin's avowed intent is to:

"balance these iconographic interests (of the "Surrealist poet-critics") with the needs of stylistic analysis."²⁰

While we can understand that the style in which a work is made is an important aspect of its totality, as is the imagery it employs, it is also vital, if we are to see that work as a whole, to avoid a one-sided approach that diminishes either aspect of the work in question. So if we find the criticism of Breton, for instance, lacking in the data in which conventional art-historical writings are imbued, we might indeed welcome Rubin's stylistic analysis, but we should also feel wary when we see just how hostile Rubin seems to be to Breton's writings on art.

In the opening chapter on Surrealism, *The Background of Surrealist Painting*, Rubin sneers:

²⁰Ibid.

"Probably no other art critic has made a reputation on the basis of as little critical writing as Breton. His articles on painting were infrequent, and usually focused more on literature and mysticism than on the pictures themselves. When he confronted the latter directly, he was anything but critical. Almost without exception, Breton wrote about painters he loved ("criticism can exist only as a form of love")...His writing deals more with the painters than with painting and is so personal, so lyrically effusive, that his occasional remarks about the works themselves remain obscure.

Breton rarely addressed himself to the formal aspects of painting: he remained almost totally involved with the subject of the picture"....."This single-mindedness tended to make him write about all image-makers with almost equal conviction, regardless of their paintings' pictorial qualities proper."²¹

All of which contains a lot of truth, but nevertheless is rather misleading. Rubin goes on to tell us that:

"To collate his art criticism, therefore, one must rely on the booklet *Le Surrealisme et la peinture* (1928) and on an even shorter essay, "Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism,"...To these may be added a number of eulogistic catalogue prefaces and random remarks made in interviews or in the course of writing on other subjects."²²

Here Rubin is curiously unforthcoming on certain important facts concerning Breton's writings on art, for instance that *Le Surrealisme et la peinture* had, over the years, accumulated much other material (from those "eulogistic prefaces" and "random remarks") and was available as a hefty book, only slightly smaller than his own volume. He does not even mention this in his bibliography, and as he mentions several other works by Breton, it is an exceedingly odd omission.

If this is an example of that amnesia I mentioned in my preface, we may wonder at the cause of this hostility. He upbraids Breton for the quantity of his critical writings on art ("Probably no other art critic...") but Breton never set out to be a professional critic and if his articles on painting were infrequent this is hardly surprising in a man who was

²¹Ibid. p.122

²²Ibid. p.122.

involved in such a many-levelled enterprise as Surrealism. To accuse Breton, a Marxist and an adherent of Dialectical Materialism, of being "focused more on...mysticism than on the pictures themselves" without further comment betrays a lack of understanding of either Breton's or Surrealism's attitudes toward the whole area of the occult and the mystical.

Although Rubin is on slightly firmer ground in finding Breton's writing "so personal, so lyrically effusive" it is here that his misunderstanding of Breton's purpose reaches its zenith (or its nadir?). Because, for Breton, (as indeed Rubin tells us) "criticism can only exist as a form of love," Breton does not attempt a cool analysis of the work, but rather a re-creation of the impact of the painting on him. His writing is meant only secondarily, if at all, as criticism in the conventional sense, so for a conventional critic such as Rubin one may suppose that such writing functions as a perpetual irritant²³.

When, later, Rubin is writing of Victor Brauner, we find typical evidence of Rubin's hostility towards the notion of a continuing and vital Surrealism:

"While art produced after the Surrealist exhibition of 1947 is not, strictly speaking, within the scope of this book.....none of the great pioneers of Surrealist painting, nor, for that matter, any of the artists of the second Surrealist generation like Matta and Wifredo Lam, have since 1947 produced work that equals in quality the very best things they did before that date."²⁴

This dogmatic assertion is not qualified, except to exempt Brauner from this decadence, nor is it backed up with any evidence. Why is

²³ In one of her more perceptive moments Anna Balakian tells us that "Breton calls art criticism "a complete failure" because he sees the art critic as one who describes *form* rather than content, one who generalizes on the trends and attainments in the field of technique rather than seeks sources for new inspiration. For him the true art critic is one who views art from the point of view not of the finished but of its *genesis*: the psychological vantage point of the artist, his notion of reality,..." (Balakian, A: *André Breton Magus of Surrealism*, Oxford University Press 1971.)

²⁴Ibid. p.313.

post 1947 surrealism excluded? He speaks of "The dissolution of Surrealism after World War II" but this is simply not the case. While he has every right to believe that Matta and Lam had peaked before 1947, he needs to validate it for his readers. What are his criteria for this opinion? It appears that Matta and Lam cease to fit tidily into the conventional schema of art history, they have, so to speak, fallen out of history.

It is important to remember that no commentator is impartial or disinterested. They bring with them a range of political, cultural and philosophical prejudices that shape their critique both consciously and unconsciously. Needless to say my own subjective opinion differs from that of Rubin. If Matta's work shows a falling off in quality then surely, given the prominence he is given in Rubin's account, this deserves an explanation. Although Matta's separation from the surrealists (he was expelled in 1948) during the 50's seems to be connected with changes of style and subject, his work is different, but not necessarily less successful than the work of the early period. Now this is manifestly my own opinion and although one in which I have some confidence, it is one conditioned by my own cultural and historic circumstances. I belong to a generation ideologically distant from that of Rubin in its view of art history and this introduces an element of relativity to my opinions. However carefully I may back them up with supporting evidence, they emerge from certain historical and cultural presuppositions that I may be unconscious of. However, whereas I have some awareness of this situation, Rubin apparently is not, and his blind objectivism crucially marring his account of Surrealism.

Later, in his discussion of Arshile Gorky, he attempts to differentiate between Gorky and other Surrealists in such a way as to suggest that Gorky never was a surrealist. Rubin is not the only person to have

attempted this, it is a commonplace that Gorky was one of the immediate predecessors of Abstract Expressionism, along with Ernst, Miro, Matta and Masson, all surrealists, and it is particularly through Gorky that the influence of Miro and Matta was filtered through into American painting, but one more disservice to truth is perpetrated by seeing the bulk of Gorky's mature work as wholly other than surrealist. Having said this, it must however be admitted that it is Gorky himself who provides ammunition for the anti-surrealist argument, late in his career he moved away from his surrealist colleagues and eventually repudiated Surrealism. This does nothing however to vitiate the strength of the surrealists claim to Gorky as one of their own for much of the most fertile and innovative part of his career. In his book *The Imagery of Surrealism*²⁵ J.H. Matthews upbraids Rubin for a passage where he discusses Gorky's painting *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*:

"When we look at *Le Foie est la crete du coq* reason's defense mechanism, triggered by an appeal to the title to explain the forms assembled under Gorky's brush, is rendered inoperative. A conscientious search for the liver and the cock's comb promised in the title can identify neither-independently or the one in or as the other. Nor does reconciliation with commonsense expectations come from the text in which the painter describes *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*: "The song of a cardinal, liver, mirrors that have not caught refectations, the aggressively heraldic branches, the saliva of the hungry man whose face is painted with white chalk." The dissatisfaction that prompts Rubin to dismiss this puzzling description as "pretentious" (p. 402) betrays an instinct for itemization. Apparently, Rubin believes a painting's title must provide a catalog of constituent pictorial forms."²⁶

We may be disposed to think that Matthews is a little unfair in his sarcasm - Rubin does refer to this text as a description, although initially in quotation marks, going on to say that it: "...should not be taken literally. One critic, misled in this respect, interpreted the picture as "the successfully deceptive dismemberment of a rooster.""²⁷

²⁵Matthews, J.H.: *The Imagery of Surrealism*. Syracuse University Press 1977.

²⁶Ibid. p.185.

²⁷Rubin. p.402.

What is essentially correct about Matthews' criticism however, is that Rubin's stylistic analysis tends to obscure our view of the imaginative content rather than illuminate and enrich it. Rubin's lack of imagination leaves him unable to share Breton's perception of this painting as "The great door open upon the analogical world."

The Czech surrealist, Vratislav Effenberger, developed a classification of mental types which has relevance here:

"In accordance with the findings of art psychology, it may be expected that these two aspects (formal and imaginative) will be matched by two opposed mental principles - the tectonic and the atectonic.

The tectonic mental type.....derives from different modes of positivist thought, whereas the atectonic type.....is governed by the dialectic principle.....In its active form the problem of interpretation coextensive with the problem of symbols and signs in general emerges within the domain of the analogy principle. The descriptive identity principle, on the other hand, is closely and unambiguously tied up with a priori norms, its semiotic nature does not presuppose a semanticising dynamic force operating in the context, which gives full rein to the dialectical potential inherent in the symbol but an objectivistically static world outlook."²⁸

Although I must reserve an analysis of Effenberger's ideas for a later point, this passage is sufficient to reveal some of the probable reasons for Rubin's incomprehension and hostility to surrealist ideas. His manifestly formal and positivist approach can not cope with the most essential aspect of the work - the poetic.

A short, four-page, epilogue closes Rubin's work. In this he briefly discusses some of the tendencies of "post-surrealist" art, mainly American. Again, he concentrates on the formal aspects of the works, thus allowing him to imply both that these tendencies (Abstract Expressionism, Tachisme etc.) both equate with surrealist automatism

²⁸Effenberger, Vratislav: *Interpretation as Creative Activity*. In: *Dunganon 4. Surrealism as a Collective Adventure*. 1986.

and supplant surrealism itself. Only the last two paragraphs deal directly with Surrealism and here he manages to find that: "...the writing and the art reproduced in these magazines are of unrelieved mediocrity."²⁹ One of my original reasons for conducting this research was a fascination with the work of surrealists active in the post-war period, so I find his attitude wrong-headed to say the least. It is certainly true that a lot of the surrealist painting of the 50's and 60's has little resemblance to the fashionable currents of that period, but given that writers such as Julien Gracq, Andre Pieyre de Mandiargue and Octavio Paz, painters like Simon Hantai, Konrad Klapheck, Alberto Gironella, Jorge Camacho and Max-Walter Svandberg were all active in the movement during this time, we may wonder at his definition of mediocre.

To set the balance right then, I intend to concentrate on precisely that area Rubin manages to dismiss in less than 1% of his book. Unfortunately, as I have previously stated, very few writers in English have chosen to look at this period. An exception is J.H. Matthews, but he does so in a way that does not differentiate between the earlier and the later periods of Surrealism. Essentially, he regards Surrealism as an indivisible whole and in many ways is right to do this, but given the shortage of information we have about many aspects of Surrealism in English I feel myself justified in satisfying what I experience as a lack.

Witney Chadwick's *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*³⁰

is, in some ways, a very important book, and the first to reveal to an English-speaking audience some very interesting and important women artists connected with the Surrealist movement. It opened the doors

²⁹Rubin. p.410.

³⁰Chadwick, Witney: *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. Thames and Hudson, London 1985.

to a new generation of writing on women artists, more or less feminist in direction, and we have it to thank for the much of the attention since cast upon Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning, Lee Miller, Remedios Varo and, to a lesser extent, the "cult" of Frida Kahlo. But in acknowledging the real importance of this work as a pioneering study, it must also be said that it is a deeply flawed book.

The problem seems to reside in a confusion as to what purpose the book is to serve. In her introduction Chadwick writes:

"That the very existence of such a book creates philosophical problems for some of the women involved seems to me to be regrettable, if unavoidable. Tanning and Fini both feel that books devoted to women unnecessarily isolate and perpetuate their "exile." Both would prefer to be omitted from a book that largely excludes their male colleagues; unfortunately, to do so would falsify the history of Surrealism as I understand it. Although I agree that in the long run their argument is true, the fact remains that histories of Surrealism have not been without gender bias. Rather than retell histories of male Surrealists that are already widely available, I have chosen in this instance to concentrate on aspects of Surrealism that are perhaps less widely known."³¹

The first problem, to my mind, is that Chadwick begins with a statement that prevaricates as to how much the book is about Surrealism at all:

"Unconvinced about the usefulness of attempting to define what makes an artist "a Surrealist," I have chosen to write about a group of artists who were associated with Surrealism. In some cases they have accepted the designation "Surrealist"; in others, they have rejected it entirely. But most of these artists have participated in at least one, and usually more, of the international Surrealist exhibitions, they have all contributed work to major Surrealist periodicals, and in each case their work shows the clear influence of Surrealist ideas about art and the creative process.....Two other factors played a role in determining the group's parameters for the purpose of this study. One was a decision to concentrate on women whose artistic lives were not solely defined by their proximity to Surrealism, but who also exhibited independently of the group and whose self-identity

³¹Ibid.

was linked to their lives as artists. The other, the consideration of space, time, and personal energy, led to the decision to have the book concentrate on the years between 1924, the date of the Surrealist Manifesto, and 1947, when a major exhibition at the Galerie Maeght celebrated Surrealism's postwar return to Paris."³²

Which seems to suggest that what she is saying is that the book is about women artists who perhaps were and perhaps were not surrealist at a time when women's involvement in the movement tended to be peripheral. Surely such a selective view can do nothing but distort the view of the history of Surrealism? Although Chadwick does, in the next paragraph, inform us that:

"After that date, an important nucleus of younger women artists emerged at the center of the group now reformed around Breton. They have done much to keep the Surrealist flag flying."³³

But Chadwick does not even bother to mention their names! This seems a shame as someone who has made the effort to interest themselves in the subject of women and Surrealism might well consider it worthwhile to know who this "important nucleus" consisted of.

Chadwick does touch on a real problem within Surrealism. The founders of the movement were born at the end of the nineteenth century and inherited many of the values of that time. Even as they consciously rejected those values, unconsciously they continued to be moulded by them. Certain assumptions about the place of women seem not to have appeared contradictory to the young surrealists as they debated the issues of sex and love around the time of the *Second Manifesto*. Chadwick refers specifically to these discussions, now translated as *Investigating Sex*.³⁴ She reminds us that only Aragon felt strongly that women should be present at the debates. It

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴*Investigating Sex: Surrealist Research 1928-1932*. edited by Jose Pierre, translated by Malcolm Imrie. Verso, London 1992.

would not be too much to say that the surrealists of that time must seem all-too sexist in their attitudes to us, a thought that would, if our perspectives had been available to them at that time, have unsettled them. But an attitude that prevails in a young man of the late twenties does not necessarily have the same force twenty years later, or in another, younger, generation, one that had felt the force of an entirely different set of values, including those of the earlier generations of surrealists. So we can see in the post-war surrealists a far more feminist-oriented view of the matter. In this period we find, not only a much larger number of committed women surrealist painters, but also writers and theorists, so, for instance five out of eighteen contributors to the *Lexique Succinct de L'Erotisme*³⁵ in 1959 were women, (Bona, Joyce Mansour, Mimi Parent, Nora Mitrani, Marianne Van Hirtum) which if it is less than equal representation is considerably better than one finds generally at that time.

What we find here then, I believe, is less a will to misrepresent than a confusion as to what is to be said about Surrealism at all. I get the impression that Chadwick remains deeply unsure as to what to make either of Breton or of Surrealist ideas on women, not least when she deals with the concept of the "femme-enfante". Anyone who is conversant with surrealist ideas will know of Breton's terms "exploding-fixed" and "convulsive". What we have here is two terms, contradicting each other, but existing in a dialectical relation to each other also. In this case the "femme-enfante" is not a paedophile's dream, but in fact the complete woman. Her childhood and adulthood contradict each other on the temporal plane, but complement each other dialectically to give the entire person. Perhaps it is a pity that no woman surrealist has posited an "homme-enfant." It is not least because of the high value that Surrealism puts on the state of

³⁵*Lexique succinct de L'Erotisme*. Eric Losfeld Paris 1970.

childhood and on the playing of games that this term possesses some importance within Surrealism. I can't deny, however, that the notion of a girl-woman also possesses the dimension that Chadwick would attribute to it.

Given all I have said above, I would not wish to give the idea that Chadwick entirely short-changes Surrealism. She certainly does tell us that women were more active in the later generations of surrealists, and at the end of the book she is unequivocal in her praise of the surrealists for supporting women artists, but the main body of the text tends to confirm the notion of Surrealism as a boys club, and a white boys club at that.

For me, Surrealism represents something very different. It has, throughout its history been able to correct itself against the dominant ideological constructs of its time. Born in Paris among a group of young middle-class white men, Surrealism became international, embracing all peoples and both sexes. That it maintained some old prejudices along the way is not surprising, but as it became more aware of them it was able to abandon them. The number of surrealists of different ethnic backgrounds, when art and ideas were largely the privileged preserve of the whites in Europe, were large, as was the number of women. Surrealism has developed a far greater range of ideas than most commentators have given it credit for, and, very certainly, Surrealism has survived far longer than many commentators have claimed. Breton once made a remark to the effect that people had been announcing the death of Surrealism ever since the day after the publication of the *First Manifesto*. The crisis that led to the *Second Manifesto* and that of the Second World War for instance gave them fuel. Despite all this Surrealism continued to exist and develop new perspectives. Perhaps the most extreme crisis was in

1969, three years after Breton's death, when the surrealists in Paris found that they were no longer able to function collectively as they had done for so many years. At this time, Jean Schuster, Breton's executor, and in a sense, the man who seemed most to have assumed his mantle, announced the demise of the movement in a tract entitled *Le Quatrieme Chant*³⁶. Here Schuster envisaged the dropping of the term "surrealist", but the continuance of the surrealist spirit in new and, as yet, unknown and unnamed forms. His own enterprise shrank to a curatorial attempt to preserve the archives of the movement which, however, became so compromised in the eyes of most of his supporters that even that collapsed. But if there is no unified, centralised Surrealist Movement in existence, yet there is, as I have shown, a large number of surrealists in different countries, finding new ways of working with each other and moving towards a new common understanding of the aims of Surrealism. The Czech Surrealists, for so many years prevented from any public collective manifestation, have emerged as the single most important group in this milieu. In 1992 a tract was issued with 129 signatories from surrealists of many countries to protest against the Columbus celebrations. A new group in Paris, centred around Vincent Bounoure and the other signatories of *Hermetic Bird*³⁷ has come into being and is active in many fields, including the provoking and condemnation of those ex-surrealists that they believe attempted to institutionalise Surrealism. Whether this renewed momentum can be maintained remains to be seen, but as yet it shows no sign of abating.

If indeed Surrealism is a "traumatic kernel" that makes the conventional critical mind look askance at it we are entitled to ask why it should seem so difficult. That supposedly "good minds", used

³⁶Schuster, Jean: *Le Quatrieme Chant*. Originally published in *Le Monde* 4th October 1969, translation in: *Grid* No 4 1986.

³⁷Until, at any rate, Bounoure's death in January 1996. His old enemy Schuster had predeceased him by a few weeks. The group continues.

to dealing with ideas, seem often wholly unable to cope with the notion of Surrealism is curious. But if I am to prove the existence of their theoretical amnesia I must not only argue the surrealist position, but I must also reveal in much greater depth the extent of Surrealism's activity over the last half-century. It is important also that some of the movement's most important figures were hidden from view in Czechoslovakia by its oppressive government. Although a great amount of material has recently surfaced, very little has reached the English-speaking world. As so little work seems to have been done in precisely those areas that interest me most, and there still few signs of the situation changing, this is the purpose of my research.

SURREALISM IN PARIS 1945-1969

Surrealism had all but ceased to exist as an organised international movement by the end of the War. Some groups, such as the Belgian and Czech groups had come through the Nazi occupation reasonably intact, the English group still existed. On the other hand, the Yugoslav group had ceased and many of its members had found their way into Tito's General staff. What remained of Surrealism in France was a loosely coordinated, often contradictory and greatly shrunken network of individuals and small groups, many of whom did not satisfy Breton's own criteria for Surrealism. Surrealism in Paris had to be rebuilt in an atmosphere that scarcely conceded its right to exist.

Breton's re-entry into Parisian life was, it seems, low-profile. Before the War he had been at the hub of intellectual life, he was now forced out of the limelight and the new stars were not surrealists, but the up and coming existentialists, in particular Jean-Paul Sartre. Politically, it was the Communist Party, who detested Breton, that held the high ground, all of which clearly pushed Breton towards the periphery of Paris' cultural life. If Anna Balakian seems to whittle down Breton's reaction to this situation to one of disarming modesty, Mark Polizotti, usually managing to transform even the most positive events into negatives, seems to relish an act of bravado, as Breton stole the limelight from his old sparring partner Tristan Tzara.

"...Breton had a much more public run-in with another old colleague, Tristan Tzara, over Tzara's March 17 lecture at the Sorbonne (the site already speaks volumes) on "Surrealism and the Postwar Period." Trouble was promised from the moment Breton entered the hall: "In an auditorium bursting with onlookers,"wrote one witness, "Breton entered like a huge lion" - an epithet people never tired of - "escorted by several faithful followers; hearing his name whispered on all sides, he raised his head, rounded his thumb

and index over one eye, and through this improvised monocle contemplated the audience with superb arrogance."

Then the speaker took the stage. His own famous monocle having been replaced by sage horn-rimmed glasses, his Dadaist iconoclasm having yielded to Stalinist orthodoxy, Tzara chided Breton for his "absence" during the war and declared, "History has passed Surrealism by." Furious, Breton rose and, standing on a bench in the ancient Richelieu amphitheater, finger pointed accusingly at the stage, shouted out that Tzara "should be ashamed to be speaking in such a place!" When Tzara continued with a remark about those who judged the Occupation "from high atop the Statue of Liberty," a livid Breton jumped on stage and (for lack of a better challenge) defiantly downed the speaker's glass of water. He then stormed out of the amphitheater, taking a large portion of the audience with him."¹

Elmer Peterson, in his book *Tristan Tzara*² plays down this event, referring merely to a "demonstration against Tzara which was led by a group of surrealists. A photograph in Ribemont-Dessaigne's *Deja Jadis* shows Breton on his feet, shaking his fist at his former friend, who is seated on the podium."³ Fortunately, Peterson reproduces the photograph. The amphitheatre is bulging with people, filling all the seats and with some standing, most of whom are too indistinct to identify, but who must number at least a couple of hundred, and Breton alone stands out, immediately identifiable. If indeed a "large portion" of the audience followed Breton out, the scene must have been pretty dramatic.

In discussing the lecture, Peterson tends towards Tzara's position, considering him "justly bitter" over:

"some of the "jeux surrealistes" described in *VVV*. One of them had to do with placing a hand on either side of a wire fence and running the hands up and down touching each other. Tzara simply and devastatingly remarks that this was probably the only surrealist

¹Polizotti, Mark: *Revolution of the Mind: the Life of André Breton*. Bloomsbury, London 1995. p.544.

²Peterson, Elmer: *Tristan Tzara: Dada and Surrealist Theorist*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1971.

³*Ibid.* p.187.

experience at the time that had anything to do with the occupation, where..."prisoners in the concentration camps had become veritable specialists in the matter of wire fencing.""⁴

This reflects official Communist attitudes towards Breton and Surrealism after the war. Whether or not one considers Tzara's bitterness just or his comparison of the twin touch test to the experience of the concentration camps as being "devastating" depends on a multiplicity of factors, not least one's own attitude towards Surrealism, but surely the sort of choice that Tzara suggests that Breton refused is at least partially illusory. Given that the surrealists had denounced the Stalinisation of Communism, the show trials, the betrayal of the liberatory impulses within the Russian Revolution, given Breton and Peret's admiration and ideological closeness to Trotsky, how could the surrealists have easily made common cause with the communists of the Resistance? Would they have not simply have been purged? And, given our perspectives fifty years after the end of that war, given both Breton's own attitude towards the Communist Party by the end of the Thirties and current knowledge of Stalinist terror, although one might find Tzara's bitterness understandable, it seems less justifiable. How, after all, is one to choose between two monsters, Hitler and Stalin?

Peterson does not allow Tzara to get away with everything. He calls Tzara's overly orthodox Marxist view of love as "...weak, if not absurd" and praises the surrealists exaltation of love. He also finds unacceptable:

"Tzara's accusation that the surrealists have always expressed a pessimistic view of man's possibilities. Tzara affirms that surrealism was a movement of despair and that its poetry was usually negative."⁵

⁴Ibid. p.195.

⁵Ibid. p.196.

For the ex-surrealists like Tzara, Breton was now beyond the pale. In a collage of quotations and paraphrases from André Thirion and Jean-Louis Bedouin, Mark Polizotti tells us that:

"René Char, who had emerged from the war a major Resistance poet, declined an offer to rejoin Surrealism, and instead half jokingly remarked to a young colleague: "You know, I think Breton will have to be shot." Eluard, who lacked even Char's dose of humor, snipped to Gala, "Mr Breton, whom I have not met (or glimpsed) since his return, has become petrified in a historic pose, very much the exile...It's not even painful to me any more to see Breton supported by all the worst kind of reactionaries. As for me, I am entirely at the disposal of my party [and] fully approve its politics."..."Aragon rode around like John Wayne wearing a badge that said 'PCF'."⁶

Eluard's position is particularly contradictory, remaining friendly with Gala and Dali, not exactly notable for pro-communist or even anti-fascist activities and opinions, and remaining so approving of his party's politics that he condoned the execution of Zavis Kalandra a few years later. This, of course, expresses the dilemma of that time, one could not make the choice between two systems, both based on the total state, state terrorism, on the personification of that state by a psychopath. It is an insane choice, and one that could only be made by deliberately blinding oneself to the nature of Stalinist Communism. For the surrealists the only option was to refuse both equally, but this refusal meant that they were to be perceived as existing in a void at a time when commitment was very fashionable.

At least to this extent, history has proved the surrealists right. Eluard's and Aragon's adherence to the Communist Party, Sartre's rather erratic approximation to it, later generations espousal of Maoism (Tel Quel for

⁶Polizotti: p.537.

instance), do any of these ideological positions seem even remotely credible today? So it is only those who turned their backs on such easy (and fashionable) answers who can hope to represent any kind of radical standard. This does not mean, however, that Surrealism's position after the war can be easily summed up, nor that their path was to be an easy one. In the years that followed Breton's return to Paris, although a considerable surrealist activity was to emerge, the movement was frequently split with dissention, and to many the Surrealism of the late 1940's seemed to lack clear focus and an apparent inability to renew the forms of surrealist inspiration, a willingness to rest upon considerable, but rather faded laurels.

Although I have made a personal affirmation of Surrealism's continuing relevance, I do have to ask if there is not a substantial element of truth to these accusations. The question is was Surrealism permanently diminished, and if so, to what degree? was it possible for a renewal of Surrealism after the tide had turned against it, or was the movement a kind of ghost, condemned to endlessly haunt the sites of former victories, only dimly aware of the reality of its defeat?

Stepping Back Stepping Forward: The Prolegomena To A Third Manifesto - Arcane 17 - Ode To Charles Fourier

To appreciate the course taken by Surrealism in the post-war years it is necessary to examine, at least briefly, Breton's major theoretical texts of the preceding years. Taking as the key texts *The Prolegomena To a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Not*, *Arcane 17* and the *Ode to Charles Fourier*, new developments in Breton's thinking can be traced which, while making possible further development in surrealist thought, also creates particular problems.

Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto or Not: its title suggests that it was intended to do no more than sketch out the possible course of a third manifesto. The original manifesto had suggested activities, directions and definitions with a certain amount of humour, while remaining open, not to say a trifle vague, about the future shape of Surrealism. Many of the descriptions of surrealist activity did not entirely conform to the definition of "pure psychic automatism." The Second Manifesto had revised some of Breton's views, scarcely mentioning automatism, blasted enemies and opponents and introducing the definition of Surrealism that had best expressed its aims, the search for the Supreme Point. The Prolegomena demonstrates the openness of Breton's approach:

"Parties: what is, what is not in the party line. But what if my own line, that admittedly twists and turns, passes through Heraclitus, Abelard, Eckhardt, Retz, Rousseau, Swift, Sade, Lewis, Arnim, Lautreamont, Engels, Jarry, and a few others? From them I have constructed a system of coordinates for my own use, a system that stands up to the test of my own personal experience and therefore appears to me to include some of tomorrow's chances."⁷

And attacks ideological fixation:

"All present systems can reasonably be considered to be nothing but tools on the carpenter's workbench..."⁸

The main theoretical innovation though would seem to be Breton's demand for a new myth, that of the *Grands Transparents*, beings living on a plane imperceptible to human senses.

The problem for someone coming to Surrealism from the outside is that the Transparents approximate too closely the idea of angels or gods. Without understanding whether they are meant literally or merely

⁷Breton, André: *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. University of Michigan Press. 1972. p.285.

⁸Ibid. p.287. (The full quote is on p.1. of the present study.)

analogically, one is either repelled by their apparent mystical nature or attracted by it, without understanding it. In Czechoslovakia, Vratislav Effenberger was to criticise Breton's "mysticism," while others would see in the Transparents the possibility of reconciling Surrealism with religion or magic.⁹

I am not convinced that these are correct views of either Breton's, or Surrealism's, attitudes towards occult and mystical matters. Although Breton had long been fascinated by the occult (he had made references to alchemy in the Second Manifesto for instance,) he did not commit himself to it as a world view, but rather as an instrument of imagination, retaining the basis of his materialism. Was Breton perhaps tempted by occult doctrines? Perhaps, but there seems to be no justification for claiming that he was won over by them. Rather he would seem to have wished to create a dialectical tension between materialist and idealist world-views in the hope of some new resolution.

Arcane 17

This book is the last of Breton's books of lyrical prose. Viewing the sequence, from *Nadja*, through *Vases Communicants* and *L'Amour Fou* we can see a progression from a kind of realism, the almost documentary nature of *Nadja* (how on earth did anyone ever get the idea that it was a novel?) is carried through to *Vases Communicants*, which, however, is shot through with melancholy reflections and attempts to define himself in relation to the revolution. Both books are centred on Paris, as is the opening of *L'Amour Fou*, which also begins with an obsessive detailing of

⁹Interestingly, in her *Surrealism and the Occult*, (Mandrake, Oxford 1991) Nadia Choucha seems to miss the significance of this text in relation to occult tradition. But then as she misses the significance of almost everything, preferring to fabricate illusory correspondences with Jung or Austin Spare. The latter at least is interesting enough to discuss another time the parallels between his ideas and those of the surrealists, but Choucha fails at every turn.

events in Breton's life and his miraculous-seeming encounter with Jacqueline during night of the sunflower. (Another alchemical image - the sun at midnight). The book then takes off to, among other places, the Canaries. *Arcane 17* is not at all rooted in Paris, but rather in Breton's being uprooted, his need to find a new basis to his life, and although we quickly gather that in some way he has found this, it is difficult to discern many other events in the book.

It is a furiously dense book; the multiplication of analogies dazzles. Images of nature, the human world, nature transformed, slide into each other. Although, no doubt, impossible to unravel entirely, the basic themes of the book are clear enough; dreams, the chosen woman, the rediscovery of love, an increased interest with myth and with nature. Most importantly, a shift in Breton's own values, the abandonment of masculine values in favour of the feminine. From now on Breton espouses the values of woman, but what does he mean by this?

In rejecting the masculine he is rejecting those values that have endlessly sent millions to fight and die on fields of battle. Woman is the peacemaker, "...extending her arms between those who are about to grapple to say: you are brothers." The image of woman here is a complex of the *femme-enfant* and of Melusine, a magical being who appears sometimes as a woman and sometimes as half woman, half serpent.¹⁰ A third image, the one that gives it's name to the book, is that of the seventeenth major trump, or arcanum, of the tarot pack - Hope. Here

¹⁰A variant on many stories of magical women, such as the kelpies, or seal-women, who chose to live as mortals for love of a man, the story of Melusine has a curious basis in fact. She is supposed to have married the lord of Lusignan, hiding her half-human nature from him. When he saw her in her half-serpent form, she vanished, but promised to protect their descendants. The myth is discussed in Jean Markale: *Women of the Celts*. Trans. A. Mygind, C. Hauch and P. Henry. Gordon Cremonesi, London 1975.

Breton is picking up on the nineteenth century developments of the occult traditions, particularly the writings of Eliphas Levi, where the tarot cards, long known as a game and as a medium for telling fortunes, were exalted as the long-lost Book of Thoth and equated with the paths on the Qabalistic Tree of Life. Hope is represented by a naked woman, kneeling by a river, one foot on land, the other in the water, pouring the water from two jars into the river. Above her is a star, or in some versions, a constellation. She is clearly, at least when assimilated into the occult tradition, a figure of mediation, between the elements, between heaven and earth, and as such provides one of the series of keys to Breton's thought at this time. Melusine is also a mediator, between the human and the non-human (her non-human part is both animal and divine) between earth and water and air. Both are, therefore, also images of some kind of totality, and I would interpret the child-woman in that light also.

Zack Rogow finds Breton's new-found feminism "strong and far sighted...revolutionary", but then goes on to agree with Whitney Chadwick:

"But in her book *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, the art historian Whitney Chadwick questions the depth of Breton's feminism in *Arcanum 17*. Criticizing the Surrealists, she writes:

What they give us finally, is not a role for women independent of man, even as they acknowledge her power and her proximity to the sources of creation, but a new image of the couple in which woman completes man, is brought to life by him, and in turn, inspires him.

Professor Chadwick makes a good point when she chides Breton for choosing the "child-woman" as his image of woman at her most powerful. This archetype, isolated from others, does infantilize women."¹¹

¹¹Rogow, Zack: In:Breton, André: *Arcanum 17*. Sun and Moon Press 1994. p.20.

I substantially disagree with this. Further to my discussion of these matters in chapter one, it is necessary to ask in what way is "this archetype" isolated, and why, indeed, use the term archetype? Are we to take a Jungian interpretation as given? Breton is indeed concerned with woman as *interdependent* with man, but this does not mean that she lacks any of the autonomy that a man might claim for himself. But these two aspects of autonomy and interdependence are unavoidable and to insist on a further independence is simply to increase alienation, it splits humanity in two. (And this applies equally in relationships between gays, themselves and others). Breton wrote, quite clearly, as a man and a poet, and from this perspective he certainly was concerned with the inspiring role of woman, and nobody should be surprised that he does not see woman as "independent of man" any more than man is independent of woman. A fairly blatant sexism in Breton's earlier attitudes (such as his dismissal of Aragon's suggestion that women be included in the 1920s discussions on sexuality) seems to vanish, but if it seems only reasonable to assume that it must leave some trace in a man born in the last century, a position of interdependence is not of a matter of course an inferior position. Because, for Breton, the heterosexual couple is *always* the paradigm, anything else is a falling away from that perfect relation. In the post-war years Breton's willingness to accept women as intellectual equals as well as artists in their own right was expressed in friendships such as that with Joyce Mansour.

As for the femme-enfant, I am of the opinion that this concept is misrepresented by Chadwick and Rogoff. I have to confess that until I had read Chadwick's book I had never considered the term to mean a *childish* woman, but rather that it is an "exploding-fixed" analogy. I mean that the contradiction between the adult woman and her own childhood is overcome by the more complete image of woman of the femme-enfant. The contradiction is not wholly resolved perhaps, but exists as a creative

tension. It is important to remember that Elisa was not a nymphet when Breton met her, but a widow who had also been a mother. She was a mature woman. If she represented some aspect of childhood as well, it was surely because Breton read in her the glyph of the complete woman?

It is true, however, that *Arcane 17* does not provide any easy way forward. It expresses hope, but how are these values to be put into practice? In some ways Breton was catching up with fellow spirits who had been far more progressive in their advocacy of Feminism. In some ways the book is one for men rather than women in that does not chart a way forward for the woman surrealist (or more generally for the woman revolutionary) but it does open up a territory that is still insufficiently explored. It also makes a demand on men to make way for these women, and their values. It seems to me that he is right to do so in as much as he can't speak for women and should not pretend to do so. In this light the limitations of *Arcane 17* can be seen as quite proper, opening a path without defining it, but consequently it shares a problem with the Prolegomena and the missing third manifesto in that at a moment when Surrealism seems lost they are maps of possibilities rather than blueprints for a renewed movement.

Ode to Charles Fourier

Breton's discovery of the work of Charles Fourier while in America was to prove a turning point in surrealist ideas on society and civilisation. Surrealism's - and Breton's adherence to Marxism-Leninism had never had the results that Breton had desired, the surrealists had been mistrusted by the communists while in the party, and having left it, were to be viewed as reactionary turncoats - and even worse - as Trotskyists. Communism in the form that developed from Leninism into Stalinism was, in its beginnings, only a partial realisation of what the surrealists

desired, and in its outcome its antithesis. The search for alternative visions, the delving into Utopias was inevitable, but it was not until Breton found a copy of Fourier's complete works in a New York bookstore that his influence was to be felt.

Breton had previously only been dimly aware of Fourier's work, and that "through anthologies which are interested in him only from the angle of social reform."¹² Certainly, for the practical revolutionary, Fourier seemed to be of little interest, the man who believed that the oceans could be transformed into lemonade and people into butterflies would seem to be of little relevance to factory workers, but he had been spoken of appreciatively by Marx and Engels as a dialectician. Fourier's vision of the perfect society, not civilisation, but Harmony, was a fantastically detailed picture of people finding happiness in unalienated work, work expressed as a game and made to satisfy, rather than frustrate, the passions.

A reconciliation then of the reality and pleasure principles was a major attraction of Fourier's system. His analysis of the social conditions of his day, of the lot afforded the workers, of women, was sharp and relevant. What emerges from a reading of Fourier is that he is also a master humorist.¹³ The problem for one trying to extract a notion of a possible praxis from the mass of Fourier's work is where the humour ends and where he is serious about his claims for Harmony. It emerges that Harmony is, in effect, a theocracy, that it cannot be effected incrementally, but only by finding a patron willing to finance a

¹²Letter to Jean Gaulmier. Quoted in translator's introduction: Breton, André: *Ode to Charles Fourier*, translated by Kenneth White. Cape Goliard Press, London 1969.

¹³"...his imperturbably serene nature makes him a satirist, and assuredly one of the greatest satirists of all time. He depicts, with equal power and charm, the swindling speculations that blossomed out upon the downfall of the Revolution..." Engels, F.: *Anti-Dühring*. 2nd edition. Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow 1959.

phalanstery (the social unit of Harmony, a collective) for it must be instituted definitively or not at all, and that without such conditions we are apparently condemned to remain in a rotting Civilisation. If this is so, then it seems that the pleasure principle and reality principle might remain in opposition for some time to come. What remains unclear at this juncture is in what light Breton was reading Fourier.

The answer appears to be twofold. Firstly he was calling for "...a reevaluation of those parts of his work that are still valid."¹⁴ But also Fourier's vision is to be approached in its entirety as a great analogical message permitting a variety of interpretations and responses. Octavio Paz said that Breton read Fourier as:

"...we might read the Vedas or the Popul Vuh..."¹⁵ Beecher and Bienvenu remind us that "Fourier's vision is a whole and cannot be conveniently separated into sensible doctrines and mad speculations."¹⁶ This should not, however mean that one should always read him purely literally.

Among the most important of Fourier's ideas for Breton were those of *passional attraction* and *absolute doubt*.¹⁷ The latter is one of scepticism towards all received ideas, the former is a view of the structure of desire. In their introduction to *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier* Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu say:

"Although few of the eighteenth century psychologists had denied that men were creatures of passion, most of them held that men were also endowed with a rational faculty which would or

¹⁴Breton, André: *Entretiens* (translated as *Conversations*, trans. Mark Polizzotti) Paragon House, New York 1993.

¹⁵Paz, Octavio: *André Breton, or the Voyage to a Beginning*. In: *Alternating Current*. Arcade Publishing. 1990. p.56.

¹⁶Beecher, Jonathan & Bienvenu, Richard: *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier, Selected Texts on Work, Love and Passionate Attraction*. Jonathan Cape, London 1971. p.36.

¹⁷Interview with Jean Duché. In: *Entretiens*. p.lbid.

could enable them not only to organise their sense experience but also impose effective checks and limits on their passions. Breaking decisively with this tradition, Fourier maintained that men were moved by instinctual forces over which they had no real control. His primary concern was to specify and analyze these drives. For the passions were the "mistresses of the world"; and only when they had been recognized and allowed free expression could man attain the happiness for which he was destined."¹⁸

Such a view coincides with the surrealist interpretation of Freud in preaching an end to the repression of desire and giving possibilities for a form of sublimation that does not become the mask for renewed repression, but rather the means of the further realisation of desire.

The Ode itself is a curiosity for Breton, it is a very consciously structured work, which, from the viewpoint of the dedicated automatist would seem retrogressive.

"The text is fairly controlled (relieved as much as possible of the dross which encumbers automatic texts)...Its elaboration was part *critical*: I permitted myself in this case the luxury of an infraction of my own principles (to liberate, at any cost, poetry from parasitic controls) and my idea was to give this infraction of my principles the sense of a voluntary, freely-chosen sacrifice, to the memory of Fourier, the most recent memory that seemed worthy of it."¹⁹

The poem opens with an address to Fourier:

"In those days I knew you only by sight...
...And then one early morning of 1937
That would be about a hundred years by the way after your death
In passing I noticed a very fresh bunch of violets at your feet...
...Fourier are you still there...

..You who spoke only of uniting look all is disunity
And head over heel we've gone down the hill...

...Fourier it's all too depressing to see them emerging from one of
the worst cess-pools of history...
Like you Fourier

¹⁸Beecher and Bienvenu. p.36-37.

¹⁹Breton, Letter to Jean Gaulmier. Quoted in *Ode to Charles Fourier*.

You erect among the great visionaries
Who thought to have overcome routine and misery"²⁰

Breton describes the misery of the present day and contrasts it with the vision of Harmony. Then suddenly we come across the phrase "Here I've reversed poetic steam" rendered as two semi-circles. What follows is a paraphrase of, and commentary on, Fourier's ideas, the State of the Sensual, the Affective and Mechanising Pulsions. Two more semi-circles lead us back into the Ode, Breton salutes Fourier from:

"...the moment when the Indian dances have just come to an end...

...the bottom of the ladder which plunges into the great mystery in the hopi *kiva* the sacred subterranean chamber...

...From the depths of the millenary pact which in anguish has for object to maintain the integrity of the word

From the farthest waves of the echo awakened by the foot striking imperiously the ground to seal the alliance with the powers that raise the grain".²¹

The shifts from the narrative to the lyrical to the expository make the Ode a more difficult work, more demanding of our attention, than Breton's other long poems, such as *Fata Morgana*, which, although its imagery is often more difficult, is yet simpler and less demanding of special knowledge. In a curious way, with the *Ode to Charles Fourier*, Breton comes close to Pound's *Cantos* in making a poem less an autonomous text than a collage of sources intended to educate. Despite the difficulties of reading it, it is considerably easier, and far less tedious, than the Chinese *Cantos*.

Breton was to say of Fourier that he "...must be one of our primary guides, not to say a major contributor, to the potential establishment of a new myth on which we could base a durable cohesion (I'm thinking of

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

his marvellous ongoing cosmology, of his concept of the "aromal shell," home of the "transmundanes," etc.)."²² Again, the search for a new myth. In each of these texts, and in lesser texts of the same period, this preoccupation with a new myth looms up into the foreground of Breton's thought. When, in 1947, the surrealists were able to stage the first post-war international exhibition, the theme of myth was to take centre stage.

International Surrealist Exhibition 1947

The International Exhibition of 1947 is sufficiently well known for me to not describe it in great detail. I will, however, attempt to examine some of its themes and consequences, particularly in the light of the developments in Breton's thought.

Given the negative reaction the exhibition received from some quarters, often ex-surrealists who no doubt had to shout their complaints over the sound of axes being ground, it is worth remembering that many of the exhibitors from the pre-war period, Bellmer, Brauner, Matta, Lam, Gorky, Toyen, Heisler, Miro, etc. were at this time producing their best work. Doubtless, at a time when social reality was the preoccupation of the new generation of artists and writers, the theme of the exhibition, that of myth was responsible for much of the adverse opinion. The passages, the Hall of Superstitions, the altars to mythical beings, all must have reinforced the view that Surrealism had simply lost its revolutionary impetus and succumbed to occultism. I have tried to place Breton's own interests in the occult and in alchemy in some sort of perspective, but it is difficult to make any absolute generalisation about the surrealists as a whole. Some were clearly opposed to any such occult leanings, seeing

²²*Entretiens*. p.207-8.

them as idealist or quasi-religious. E.L.T. Mesens and Vratislav Effenberger, at least in his youth, seem to represent such opinion, but neither were regular participants of Paris Surrealism, Effenberger not at all.

I shall concentrate on two texts printed in the catalogue of the 1947 exhibition, Breton's *Before the Curtain* and Georges Bataille's *The Absence of Myth*.

Breton's text, the longer of the two, prefaces the catalogue and places the exhibition in the context of earlier exhibition, of the hiatus of the war. He turns to dream and the work of the Romantics, mentioning in turn Blake, Du Maurier's *Peter Ibbetson* and de Quincy:

"It is more necessary than ever to save "something of the grandeur which." said Thomas de Quincy, "belongs potentially to human dreams". And he adds: "He whose talk is of oxen will dream habitually of oxen; and the condition of human life which yokes so vast a majority to a daily experience incompatible with much elevation of thought oftentimes neutralises the tone of grandeur in the reproductive faculty of dreaming..."

We cannot give too much thought to this statement, in an age when dreams of oxen (oxen usually cut into very thin slices) tend to oust all others; when socialism itself, forgetting that it had its origins in the waking dream of better days for all shows the greatest mistrust of all that might recall those origins...and when it is possible to read...the hope that Soviet science would soon succeed in banishing from human life both sleep and dream, as being "unproductive", and which the same paper went so far as to denounce as a "useless luxury".²³

He goes on to affirm surrealist principle against those who enjoin them "with tender consideration, to break with its post". And then he turns to the procession of names of Surrealism's predecessors (Hugo, Nerval, Lautreamont, Saint Martin, Rimbaud etc.). He approves of Frazer's

²³Breton, André: *Before the Curtain*. In: André Breton: *What is Surrealism?* Edited and introduced by Franklin Rosemont. Pluto Press 1978. p.276.

comment in *The Golden Bough* that "Magic has contributed to the emancipation of mankind...and if Magic is the daughter of error, yet it is the mother of Liberty and Truth." At last he speaks directly about myths:

"This is not the moment to state our attitude to the thorny question as to whether the "absence of myth" is in itself a myth and if it is to be considered as constituting the myth of our day. Despite rationalist protests, *everything occurs today as though* certain relatively recent poetic and plastic works exercised a power over people's minds incomparably stronger than that of the "work of art".

"...take for example Rimbaud's "Devotion" - all this lends colour to the idea that a myth is emerging from them, which it is our task to define and to coordinate.

We have merely aimed, in the narrow limits of this exhibition, and by means as it were of a spiritual "parade", to give an entirely external glimpse of what such a myth might be."²⁴

Bataille's text stands in stark contrast to Breton's. While Breton weaves in and out of other texts, makes elegant rhetorical flourishes, and sums up the exhibition, Bataille is short, curt and direct. He tells us that:

"The *absence of God* is no longer a closure: it is the opening up to the infinite. The absence of God is greater, and more divine, than God...The myths which, in the white and incongruous void of absence, exist innocently and shatter are no longer myth...myths, whether they be lasting or fugitive, vanish like rivers in the sea in the absence of myth which is their lament and their truth...The fact that a universe without myth is the ruin of the universe - reduced to the nothingness of things - in the process of depriving us equates deprivation with the revelation of the universe. If by abolishing the mythic universe we have lost the universe, the action of a revealing loss is itself connected to the death of myth..."Night is also a sun", and the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the purest, the only *true* myth."²⁵

²⁴Ibid. p.279.

²⁵Bataille, Georges: *The Absence of Myth*. Trans. Michael Richardson, Verso Books, London 1994. p.48.

Bataille seems to draw equally upon Nietzsche and the Gnostics by proposing that God is a limitation on our existence and his absence the destruction of that limit. (For the Gnostics the creator-god or gods were the Archons, false images of the divine which must be surpassed or defeated in order to reach the uncreated true Divine realm.) We have reached a point where the entire symbolic structure has collapsed, we are both set free and, curiously, impoverished. If the absence of myth is a myth, then we are living (tautologically) the myth of absence. He does not say if this absence is to be filled or if it prefaces a return (of God or a new god or of being as suggested by Heidegger?).

If Bataille, as ever, seems to belong to the opposite pole of thought to Breton, they seem at least to belong to the same system of attractions and repulsions. If there were not an absence of myth, there would be no sense in searching for a new myth. The absence is a necessary condition of the search. Breton is less willing to commit himself to the notion of this absence, perhaps finding this absence so final, irrevocable. Is the absence of myth like the Grail Quest, in which the absence of the Grail dominates the story until near its end? Or is the search for a myth doomed to failure, bound to be false, because the absence of myth is the only true myth? If the absence of myth is itself a myth, what lies behind it - another myth, or naked reality?

In the context of the 1947 exhibition Bataille would seem to both complement Breton's approach and to confound it, to open a wound in the structure of this search for a myth. But by doing so, he also completes the presentation. The element of paradox, the impossible search, the grit needed by the oyster to make the pearl. Bataille's presence in the exhibition still seems to surprise many, and this is not entirely unexpected. Bataille has been portrayed as anti-surrealist, or as

the leader of an alternative Surrealism. Neither view adequately describes this frequently difficult relationship with Breton and with Surrealism. His early judgement that the surrealists were "fucking idealists" underwent a transition after his period of open enmity with Breton at the time of *Un Cadavre* and the *Second Manifesto*. Michael Richardson's translation of Bataille's writings on Surrealism²⁶ shows a drastic shift in his own attitudes, recognising their closeness in many respects, but at the same time certain great differences. Fundamentally, Bataille and Breton seem to remain opposed in temperament, and it is this temperament that informs their intellectual differences. Octavio Paz describes this opposition:

"Breton's indignation at the "infamous Christian idea of sin" is something more than a violent rejection of the traditional values of the West: it is an affirmation of the original innocence of man. This distinguishes him from almost all of his contemporaries and successors. For Georges Bataille, eroticism, death and sin are interchangeable signs whose combinations repeat the same meaning again and again, with terrifying monotony: the nothingness of man, his irremediable abjection."²⁷

"Bataille has endeavoured to transform Sade's monologue into a dialogue, bringing absolute eroticism face to face with a no less absolute adversary: Christian divinity. The result is silence and laughter: "atheology." The unthinkable and the unnameable. Breton reintroduces love into eroticism, or, more exactly, consecrates eroticism through love...Commenting on a passage in the *New Justine* - the episode in which one of the characters mingles his sperm with the lava of Etna - Breton observes that the act is one of loving homage to nature, "*une façon, des plus folles, des plus indiscutables de l'aimer.*"²⁸

This is a rather unexpected judgement on Sade, and one which Bataille could not have concurred, yet we must recognise, as Richardson says' "Bataille's affirmation of his fundamental solidarity with (Surrealism) and his general agreement with the thinking of André Breton."²⁹

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Paz. p.47.

²⁸Ibid. p.57.

²⁹Bataille. p.1.

What is most important about this mutual recognition is that this dark contrary spirit manifests itself within Surrealism more fully in the post-war era than ever before. From this time onwards the surrealists can be seen more than ever to descend "towards the dark core of erotic oneirism."³⁰

The 1947 exhibition did not lack for critics even within Surrealism. The Egyptian surrealist Georges Henein believed that, as Abdul Kadir el Janabi says: "a general consultation of surrealists throughout the world was more urgent than a show-off exhibition."³¹ However, Henein did not withhold his collaboration from the exhibition. Breton's attitude was that only confusion would arise from such an exercise. Janabi continues:

"Yet, in spite of this peculiar way of despairing about the future of the surrealist movement, the confusion which Breton wanted to avoid was not very far from prevailing: peripheral surrealists (Cobra, Lyrical abstraction, Bauhaus Imagiste, Lettrism, etc) had surfaced to show evidence of the new necessity for intervention."³²

Surrealism's course in the following years suggests that Henein's suggestion had considerable substance to it. From this time on until the mid-fifties, the surrealist movement was frequently split by dissention and ideological quarrels, while the new movements Janabi mentions, and most importantly the Situationists, saw themselves not only as the heirs of Breton's Surrealism, but as surpassing it.

Surrealism In Fission - The exclusion of Matta and Brauner

While Surrealism had its origin in an organic growth from its Dada and pre-Dada roots into a complex and mature "compound being", in the

³⁰Passeron, René: *Concise Encyclopedia of Surrealism*, translated by John Griffiths. Omega Books 1984.

³¹El Janabi, A.K.: *The Nile of Surrealism: Surrealist Activities in Egypt 1936-1952*, Arabie sur Seine, Paris 1991.

³²Ibid.

years following the war, it had been, not reinvented, but recomposed, often from readymade components. Perhaps no other option was available. perhaps both Breton and Henein were right, maybe Surrealism in 1947 was too fragile to bear the brunt of a questioning of itself from within. If signs of possible trouble were visible, eyes were focused at first on the enemy without until Arshile Gorky's suicide led to the exclusion of Matta for "moral turpitude".

The bald facts of the case seem to be that Matta had an affair with Gorky's wife Magouch. Gorky must have already felt he was cursed, a studio fire had destroyed many of his best works, he was partially paralysed after a car-crash and he was found to have inoperable cancer. The affair between Matta and Magouch was, perhaps, the last straw, he hanged himself in July 1948. Apparently, Frederick Keisler had written to Breton on this, as Polizzotti puts it, "painting Matta's role in the incident in the blackest terms"³³ Breton refused to listen to Matta's explanation of the affair and it would seem that it was Breton who demanded the exclusion of Matta from the surrealists. Victor Brauner was alone in refusing to sign the notice of exclusion and was in turn excluded. At this point several of the young surrealists³⁴ rebelled and were also expelled from the movement.

The exclusion notices of Matta, Brauner and the others appear on the back page of the fourth issue of *Neon*.³⁵ The whole thing, including the accompanying drawing by Maurice Henri³⁶ takes up no more than a very few inches, including the list of signatures, as if the matter was of little

³³Polizzotti, Mark: *Revolution of the Mind*. p.557.

³⁴Alain Jouffroy, Sarane Alexandrian, Claude Tarnaud, Stanislas Rodanski, Francis Bouvet.

³⁵*Neon*, No.4, Paris Novembre 1948

³⁶Titled *Le cadavre exclu ne boira pas le vin nouveau*. (The excluded corpse shall not drink the new wine).

consequence. To paraphrase Lady Bracknell, to lose one surrealist may be deemed unfortunate, to lose seven, including two of the movement's most prominent members, seem more like carelessness. This bloodletting was to be the first of many in the coming years, and no doubt the public nature of much of this infighting contributed to the impression that Surrealism was dead in the water. The next major disruption was to be aimed at Breton himself.

Carrouges and the Pastoreau Affair

I will deal briefly with these incidents as they have been well covered by Mark Polizzotti in his biography of Breton.³⁷ Breton had become friendly with the writer Michel Carrouges, despite the latter's catholicism. Carrouges wrote a flattering study of Breton. No doubt because of their friendship, Breton was noncommittal when Carrouges gave a lecture, *Le Surréalisme est-il mort?* (Is Surrealism Dead?). However, this enraged the other surrealists, and Henri Pastoreau and Marcel Jean led several of them in a demonstration to sabotage the lecture. Breton, instead of approving the act, as they had expected, was furious. What followed was a batting back and forth of weighty documents detailing respective versions of events and positions resulting in the exclusion of Pastoreau, Jean and several others. Once again the surrealist ranks were reduced to the detriment of Surrealism. Although Pastoreau had lost his place in the movement, he did cause Breton to break with Carrouges.

The problem with relying on Polizzotti's account is that, as Robert Short has pointed out, although he usually factually accurate, his interpretation of events is almost unfailingly negative. The Pastoreau Affair, being one of seemingly total negativity becomes a depressing little tragi-comedy in his hands. It is, however, quite useful at this point to emphasise the

³⁷Polizzotti, Mark: 1995.

negative and to attempt to draw from it the peculiar tenacity of Surrealism even under adverse conditions. Polizotti informs us that of the thirty three signatories of *Haute fréquence* (High Frequency), the final instalment of the Pastoreau Affair, only Breton, Peret and Man Ray "specially pressed into service for the occasion" were of the older generation. He forgets to mention several veterans though, including Toyen and Heisler, Brunius and Mandiargues. The way he mentions the more recent recruits suggests that they are of little consequence:

"Instead, Surrealism was now mainly populated by such figures as Bedouin, Dax, Duprey, Legrand, Mitrani, Schuster, and Zimbacca, along with three film fanatics from the magazine *L'Age du cinema* (Adonis Kyrou, Georges Goldfayn, and Robert Benayoun) and a few others - all of them young enough to have been Breton's children, if not his grandchildren."³⁸

Why Kyrou, Goldfayn and Benayoun are "film fanatics" suggesting that they are, in current parlance, "anoraks" rather than critics of film we are not told. Nor are we told that at least two of the recent recruits among the signatories, Paz and Duprey, are poets of genius, (if that word means anything at all) and that several of these "figures" even if they failed to gain the public prestige that the first generation of surrealists were to enjoy, were yet often of considerable ability. Furthermore, the suggestion seems to be that their very youth counts against them. Of course, Polizotti's point is that most of the earlier surrealists had long vanished, but the point is being made in a loaded way.

It is a difficult question, but one that deserves asking, was Breton ever tempted to back-pedal on his life-long anti-clerical, anti-catholic stance? It seems hardly likely, put in these terms, although André Thirion remembers finding Breton's attitudes softened:

"Have you become a mystic?" I jokingly asked him. He laughed but did not reply frankly. "I *am* favourable to mysticism, as I am to magic, and I am curious about religions and the religious spirit. But I

³⁸Polizotti, p.574.

am not reconciled with the Crucified....I always feel the same aversion to the idea of a fault that can be redeemed through privation, suffering and sacrifice, and to the apology for resignation, much less the scandalous fantasies that the Church has added to this basic masochism."³⁹

But given Breton's stand against both God and organised religion, one is at a loss to find a conventional framework to contain his apparent mysticism, and it would seem rather to be a rephrasing of Surrealism's "magic materialism" rather than mysticism as is understood in the West.

The Expulsion of Max Ernst - 1954

Another wound was occasioned by the 1954 Venice Biennale, at which Ernst had been awarded the grand prize. Ernst's departure was, in terms of the group's internal activity, of peripheral importance, he was by now only sporadically active and apparently was not impressed by the new generation of surrealists. His continued adherence related more to his friendship with Breton and memories of the heroic past than with the present. The brevity of Dorothea Tanning's account is telling in more than one way:

"Its (the prize) concrete results were twofold: banishment (exclusion) by Breton and his new friends from the surrealist enclave, for so stooping. And the money to buy a farmhouse in Touraine."⁴⁰

On the one hand it suggests that Surrealism had ceased to matter, on the other, it suggests that the expression of hurt at this expulsion is suppressed, something not to be spoken of. Probably both contradictory versions are true, existing together in conflict. Breton had initially refused to consider Ernst's expulsion. Polizotti tells of "The doctrinaire rigidity of the younger members" winning out, although if such an incident had occurred twenty years before the result would likely have been the same.

³⁹Thirion, André: *Revolutionaries Without Revolution*. p.480.

⁴⁰Tanning, Dorothea: *Birthday*. Lapis Press, San Francisco 1986. p.108.

Despite Polizotti's portrait of constant decline, and despite the attacks of the Lettrists and Situationists, the late fifties can be seen as a period of recovery for Surrealism. The appearance of *Le Surréalisme Même*, the most considerable journal for many years, marks the upward spiral and despite the limited success of their collaborations with anarchists, the surrealists seem less like a closed sect than a few years earlier.

Bief Jonction Surrealiste, a much slighter magazine than *Le Surréalisme Même*, at first ran in tandem with the latter, then quietly replaced it. The February 1960 issue has on its cover a photograph of crowds of young people arriving at the vernissage of the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme (EROS) at the end of 1959. Put there to refute claims that the exhibition was being ignored,⁴¹ it shows the surrealists ready to enter a new decade on a positive note. The death of Peret and the suicides of DuPrey and Paalen notwithstanding, Surrealism seemed to be in good shape. The EROS exhibition celebrated Surrealism's vision of the erotic and this was consecrated by Jean Benoit's performance of *The Execution of the Testament of the Marquis de Sade*. This occasion also marked the re-entry of Matta into the Surrealist Movement. This was the occasion of Meret Oppenheim's *Cannibal Feast*, originally a naked woman decked out with food, later pictures show the woman replaced by a mannequin.

New decade, new journal. The magazine *La Breche: Action Surrealiste*. This was the last journal to be edited by Breton, and the last during his lifetime. As an expression of Surrealism it is varied and intelligent. It contains illustrations by Toyen, Benoit, Parent, introduces Camacho,

⁴¹The photo caption is a quote from *LFS Journaux*: "La jeunesse d'aujourd'hui se desinteressé totalement de surréalisme." *Bief Jonction Surrealiste*, Numero special 10-11 15 Fevrier 1960.

Telemaque Der Kervorkian and Terossian, has poems by Mansour, articles on Art Brut, Fourier, Oceanic art and Alchemy. What it does not tell us about is the decline in Breton's health. Polizotti's epic of decline often tells us little else in dealing of this period.

1965 saw the demise of *La Breche*, but this time with a new journal planned, it was also the year of another international exhibition: *L'Ecart Absolu*. The title and theme of the exhibition were taken from Fourier. They picked up on his insistence on "absolute apartness"⁴² to express Surrealism's breach with the avant-garde and with consumer society, the particular target of the exhibition. Another performance by Benoit marked the exhibition, this time a commemoration of the necrophile Sergeant Bertrand.

Breton's death in September 1966 was the final seal on an era. Whatever Surrealism was to become, it could no longer be exactly what it had been while he was still alive. A few years later Jean Schuster was to reflect on some surrealist's inability to realise this. Breton had been founder and spiritual leader of the Surrealist Movement since its inception. He had defined its principles and promoted its activities. Breton had once declared "I am Surrealism"⁴³ and this identification was of such intensity that many, both inside and outside of the movement, were prepared to believe him.

After the tributes came the decision: whether to continue or not. The decision to do so led to the launching of a new journal, *L'Archibras*. Of this period Polizotti is, as usual, disparaging: "In the months following Breton's death, the Surrealist Group carried on as best it could." perhaps,

⁴²Or in Beecher and Bienvenu's translation, "absolute deviation".

⁴³Quoted in Polizotti p.572.

for once his emotional assessment is accurate, but *L'Archibras* gives little hint of this. The first issue⁴⁴ is more glamorous than *La Breche*, A4 format with lots of illustrations. It contains articles by Schuster, Audoin, Legrand; collaborations between Bounoure and Camacho, Toyen and Ivsic. The focus is a resume of *L'Ecart Absolu*. The procession of glossy volumes is interrupted 1968 by two thin issues, the latter, number 5, being dedicated to the situation in Czechoslovakia.

In 1967 the Czech surrealists had made contact with Paris and during the Prague Spring this led to the Paris surrealists' exhibition in Prague, *Princip slasti* - The Pleasure Principle. The two groups discussed their common ground and eventually produced the document *Plateforme de Prague*.⁴⁵

The opening statement of the Prague Platform tells us that it was to have appeared simultaneously in French and Czech, but the invasion of Czechoslovakia has prevented this, it was to have carried the signatures of twenty-one Czechoslovak surrealists. In the published version these are suppressed.

"The present declaration is a theoretical and practical platform, valid from today, and for all countries in which surrealism attracts energies sufficient to bring about the total emancipation of man. We expect that the lucidity of surrealism will draw on this platform not for a set of dogmatic positions, but in order to avail itself of all developments engendered by the diversity of evolving circumstances, and to constantly enrich itself through the dialectical play of consciousness and spontaneity.

1. The repressive system monopolizes language in order to restore it to humanity reduced to its utilitarian function or diverted to the purposes of entertainment. Humanity is thus constrained,

⁴⁴*L'Archibras* 1 Avril 1967.

⁴⁵In: *L'Archibras* no.5. The translation here is by Imogen Forster.

deprived of the real power of its own thought, and soon acquires the habit of entrusting itself to cultural agencies that deliver forms of reflection that clearly serve the smooth functioning of the system."⁴⁶

This repressive system is not capitalism or communism, but stretches across both systems, is common to both. The surrealists find that this empty language

"...is inadequate to formulate the passionate images that would make imperative the satisfaction of their real desires. Responsibility for this state of affairs falls partly on contemporary art and human sciences which, even in their so-called avant-garde forms, often limit themselves to passively reflecting the current devaluation of signs, and thus contribute to the obfuscation of thought.

The task of surrealism is to extract language from the repressive system and to transform it into an instrument of desire. In this sense, what is thought of as surrealist art has no other objective than to liberate words, and more broadly, signs, from the codes of utility or entertainment and to restore to them their destiny of revealing subjective reality and the essential intersubjectivity of desire reflected in the public mind."⁴⁷

The surrealists take upon themselves the making of:

"revolution in language...and putting on record the terrible devaluation brought about in that domain, not only by regimes in the "free world", but also, on a completely different scale, by stalinism. It is no longer a question of reducing language to the ends of entertainment, but of the corruption of ideas themselves, since that alone makes it possible to conceal the worst deformation of the most exhilarating words that the revolutionary consciousness has pronounced."⁴⁸

They find that such words as communism, internationalism and liberty can provide the justification "for a police apparatus that has ruled, still rules, or aspires to rule again as absolute master." Thus revolution means

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

"political crime", communism is a bureaucratic caste and internationalism "submits to the demands of Russian policy".

Therefore surrealists will do everything to restore to these words "all the power of their precise cognitive meaning and their affective resonance." The surrealists find themselves to be a natural minority in refusing to accept as definitive "categories of reality such as the psychic, the social or the natural; to resign ourselves to a reality parcelled out and fossilised would lead us to privilege one or other of these three domains, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, the objective world, at the expense of the other two."⁴⁹

They wish to abolish these categories. "This understanding of the passing and provisional nature of reality" determines the anti-confusional position of surrealism on the relation between art and revolution.

Surrealists seek alliances wherever an agreement on an issue overcomes their differences with others, even taking a back seat to others. They believe that Marxism is still capable of "becoming again an effective weapon in the service of the Communist ideal, but it must be de-mythologised and rethought from top to bottom. Fourier, Stirner, Proudhon and Bakunin are mentioned respectfully, all figures that Marx had opposed, but who, nevertheless still have relevance. "Serious reservations" of the Leninist role of the leader are voiced, rather moderately, and the "tragic experience of Bolshevism's deviation into a repressive police system" must be put into the service of "today's revolutionary vigilance."

They wish to bring down "all forms of economism" and seek transformation through the:

"reciprocal multiplication of intellectual and emotional processes; their development in Marxism, in psychoanalysis, the

⁴⁹Ibid.

mutual fertilisation of analogy and dialectic to which the hermetic sciences still bear witness..."⁵⁰

They scan the contemporary scene, refer to Rudy Dutschke, and the reconstruction of socialism in Cuba and Czechoslovakia. Thus the Platform is an expression of a spirit of revolution arising in the world which "...allows us to hope for a recrudescence of revolutionary ideology."

"Above all, a new phenomenon - and one of considerable importance - is making young people rise up against all forms of repression."

"Surrealism", wrote Breton, "is born of the affirmation of faith without limit in the creative power of youth."⁵¹

The surrealists adhere to the Hegelian dialectic and to analogical interpretation.

"Dialectic and analogy together are the foundation of a new theory of knowledge which will free humanity, not from the living aspects of rationality, from what paralyses it with alienating systems: the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of identity."⁵²

Their hats are duly tipped to the masters of Critical Theory, and perhaps here Adorno in particular.

They relate Freud's theories of dream to the everyday and find the "path to be opened to the forces of the unconscious is completely unexplored." A return to innocence, the power of poetry which ...escapes time in order to give humanity the power of prophesy. Poetry transforms the imaginary into the real, for:

"all creative forces...leading to a new awareness and anew interpretation of the universe, have their origin in humanity's necessary and irrevocable discontent in the face of the iron law of necessity."(Teige)."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

"Surrealist play is a collective expression of the pleasure-principle. They are more and more necessary since both oppression by technocracy and the culture of the computer are continually increasing the weight of the reality-principle."⁵³

Any melancholy amusement at the expense of some of the contemporary references should not blind us to the coherence of the *Platform*. Although the Prague Spring was about to be crushed, May '68 now seems more like a fad than a real revolt and Cuba long since became a post-stalinist fossil, the principles of the *Platform* are the real substance of the text, not these circumstantial elements. In essence there is are several new elements here, at least to those unfamiliar with the specifically Czech elements, which would include most surrealists until this time. The text demonstrates the evolution of their thought, particularly Effenberger's. It is likely that without the French input, the text would have been less lyrical and positive in places, without the Czechs it would have been less philosophical and less focused in its critique.

What is probably most important is the emphasis on the critical and oppositional aspects of Surrealism, its task of attacking the bureaucratic obfuscations of official culture on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Official language in all its forms ruins the capacity for clear thought. Some might find it contradictory that surrealist language should lead to clarity, given its reputation for difficulty, but real thought is often far from easy. What is more difficult is the use of revolutionary phraseology. In the climate of the late sixties it was still possible to use it credibly, but from the perspectives of the late nineties the worst problem of expressing revolutionary thought is the lack of a revolutionary language. The rhetoric of Marxist revolution is so besmirched, so reduced to jargon, that it seems unusable. This is foreseen by the *Platform*, but the surrealists do

⁵³ *Ibid.*

not step outside of that rhetoric, and perhaps this is too much to expect. The problem remain whether a new language has to be constructed or the old language can be "cleaned" restored to meaning - if, at any rate, there is a future for revolution.

Although the *Prague Platform* was an affirmation of the continuation of Surrealism and the projection of its activities into the future, in part it masked a growing disagreement among the Paris surrealists, both personal and strategic. Jean Schuster was certainly in some senses Breton's heir, trusted enough to be made executor of his will, but some felt that he and his most immediate associates were ruling the group by dictat. Several people I spoke to, active at this time, felt that Schuster was overly concerned with his own authority at the expense of others freedom. Those who subsequently maintained friendly relations with him regard this less an exercise in self-aggrandizement than an attempt to steer Surrealism into new directions and avoid the stagnation that he feared it was in danger of sinking into. Eventually the strain of these disagreements became such that on 23 March 1969 the tract *Sas* was issued announcing the suspension of activities by the movement. *Sas* is a curt document, covering a mere half page of text in Pierre's *Tracts Surrealistes*. It informs the reader of the cessation of collective activities, that a previous tract, *Aux grands oublieurs, salut!* was not representative of the movement, but only of its five signatories,⁵⁴ the last collective expression had been the seventh issue of *L'Archibras*.⁵⁵ *Sas* is signed by the majority of the surrealists in Paris, but with the notable exceptions of Vincent Bounoure and Jean Schuster.

⁵⁴Phillipe Audoin, Claude Cortot, Gerard Legrand, Jose Pierre and Jean-Claude Silbermann.

⁵⁵*L'Archibras* no. 7. 1969.

Sas would seem to be not a notice of final closure, but closed provisionally, "until further notice". They might in consequence re-open in a week, or never. Schuster came to believe that Surrealism could not continue as before and that to continue at all must effect a break with its own past and even with the label "surrealist."

"The six months separating SAS from the IVth Canto were mainly taken up for me trying to convince various parties of the *prime* need for debating the use or non-use of the label *surrealist* in the continuation of our activity. Indeed, my view on this was taken. I stood by the unconditional defence of giving up what I believed to be merely a reassuring label. Yet at the same time I was asking for the broadest discussion to take place and, to begin with, the aforementioned problem as the necessary preliminary. I think I can maintain that no-one was against this condition except Bounoure whom I met in May or June and whose categorical refusal brought about the failure of the last attempt at conciliation. From then on, the decision for an auto-dissolution was taken by Phillippe Audoin, Claude Cortot, Gerard Legrand, José Pierre, Jean-Claude Silbermann and myself including that is to say, three of the four members of the editorial board of *La Breche*, the last magazine directed by Breton (Robert Benayoun, who was also a member of this committee, had moved away from us at the beginning of 1968)."⁵⁶

Schuster set the seal, as far as he was concerned, on the end of "historical Surrealism" on the 4th of October, when he published *Le Quatrième Chant* in *Le Monde*.

The title of this document comes from the 4th canto of Lautreamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*, which opens with the words "A man, a stone, or a tree is going to begin this fourth song."⁵⁷ Schuster begins by describing the situation following Breton's death:

"When André Breton died on September 28th 1966, he left behind no fully traced course to the Movement that he had founded and animated up to his last days, but only acquired knowledge, a

⁵⁶Schuster Jean: *An interview with Jean Schuster*. In *Grid* no.5 1986. The name of the interviewer is not given, I assume it is A.K. El Janabi).

⁵⁷Lautréamont: *Maldoror*. Translated by Paul Knight. Penguin, Harmondsworth 1978.

treasure either to be built or gazed upon. The Surrealists decided to pursue a collective activity for which they all felt the inner necessity: this being a quite sufficient criterion for whosoever is not used to deciding his tread according to the firmness of the ground. and indeed, the ground was soon to hold promise. As we know, the world is entering a phase where revolutionary energy is thawing and where new forms are rising up against all repressive institutions. The Surrealist hope for a radical transformation of society, indissolubly linked to the remoulding of the structures of the human mind, this ever thwarted hope that is finally relegated to abstraction by what seems to be the general consent, is acquiring fresh vigour. In this way, Surrealism is facing a special historical conjuncture of which it may be said that it determines itself towards it by unfavourable subjective conditions (the renewal of revolutionary thought and action).

In a case like this, one far too often underestimates the subjective conditions, owing precisely to the tantalising illusion sustained by the objective conditions. When the illusion vanishes, the dissolving factors have completed their work."⁵⁸

He goes on to insist on "...one aspect of the personality of Breton...Whoever knew Breton is aware that he was the very opposite of a dictator." Schuster then goes on to illustrate the point by referring to Breton's bowing to the other surrealists to expel Ernst in 1954.

"Nevertheless, the essential point is that Breton did possess genuine authority within the Surrealist group, an authority which, contrary to a leader's, aims at the development of ideas through mental stimulation and not their petrification through the intimidation of others."⁵⁹

Breton's insight into the analogical connection between "a speech by Saint-Just, the polished surface of an agate, the keys of Basile Valentin, the unseeing stare of an Easter Island statue" means that:

"He alone was aware of their law of harmony...He alone had a way of conveying this to a Group, which considered in its entirety as the product of the individual wants and needs of each of its members, was not satisfied with merely returning its reflection, but validated its transfer to the collective level and its own cohesion.

⁵⁸Schuster, Jean: *Le Quatrième Chant*. English translation in: *Grid* no.5 1986. p.7.

⁵⁹Ibid. p.8.

Nothing could stop Breton, on his death, from taking away the secret of this harmony with him and the rules of a game which it is not sufficient just to know in order to play properly."⁶⁰

So, with Breton's death the heart of the Surrealist Movement as it had been known until then, had ceased to beat. This was the cause for the "absence of any internal cohesion in the Surrealist Movement" and that therefore "a number of my friends and I, decided to leave it to a fate which no longer concerned us."

Schuster takes a swipe at:

"Those who seemed prepared to pursue indefinitely an activity where permanent controversy was grafted onto the slightest proposal for action or reflection and onto the merest critical appreciation - be they detailed or broad-based - in order finally to be substituted for any joint research into the impact on reality..."

He refuses the continuation of "any label-bearing practice devoid of meaning" and claims that the seventh issue of *L'Archibras*

"is the final manifestation of Surrealism in France. Is Surrealism dead for all that? Not so."

Schuster goes on to discuss the varying definitions of Surrealism, he finds the word ambiguous, "Both an ontological component of the human mind...and the historically determined movement"

"Between these two Surrealisms, an identity relationship is at work, like the one between a constant and a variable. Consequently, the Surrealism qualified here as "historical" in relation to "eternal Surrealism" is of a two-fold nature, in that it is momentarily mingled with "eternal" Surrealism of which it is a special manifestation of the discontinuous inscription into history."

Therefore historical Surrealism should not be identified with eternal Surrealism, nor transform a:

"...circumstantial identity relationship into an identification: such an undertaking would stamp the whole Surrealist project with

⁶⁰ibid. p.8.

idealism - and an inconsequent one at that, since "historical" Surrealism would be attributing itself with the strange faculty of having a beginning and not having an end."

"From now on, to conclude in favour of the death of "historical" Surrealism is an understanding congruent with that which allowed its birth, a birth which was not a birth, a death which is no more death than the thirteenth card of the tarot.

Schuster and a few others have undertaken to "invent the variable that will succeed "historical" Surrealism." Their starting point will be a new publication, *Coupure*, to be based on "a specific, somewhat perverse treatment of news information" they will contribute to the solution of the crisis of the imagination and to this end tackle the analysis of the situation resulting from the events of May '68 and the "systematic research into new means of communication within mankind." He draws together Breton's *Les Vases Communicants* and recent research into Freud's hypotheses. He ends:

"All these elements must be integrated into an inductive theoretical whole , which, by definition, will go further than specialist knowledge, will assist understanding oneiric faculties and allow for the setting up of the dream as the true organiser of human destinies in the practice of living.

This is not a set programme. Whosoever of us would worry himself about the day when the first port of call is sighted and what its name will be, has surely taken the wrong boat. We know at least from where we come."

As Surrealism in Paris had reached some kind of a crisis, it could hardly be doubted that Schuster was right to take drastic action to solve that crisis. Also, it is inevitable that whatever action he should take would earn him considerable disapprobation in some quarters. The question arises therefore whether his course of action was right one, and what other path could he have taken?

Although I have made my own affiliation to a continued Surrealism clear enough, I do not feel the need to simply heap opprobrium on his head, but rather to see the fault-lines in his argument. This does indeed reflect on my perception of his character, but in order to analyse rather than abuse.

Schuster was eventually a minority in dissolving Surrealism. he therefore did not have the authority to dissolve the movement, only to leave it. Surrealism was not his property. This crisis was a purely Parisian affair, no such crisis existed elsewhere, certainly not to the same extent. The crisis was to a large extent resultant upon the Paris surrealists' reliance upon Breton. Surrealists in other countries often had considerable independence from the Parisian centre - and from Breton himself. Schuster's Pariscentric vision of Surrealism led him to discount many important manifestations of Surrealism, at least relegate them to a very subsidiary status.

"Grid: It seems that you stated at Sao Paolo that the only true international contributions to Surrealism were Belgian and English. (Why English and not Czech?).

J.S.: Quite so. I think for any activity to be indisputably qualifiable as Surrealist it must be *collective, lasting and non avant-gardist* and, most importantly, *creative* in relation to the centre which is, whether one likes it or not, Paris. Epigones are more harmful than opponents. In which case, all of the groups scattered throughout the world between 1924 and 1969, I can only see the London one (from 1936 to 1947) and especially the Belgian one (from 1924 to 1961) that might fulfil these requirements."⁶¹

Frankly, this judgement does not make very good sense. Although the criteria may be appropriate, and the Belgian surrealists fulfil these criteria, why does the English Surrealist Group also do so and not the Czech group? (or the Yugoslav, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese?) Schuster's

⁶¹Interview with Jean Schuster, In: Grid 4. p.13.

reasons are rather flimsy, actually reliant on the work of Mesens and Brunius rather than on the English Group as a whole. Also, he does not answer the question in relation to the Czechs. As this work attempts to show, the Czechoslovakian surrealists were of considerable importance, originality and creativity, developing a collective activity over a period almost as long as that of Paris Surrealism - and Schuster knew this, he had gone to Prague and worked with the Czechs on both the exhibition *Princip slasti* and on the *Prague Platform*. As the Platform was accorded great importance by all the surrealists at the time, Schuster's reasons for ignoring them later was presumably more to do with their opposition of his dissolution of Surrealism.

Schuster's privileging of Breton's status within Surrealism becomes both inevitable and disabling. Only he can bring all these things together. Really? Does that not doom Surrealism, whether it goes by that name or not, to be fragmented, partial? If that is so, then not only would it be most honest to give up the surrealist label, but the attempt at a surrealist vision, because it died with Breton. But Schuster is not suggesting this, rather that the surrealists escape from under the dead weight of their history. Unlike Breton announcing the death of Dada and making the demand drop everything, go out on the road, Schuster can really only make the demand to drop the word Surrealism, he is too conditioned by his long adherence to Surrealism to think beyond it to the new movement that is apparently needed.

When he speaks of historical and eternal Surrealism and says that historical Surrealism can never be identified with its eternal counterpart without stamping the surrealist project with idealism, does he not already use an idealist language and an idealist concept? Surrealism as *Ding an sich*? Can a thing be eternal and separate from its expression in history

without succumbing to idealism? The point is not so much that he intends this, in fact I would suppose the opposite, as that he opens up the possibility, even seems to invite it. There would seem to be a confusion of language here.

How necessary was it to do away with the surrealist "label?" For many it represented much more than a convenient or comforting label and therefore to give it up was not a necessary sacrifice, but a pointless mutilation. The fact that the word "Surrealism" had been misused merely meant that one had to combat misunderstanding and misuse. The surrealists were, however, in such a state of confusion that nobody seemed able to take any other direction until Vincent Bounoure intervened.

Bounoure: Nothing or What?

Schuster had claimed that all the surrealists were willing to discuss the abandonment of the term Surrealism except Bounoure. For his part, Bounoure denied this, claiming that even at that time there was no such unanimity.⁶² If he was the only dissident voice it seems likely that Schuster would have been able to pursue his aims without much difficulty, but if Bounoure represented even a sizeable minority within Surrealism, and there must have been other, less committed positions, then Schuster's hold on the situation must have been far more tenuous than he let on.

During the period between *SAS* and *Le Quatrieme Chant*, Bounoure distributed a questionnaire; *Rien ou Quoi?* I have not been able to examine the original enquiry, but have had access to the replies,

⁶²In conversation with the author. Also, this claim has been substantiated verbally by several others.

distributed by Bounoure in a bound volume. I am therefore in the paradoxical position of knowing the answers without knowing the questions. But the enquiry was designed to assess whether or not Surrealism could continue under its name, what directions could be taken, and so on.

Most respondents take Bounoure's questions seriously, and reply at some length. A couple are more or less derisory. What we find is a wide spectrum of opinion as to the future of Surrealism which allows several possibilities. Because the purpose of my research is primarily directed at Czechoslovakian Surrealism, I have only dealt briefly with these replies, and concentrated on the Czechs' response.

The Possible Against the Real

Le Possible Contre Le Réel is, in effect, the manifesto of the Czechoslovak surrealists at the nexus between the sixties and seventies. It is a complex document which attempts to answer Bounoure's questions, albeit rather indirectly, and revise the positions stated in the *Plateforme de Prague* in the light of subsequent events. The signatories of *Le Possible...* are Stanislav Dvorsky, Vratislav Effenberger, Roman Erben, Andy Lass, Albert Marencin, Ivo Medek, Juraj Mojzis, Martin Stejskal, Ludvik Svab, Petr Tesar, Alena Vodakova, and Frantisek Vodak.

They begin by considering as axiomatic that the meaning of human activity originates in the mental sphere "which is, by its very nature, the source and refraction of dialectical movement." They re-state the opening definition of the *Second Manifesto*:

"This movement, through which is effected the permanent and reciprocal revaluation of the subjective and the objective, the rational and the irrational, the individual and the collective, tends

towards the resolution of their antimonies in a synthesis which should be conceived not only as the outcome of the process of resolving contradictions, but also as a new source of motive energy."⁶³

This dynamic synthesis, they consider, should be capable of opening up the route to intersubjective communication, "which would allow human relationships of a new kind to be established."

"Scholars, poets and thinkers, among the most perceptive, have since the beginning of the century, endeavoured to discover and understand the relationship that exists between the conscious and the unconscious, enabling these two worlds, which seem to be closed to each other, to communicate."⁶⁴

They go on to consider the limits of their own previous endeavours:

"We recognise that before 1968, we managed only to bring to light certain critical functions of imaginative creation, and particularly of concrete irrationality. If we have been able to define surrealism as a type of imaginative protest, and to describe in a certain amount of detail how this protest intervened in dialectical relationships and was capable of influencing, even in principle, critical thought, we have been unable to escape this purely negative limitation of surrealism."⁶⁵

This limitation is considered to be due largely to the political conditions of Czechoslovakia which has led them to feel compelled towards scepticism "to the positive aspects of surrealist ideology." Their meetings with the French surrealists in 1968 had led them to see this scepticism as "only an inadequate form of critique."

"An aggressive criticism, that will inject energy into surrealist thought, must take a much broader canvas, and must be based on a positive programme capable of overcoming this alienation of the contemporary world, which up to now we have only met with mockery."⁶⁶

⁶³*Le Possible Contre Le Réel*. In: *Rien Ou Quoi?* 1969. Translation by Imogen Forster.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

This suggests that their negation is insufficiently dialectical. For Effenberger's later considerations on negative critique, see the final chapter of this work.

The *Plateforme de Prague* was an agreement between two divergent strands of the surrealist tradition upon principle. The present text offers "the broad outlines of a programme...to the surrealist movement throughout the world." It is not to be taken as restrictive or the basis for a formal constitution or structure. The three aspects of the programme are that it is *collective*, *anti-confusional* and *perspectival*. Despite the adverse circumstances following the *Plateforme*, they have been faithful to these principles.

They attempt to see their position in relation to "revolutionary consciousness" and find that Surrealism's inspiring power can not yet be effective beyond the mental sphere, not because it is the reserve of a spiritual elect, but rather because of their minority status. To allow the realisation of transforming the world and changing life they must play the part of agitators in the mental field.

"In this way surrealism acts on the evolution of the possible, surpassing the simple rationalisation of "objective reality", which is the sphere of the majority. In the revolutionary surrealist conception, this *minority consciousness* and the *consciousness of continuity* give the notion of critique its specific character, distinguishing it from formalist and scientific criticism...and also to the abstract forms of revolutionary consciousness which lend themselves to the most various depreciations."⁶⁷

They see the need for the re-examination of their position on social utopias and the "very spirit that has led us to declare the need for a new myth, and to formulate it theoretically as a surrealist project." Despite

⁶⁷ Ibid.

their poetic value, particularly that of Fourier with its "explosive charge of irrationality" the abandonment to a "disarming lyricism" would blunt their vigilance. The sentimental attachment to the notion of utopia is, in effect, to promote a holiday consciousness that "offers people a holiday, during which they would feel temporarily liberated" and which would disarm the transgressive forces unleashed in "...war, and in sadism and masochism." Leisure and recreation, as understood in the dominant culture is managed as a way of manipulating the masses. It does not allow the play of the "dialectical relationship between the rational and irrational." From their own, dialectical, point of view the solution to the problem of transgression

"is to be sought in a continuous and reciprocal multiplication of the rational and irrational components of *real life taken as a whole*."⁶⁸

A short passage deals with the relationship between men and women, where they reflect upon the difficulty of realising love in the "present stage of society" and love is in danger of becoming a farce. Love and sex possess a fascinating contradiction in which:

"...is realised the intimate union of thought and instinct, in a sense achieving the impossible, and conferring on the sexual act the character of an act of transgression, which is inherently contradictory, and not a factor of harmony."⁶⁹

A discussion of language follows in which the Czechs consider that they might have underestimated the resources of language "as if it was possible to restore to words their initial meaning without taking into account the cultural context in which they are inscribed." Surrealism has dissipated the illusion of the homogeneity of the cultural context which is, in fact, "profoundly differentiated, and this differentiation is at the

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

heart of its development." They find that even within the same "linguistic milieu" there is not a single language, but several distinct languages "which, beyond the elementary practice of current usage, no longer communicate with each other." Thus the development of linguistic systems "whose semiotics evolve more or less spontaneously in isolation" leads to a breakdown in communication in which a dialogue supposedly "between people speaking the same language" becomes instead a "series of monologues, divided between foreign languages, by people who never would meet..." It is only possible to restore words and signs to "a destination consistent with discovering subjective and inter-subjective reality, the very substance of desire as it is reflected in the spirit" in specific ideological contexts, in this case Surrealism.

The *Plateforme de Prague* is still found to have confirmed the principles of Surrealism, despite the obstacles that have arisen, however:

"...precisely because of their power and rigour, these ideas and principles can also cause deep divergences between individuals, and thus threaten their unity of vision. We would not deny that historical conditions singularly complicate the task of those who identify themselves as surrealists, and that such conditions contribute, in some cases, to revealing their own weaknesses."⁷⁰

This is the most direct reference to the situation in France so far. Their perception of these problems, both in Paris and between Paris and Prague allows them to consider that the original need of Surrealism to structure itself cohesively as a kind of monopolistic discipline is no longer relevant. Surrealism has "engendered a new kind of critical and imaginative thought...that it would be wrong to think that it could be controlled from a single centre point." There is no authoritarian controlling body because there is no need for one.

⁷⁰Ibid

This pre-emptively answers Schuster's call for a "variable surrealism" by stating that it already exists within the historical model. If what Schuster demands already exists, then there is no need to abandon the name Surrealism any more than they should abandon its aims and principles. The Czechs consider these principles as being strong enough:

"to do without a tribal defence system, always in danger of falling into dogmatism...There is no need to fear, even for a moment, that they may fall into the hands of imitators, arrivistes or saboteurs, whose incapacity would have soon become apparent."⁷¹

The last phrase of this statement I would consider to be the most questionable point of the whole of *Le Possible...* The imitation of Surrealism is more likely to be taken for the real thing than Surrealism itself within the public sphere. To recognise Surrealism one has to know what it is. The general misconceptions concerning Surrealism are sufficient that the name is very grievously misused by almost everyone. In fact, the "imitators, arrivistes and saboteurs", not to mention the merely ignorant, would seem to be having a field day.

While Schuster was to consider that something vital was lost with Breton's death, the Czechs declare that:

"We do not believe that surrealism can be identified exclusively with the life and work of André Breton, although it was he who gave the movement its greatest impetus and gave it cohesion at a time when that was indispensable. It would be a betrayal of his thought, and a demeaning of his ideas to make them the object of sentimental devotion, when, on the contrary, they have the creative power of myth. In any case, Breton was not the only one to promote these ideas. Some of the century's greatest minds have contributed to this movement, including, let us not be afraid to say, those who, for one reason or another, abandoned surrealism after having enriched it. It is because Aragon was part of the original immense explosive surge of sarcastic criticism, in reality of surrealist criticism, that the fact that he later espoused socialist realism deserves to be condemned with the greatest severity! It is because Vítěslav Nezval, during the first period of surrealism in

⁷¹Ibid.

Czechoslovakia, passed on to him the flame of his lyricism, that his subsequent development must be seen as a real intellectual bankruptcy."⁷²

The divergence of Breton's and Teige's models of Surrealism are seen as proof that to identify Surrealism with Breton:

"not only does not correspond with historical truth, but also indicates a total ignorance of the dialectic of the processes of realisation in the mental sphere."⁷³

Surrealism then, far from being a body of dogma or a personality cult, requires

"frequent confrontation between points of view adopted by different groups in various countries calling themselves surrealists...It is strikingly apparent that these groups currently form themselves not along geographical lines, but on the basis of a community of opinions, evidence of which is the current cooperation of Jean-Louis Bedouin, Vincent Bounoure and Jorge Camacho with the Prague surrealist group."⁷⁴

This community must develop in a specifically surrealist direction and it would be unthinkable to separate "the notion of surrealism itself from..."living ideas" championed by surrealism" as it is the very context of Surrealism that gives these ideas meaning. They consider each of these ideas as each containing within them "the entire history of the development of surrealist thought."

The crisis within surrealism is linked to a recurring tendency towards the closure of the movement, something that Breton had often considered, but the current "temporary crisis" is linked to questions of personality, presumably Schuster's, but:

"...only those who are incapable of questioning the values they hold...can conceive of their relationship with the past as an enslavement, and fear to see their personal contribution compared

⁷²ibid.

⁷³ibid.

⁷⁴ibid.

with former models. For such people, there is no other position to take but to look for a more or less hidden way out, in order to extricate themselves altogether."⁷⁵

Their conviction that the *Plateforme de Prague* "crystallises the essential elements of the programme which we now have to carry out" leads them to devote themselves to the following:

"1) To free from the unconscious, in which they remain submerged, the motivations and hopes capable of sustaining and inspiring humanity, and of sharpening its critical faculty, in the struggle which it has to wage against the deadening effects of the mechanisms of civilisation.

2) To analyse these mechanisms with the necessary theoretical precision, taking account of how systems of repression develop.

3) To develop a new theory of knowledge, based on the dialectic and the principle of analogy, in the conscious and unconscious spheres of mind.

4) To expose the transgressive elements of the golden rule of sexuality, that are fit to unmask rationalist hypocrisy and the commercialisation of sexual cynicism, and to direct this cynicism against rationalist exploitation.

5) In opposition to a way of life ruled by utilitarianism, to develop forms of ludic activity, with the principle of analogy prevailing over the principle of identity, on account of the progress made by human consciousness."⁷⁶

From this perspective they pose the problem of the superego "which, under the rule of the principle of identity, amasses obstacles to individual

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid

liberty." The changes in spiritual life are the signs of a crisis of the superego "whose function in producing identity, accomplished with the help of narcissistic transferences, is seriously disturbed." "Ludic forms of life" through the principle of analogy limit the superego's repressive role. They connect the group's experiments with psychiatric research (remember that Ludvik Svab was at this time a practising psychiatrist) and find that these activities favour "intellectual and affective interaction - the "fluid of friendship" as we might say - between individuals." This could enable them to discover "all sorts of secret inhibitions." The precise knowledge of the superego's censoring function should enable them to define: "dialectically what is positive in certain contemporary phenomena, particularly in some features of youth (psychedelia, counter-culture, etc.) all of which echo to some degree Rimbaud's recommendation to "overturn all accepted ideas.""⁷⁷

They conclude with a rebut to those who have "periodically prided themselves on having buried surrealism" but merely fail to understand the subtle "rule of play which governs surrealist activity." And they leave to history itself to decide whether Surrealism is "a timeless "state of mind" or an historic "movement..." For them Surrealism is:

"...an *open system*, endowed with its own particular methods of investigation which enable it to define the driving role of the imagination in the motivations of contemporary psycho-social being. If, as we believe, it is not in vain to hope that we may come to master and resolve the problems facing humanity today - and that is our activity's rationale - we must not, in our turn, make problems relating to the forms that surrealist activity may or may not take in a purely external way, problems that purely and simply consist of intellectual conjuring tricks."⁷⁸

⁷⁷Ibid.
⁷⁸Ibid.

They affirm their solidarity with Bounoure's group and their belief in Surrealism's ability to vitalise human consciousness in the most concrete way possible.

So they once more echo Schuster's call for a variable Surrealism with their own demand for the recognition that Surrealism is, by nature variable. As an open system it is capable of renewal if its members are capable of responding to that openness. The defining principles of Surrealism are signposts, not a catechism. Perhaps they underestimated the particular problems that the Paris surrealists faced, perhaps there were too many incapable of that flexibility and openness, too many who could not understand the systemic elements of Surrealism. The breakdown of consensus in Paris was in part the result of a clash of personalities, but also the inability of some surrealists to go beyond the existing model and reinvent Surrealism. In this sense Schuster had justified his "auto-dissolution." But the determination of the Czechs to continue, and their ability to respond creatively to their circumstances prove that Schuster's solution was, at best, a local one and in no way made the dropping of the word "Surrealism" a universal necessity.

The agreement between the small group in Paris and the Prague Group to collaborate was to be the lifeline for both groups over the next years, and beyond the fruitful results of that collaboration, ensured their continuing existence.

SURREALISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1934-1947

DEVETSIL - THE PRAGUE SURREALIST GROUP - SURREALISM AGAINST THE CURRENT

Introduction

When a surrealist group appeared outside France it is not surprising that its starting point was most usually the imitation of the original French model. The English group is a fairly typical example, where the paintings showed the overwhelming influence of Ernst, Magritte and Dali on most of the artists. What eventually became the most distinctive contributions to surrealism in England was that which was marginal to surrealism itself, such as the involvement in Mass Observation. In some instances, however, it becomes clear that there were considerable differences in approach to the substance of Surrealism, although that central substance was perceived as being fundamentally identical. Surrealism in Belgium for instance was both in style and content at variance with the ideas of Breton without there being any basic contradiction in aim. Thus for Paul Nougé Breton's insistence on automatism, the starting point of Surrealism, was misguided, but we find that after his initial flush of enthusiasm, Breton's attitude to automatism was that it was a means rather than an end. Although he often looked wistfully at the relatively untrodden path of automatism, Breton never resolved the contradictions implicit in its theory and practice. Even with the disagreement on the question of automatism, it is clear that there could have been no Belgian Group without the prototype of Breton and his friends.

In the case of the surrealists of Czechoslovakia we have something rather different. All the original members of the Prague Surrealist Group were former members of the Devetsil movement during the Twenties. They had arrived at a common platform through the slow percolation of ideas

and had not adopted Surrealism as an off-the-peg art fad, but had moved towards it over a period of a decade.

Devetsil - Poetism - Artificialism

The Devetsil movement was an umbrella for the avant-garde in Czechoslovakia during the Twenties. It embraced painting, photography, architecture, literature, film, music and politics. Within this curious ferment, two tendencies are of interest to us, the Poetism of Karel Teige and Viteslav Nezval and the Artificialism of Jindrich Styrsky and Toyen.

The *First Poetist Manifesto*¹ of 1924, the same year in which Breton published his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, is close to Guillaume Apollinaire in its enthusiasm for, and celebration of modern life. It reveals itself at this point as akin to the Italian Futurists, and Delaunay's Orphism. The Czech critic Frantisek Smejkal considered it to be a "hedonistic philosophy and a celebration of modernity which obscured all the contradictions of human existence with a fragile illusion of happiness." Although Smejkal is rather too hard on the Poetists, neither Teige nor Nezval would ever seem to have been quite as escapist as he suggests, the tone *is* blithely optimistic as the following quote shows:

"Poetism is first and foremost a *modus vivendi*. It is at the same time one of the functions of life and its meaning. Unpretentiously calm, it is the begetter of human happiness and serenity. Happiness is a comfortable apartment, a place to call home, but also love, fun laughter and dance...the burdensome work and monotony of the everyday would make life a meaningless vegetation, if no buoyant sensibility were to make one happy - therefore poetry has become the sole aim of life. Not to understand Poetism means a failure to understand life."²

¹Teige, Karel: *Poetism*. in: *Arsenal Surrealist Subversion* No 4 1989. (Extracts in English translation). The full text was published in French translation in: *Change* No.10. Seghers, Paris 1972.

²Ibid. p.194.

Such a faith in Poetry is certainly in full accord with the tenets of surrealism, but it is far more the poetry of surfaces rather than depths, it is far more social in expression than Surrealism and if not exactly blind to the darker aspects of existence, did not dwell on them to any great extent. Richardson and Fijalkowski suggest that the Poetist attitude can be defined as "sort of "romantic realists" or "nostalgic modernists""³ which they find is "the basis of the originality of poetism".⁴

By 1928 Teige was ready to take on other, more overtly subjective tendencies and from this time the development of Poetism begins to increasingly resemble that of Surrealism. Teige goes beyond promoting a merely subjectivist poetry however, he introduced the concept of *Ars Una* - the unity of all art forms as poetry for the five senses.

The other tendency that led to the development of Czech Surrealism was *Artificialism*, which was in fact almost entirely the work of two people, Jindrich Styrsky and Toyen. These two artists constituted an extraordinary double-act, their work at all times, although different in many ways, reflects one to the other both in style and content. After a brief "naive" phase Toyen and Styrsky created a new style in which the geometrical forms of Constructionism were suffused in a strange lunar glow and were broken up by the soft shadows of leaves and wisps of mist occupying, as Frantisek Smejkal says, "the middle ground between Constructivism and Surrealism"⁵ and indicating "a move towards lyrical

³Richardson, Michael and Fijalkowski, Krzysztof: *Years of Long Days: Surrealism in Czechoslovakia*. In: *Third Text* No 36 Autumn 1996. p.16.

⁴Ibid. p.16.

⁵Smejkal, Frantisek: *Devetsil: an Introduction*. p.21. In: *Devetsil: Czech Avant-garde Art Architecture and Design of the 1920s and 30s*. Museum of Modern Art, Oxford and Design Museum, London. 1990.

abstraction."⁶ They introduced several innovations into their work through mechanical processes such as the spraying of paint through stencils or using real objects as stencils. Smejskal again:

"It seems as if canvases had become photo-sensitive plates which registered the movement of light and shadows, or the jagged traces of electrical discharge. The technique of spraying paint over objects using nets or templates gave similar results to the effects of photograms."⁷

The use of the photogram method was of course a commonplace of avant-garde photography during this period. Christian Schad, Man Ray and the Devetsil photographer Jaromir Funke were just a few of the leading practitioners of this method. But the transposition of the evanescent and ghostly effect of the photogram into painting, if it had been tried before, had never been exploited to such an extent, and constituted the first truly original body of work from these artists.

This phase did not last long however. Although the same range of imagery remained in evidence, it was enlarged by the appearance of ragged and broken shapes, reminiscent of natural forms either showing signs of disintegration or violence. The most drastic change though was the physical substance of the paint. It became increasingly direct, with heavy impastos and clogged textures, reminiscent of natural forms such as stone or bark. The colours tend at this point to be cold and gloomy, predominantly Prussian Blue mixed with grey, muddy browns and greys. Fragments of the old geometry remain, but are the ruins of previously logical and ordered forms breaking down and restructuring within the imagination.

⁶Ibid. p.21.

⁷Ibid. p.21.

Apart from Styrsky and Toyen, other artists were working in ways parallel to Surrealism, notably Josef Sima, who had participated in *Le Grand Jeu*, the "para-surrealist" group famously castigated by Breton in the *Second Manifesto*. Sima's painting revealed a dream world of half-formed landscapes, sometimes transforming into women who half emerge out of the rocks.

The Surrealist Group of Prague

An international exhibition in Prague, *Poesie 1932* was dubbed by Nezval as surrealist, confirming the trend towards surrealism, but it was not until early 1934 that the *Surrealist Group of Prague* was officially formed. Initially the group centred around Nezval as its principle theoretician and consisted of Nezval himself, Biebl, Styrsky and Toyen, Makovsky, a psychoanalyst, Bohuslav Brouk, Jiri Honzl the theatre director and Jaroslav Jezek, most unusual in surrealist circles, being a composer. They explicitly confirmed their allegiance to the Communist Party and dialectical materialism in a document, '*Surrealismus v CSR*'. Teige joined later after overcoming his original doubts about Surrealism's commitment to dialectical materialism. He was to become the most important theoretician of the group.

Richardson and Fijalkowski say of the motive of the Czechs' adoption of Surrealism:

"The Czechs were not converts to a new philosophy, but discovered in surrealism a validation and an inspiration, for which they had already been striving."⁸

⁸Richardson and Fijalkowski. p.17.

Styrsky's Photographic Cycles

It would seem that this validation resulted in a crystallisation of thought and style in the work of Toyen and Styrsky, as it moved toward a more directly figurative style, but Styrsky's immediate impulse seems to have been to abandon painting in favour of photography.

Inspired perhaps by the example of Eugene Atget, Styrsky wandered the streets of Prague in search of his subject matter, finding it in the shop window displays, with their dismembered mannequins, faceless bewigged busts and illogical, fragmentary messages. The fairgrounds and old churchyards provided images of fantastic hands with rivers running along their life-lines, fallen Christs and forgotten angels. It is the vision of a flaneur dreaming in the streets. The substance of his photographic work resolved itself into a series of albums, *Frogman*, *Man with Blinkers* and *An Afternoon in Paris*. The best known collection of his photographs to be published, with Jindrich Heisler's poem *Na jehlach techto dni*⁹ (On the Needles of These Days) was a selection from these albums.

Styrsky and Eroticism

At this time the erotic impulse became more apparent in his work. Styrsky had always been a sexual obsessive and had studied the Marquis de Sade, he was even to travel to the Chateau de Coste with Toyen. He edited the *Erotika Revue* and published a prose-poem/ short story, *Emilie ke mne prichazi ve snu*¹⁰ (Emilie Comes to Me in Dreams) illustrated with very explicit sexually charged photomontages. His painting, as it took on more of external reality, became not only more overtly sexual in its

⁹Heisler, Jindrich and Styrsky, Jindrich: *Na jehlach techto dni - On the Needles of These Days*. Edition Sirene Berlin 1984.

¹⁰Styrsky, Jindrich: *Emilie ke mne prichazi ve snu (Emily Comes To Me In Dreams)*. In: Richardson, Michael (Ed.) *Dedalus Book of Surrealism*. Volume 1. *The Identity of Things*. Dedalus, Sawtry 1993.

meanings, but increasingly violent in its style. The works of the later 30's are often painted in an abrupt and summary manner, boldly drawn rather than truly painterly,, possessing some stylistic affinities perhaps with the neo-expressionism of the 80's. He was described as being one of the few surrealists to create an original collage style, uninfluenced by Max Ernst. This is perhaps overstating the truth of the matter, there is a certain, inevitable, technical influence from Ernst, but the use to which the medium is put is entirely his own.

The source for much of his imagery was a dream-diary that included not only written accounts, but drawn and collaged images, exploring his dreams and fantasies in every direction. These fed out into the cycles of drawings and paintings, each informing the other. He seems to have been something of an exhibitionist in this respect, constantly discussing the content with others, placing his inner life in the public gaze.

Toyen: 1930's Painting

If we see a picture of Styrsky and Toyen together Styrsky appears to be intensely withdrawn, sunk into himself, perhaps due to his myopia, whereas Toyen gazes out boldly and defiantly, in later life with the calm but suspicious ferocity of a wild animal. To some degree this seems to give the lie to their temperaments, for despite Styrsky's apparent introversion he was also a fluent and almost obsessive commentator on his own work, whereas Toyen seems to have been almost entirely silent about the content of her painting. At the same time it tells us quite a lot about their opposed but complementary temperaments. Toyen was extremely secretive, apparently rarely speaking of her work, giving it the fascination of enigma. One may guess at the specific meanings of her work through the images and through the titles, but it remains largely

guess-work, the unabashedly sexual nature of many of her works is, as André Breton put it, "erotic-veiled".

Her painting at this time takes on a greater subtlety than Styrsky's, she begins to drip paint, allowing to suggest more than ever the cracked and fissured universe they both explored. The 1934 canvas, *Magnetic Woman*, shows a strange object simultaneously reminiscent of a tree-stump, a tower, a red dress, corset or abbreviated and ruined torso, broken open to suggest both pubic hair and rotted hollow wood. In a typical work of the late 30's *Finis Terrae* (1937), Six skittles, vaguely human in shape, sit in a box-like enclosure composed of just these cracks and fissures. At the back of the box there is either another surface, reminiscent of fissured wood-grain, or a grim sky. Surrounding the whole structure is another level of horizontal fissuring.

In another work of the same period, the female form is made more explicit. *Opustene doupe* (The Abandoned Corset) 1937 a more or less literal depiction of a corset floating among curious rocks. Both the absence of a woman to fill the empty corset and the blank blue space between the rocks point to a sense of lack that occurs again and again in her work. For instance, in *The Sleeper*, also of 1937, the night-dress of what is apparently a little girl with a butterfly net opens at the back to reveal the same absence, the dress is empty.

With so little information on her beyond the bare facts, we are forced to speculate on the significance of these images. Toyen's long and close association with Styrsky, (they lived together for many years and often travelled together) has led to them being described by more than one commentator as being lovers or even husband and wife. But according to

Ales Kunes she "played the role of the more decisive and older sister" who had died when he was a boy, and that she "refused all allusions to any other relationship with Styrsky than mere friendship." Which is not to say that their relationship was necessarily platonic in nature, Styrsky's feelings for his dead sister were apparently sexual in nature and it is quite possible that Toyen could have fulfilled both roles of sister and lover in that perspective.

Whether or not Toyen may have had such a relationship is difficult to determine, given the many unanswered questions concerning her sexuality. In the same piece Kunes tells us that "she travelled undaunted all over the Balkans, wore short hair and clothing similar to men's, and never spoke of herself in the feminine gender." All of which suggests, but never states, that she might have been a butch lesbian. This would certainly go some way to explaining the particular form of feminine representation in her work. The way she depicts woman is in some ways similar to that of many male surrealist painters, a fetishistic obsession with clothes and with the woman as the apparent locus of desire. In contradistinction, woman surrealists tend to take on some of the influence of the men, but at the same time reverse the meanings of their work so woman can appear as heroine of the drama. The female forms in Toyen's work are fairly consistently glamorous and even vamp-like even when they are at their most fragmentary. I shall return to this question later when I come to discuss her later work, but of course there is no contradiction between someone having heterosexual relationships and being attracted to members of one's own sex. It would therefore be interesting to know if Toyen was bisexual.

Prague With Fingers of Rain - The Surrealist Poetry of Viteslav Nezval

Viteslav Nezval is the only Czech surrealist poet to have enjoyed the privilege of substantial translation into English. The poems of his book *Prague With Fingers of Rain* appear in the Penguin anthology *Three Czech Poets*.¹¹ In his introduction, Graham Martin quotes Nezval as follows:

"Logically the glass belongs to the table, the star to the sky, the door to the staircase. That is why they go unnoticed. It was necessary to set the star to the table; the glass hard by the piano and the angels; the door next to the ocean. The idea was to unveil reality; to give it back its shining image, as on the first day of existence. If I did this at the expense of logic, it was an attempt at realism raised to a higher degree."¹²

Martin then asks:

"How do we know that such poems don't simply reveal subjective deliriums? or amount to nothing more than playing about with language? In other words, does the accumulation of surrealist detail support a theme, or contribute to that imaginative coherence which is a feature of all good poetry?"¹³

Before passing on to the poems themselves I would like to examine briefly Martin's premise for asking these questions. Firstly I have to ask whether he is thinking in *poetic* or *literary* terms in the surrealist sense of the words. In other words, is he looking at the poems primarily as expressions of the poetic experience of reality, or as examples of "good writing?" For the surrealist, although it is usually desirable that the poem should be well written, the painting well made, these are secondary considerations compared to that of poetic revelation. In fact there may even be a deliberate flouting of all the conventional standards of what constitutes "good" in order to force this poetic reality onto the consciousness of the reader. Clearly the "bad" use of techniques,

¹¹*Three Czech Poets: Vitezslav Nezval Antonin Bartusek Josef Hanzlik*. Translated by Ewald Osers and George Theiner. Penguin Modern European Poets. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1971.

¹²Ibid. p.11.

¹³Ibid. p.11-12.

apparent incoherence etc. is not unique to surrealism, it is a common feature of much modern art. Bearing this in mind, Martin's questions may seem fair enough, but I do question why he asks this of Nezval, is it because he finds his surrealism difficult to approach for this very reason.

If we consider Nezval's statement, we find a fairly simple exposition of the use and rationale of common surrealist effects such as can be found most notably in the work of Magritte. By this I mean the unexpected juxtaposition of objects in order to make us question their meaning and function and thus see them in an entirely new light. The use of such imagery shatters any coherence at the *surface* of the work, so I would argue that Martin's question should ask explicitly whether Nezval's poetry yields up an imaginative coherence within its *depths*, a question no doubt implicit in his own, but not evidently worth asking of the other poets represented in this volume.

The first poem here is *City of Spires*, which like the majority of the poems is a lyrical evocation of the city of Prague. Its structure is one familiar to any reader of surrealist poetry, (or of modern poetry generally) for instance in Breton's *Union Libre*, almost endless repetitions and variations of a single phrase and a central metaphor:

"Hundred-spined Prague
With the fingers of all saints
With the fingers of perjury
With the fingers of fire and hail
With the fingers of a musician
With the intoxicating fingers of women lying on their backs
With fingers touching the stars
On the abacus of night....."¹⁴

¹⁴Ibid. p.25-27.

There is little to connect one finger image with another, at one point it is clearly the spires of Prague that are finger-like, at another actual fingers of musicians, women, a mummy, or again the "fingers" of hail, of asparagus and of barley. Clearly we are dealing here with "playing about with language" in that Nezval allows gaps to appear and close between the signifying image of fingers and the various things that they represent. These fingers then stitch together a series of apparently unrelated images which allows Nezval to evoke a phantasmagoria in which the subjective life of Prague appears in shimmering flashes. But if we return to the question of the "internal coherence" of the poem, we must admit at least one possibility, that the work remains in a sense unfinished, its coherence being supplied by the subjectivity of the reader.

The psalmodic repetitions appear in several poems, for instance *The Bells of Prague*, *Prague in the Midday Sun*, and *Prague With Fingers of Rain*, but in these poems the repetitiveness is less insistent, the poems more supple in form and possibly because of this the movement between romantic evocation, factual description and the constant jolting of the irrational works far better.

Sometimes the poem can be gently deceptive unless one knows Prague. For instance the short poem *The Clock in the Old Jewish Ghetto*:

“While time is running away on Prikopy Street
Like a racing cyclist who thinks he can overtake death’s machine
You are like the clock in the ghetto whose hands go backwards
If death surprised me I would die a six-year-old boy”¹⁵

The clock referred to here is that attached to the synagogue in the Josefov. Conventionally speaking, its hands *do* go backwards, the numerals are in Hebrew and therefore are to be read from right to left, so

¹⁵ Ibid. p.38.

the hands of the clock run anti-clockwise. Nezval claims then to be living literally according to time of this clock, living in reverse, apparently through the power of the person (loved woman?) addressed in the poem. It is a brief flash of profane redemption, to paraphrase Benjamin.

Prague is the privileged site of Nezval's poetry. It is the place of both his waking and dreaming life, where the real and the imaginary are intertwined. In those jolts between the prosaic and the fantastic Nezval performs the same operation on Prague as Breton and Aragon perform on Paris, opening up its imaginative vistas and consecrating it as a place of magic.

Karel Teige and Photocollage

Teige had originally considered himself to be a visual artist, being influenced by Expressionism, Cubism and the work of Jan Zrzavy. His theoretical work seems to have emerged as a result of his doubts as to how to find a way forward through the avant-garde to a coherent aesthetic position, but as he considered the many aspects of modern culture that presented themselves as issues to the avant-garde, he became more and more engaged with writing and with theory. It was doubtless due to his evolving ideas on proletarian art that he became involved in the applied arts, notably as a book designer. As a theorist he was influential in the fields of architecture, theatre, cinema and photography. Perhaps photography is the most immediately relevant field to consider in the context of his collages. He said:

"The beauty of photography is of the same nature as the beauty of an aeroplane or transatlantic ship or electric lightbulb".¹⁶

¹⁶Quoted in *"Photo"* by Anna Farova: *Karel Teige 1900-1951*. Exhibition catalogue. Dum U kamenneho zvonu. Prague 1994.

The young Teige is applying the dictum of Rimbaud that one must be entirely modern and the example of Apollinaire as the poet of the modern world, but also, perhaps, finding an exemplar in Lautreamont, with his incongruous and unexpected metaphors for beauty. As beautiful as a lightbulb? How are we to find these utilitarian and grand or wholly ordinary items beautiful? perhaps it is precisely because they are utilitarian and their aesthetic quality follows their function. In this sense one might think that Teige is proposing a wholly logical concept of beauty, but although it is true that such a model seems predominant in his early thinking, there is doubtless a certain excess, that refuses to fit a rational and functionalist modernism. It is precisely this that we find in his photocollages. Vojtech Lahoda says that:

"It was as if he wanted to unleash his imagination in contradiction to avant-garde theory and ideology restricted within the framework of socialist discipline; as though he apprehended that the contradiction he must have felt - the visions of the USSR versus the trials, his attempt at connecting ideas of Socialist Realism and Surrealism - were irreconcilable".¹⁷

Perhaps Lahoda is a little too simplistic in his statement, but it would seem that he is substantially correct in as much as Teige was performing a balancing act between various opposing tendencies, however, it is also typical of Surrealism to tackle precisely those forms and ideas that create the greatest tension of contradiction, so what could be seen as a retreat from the social into the imaginary can also be expressed as an advance of the imaginary into the social realm.

Breton and Eluard in Prague - The Surrealist Object

From the time of the formation of the Group until the German invasion, the Czech surrealists were in increasingly friendly contact with the French group and in 1935 Breton and Paul Eluard travelled to Prague to meet

¹⁷*Utopian Landscapes of Eros and Poetry*:ibid.

them and investigate areas of agreement. They were both favourably impressed by the new group. Eluard, in a letter to Gala, told her:

"This trip has been a revelation. There are a few really good people here: first Nezval and Teige - two painters: Styrsky and Toyen - a very strange woman - they're doing magnificent paintings and collages - a sculptor - Makovsky...Their situation in the communist party is exceptional. Teige runs the only communist review in Czechoslovakia. There are one or two articles on surrealism in every issue. They were at the Writers Congress in Moscow and defended surrealism tooth and nail. They are true poets, full of heart and originality...Breton gave three lectures in Prague: one at Manes (the art club that invited him) on "The surrealist position of the object, the position of the surrealist object," with slides (700 people)."¹⁸

One can imagine the impact on Breton and Eluard of such a reception and of such a vigorous association with the communist party. At this time that the French surrealists were feeling the greatest strain between themselves and the French communist party prior to their divorce from it. The communists' antagonistic attitude and the accelerating process of "Stalinisation" was rapidly making it impossible for them to continue with their association. Things had recently come to a head when Breton had slapped the writer Ilya Ehrenburg for accusing the surrealists of pederasty - a particularly sore point with Breton. Ehrenberg's standing in the party had led to Breton being prevented from speaking at the International Congress for the Defence of Culture. For them to be greeted with such enthusiasm in Prague must have been extremely gratifying for Breton and Eluard, not just because it was flattering to be the centre of such interest, but to see their ambition for the internationalisation of surrealism given such a powerful expression.

¹⁸Eluard, Paul: Letter to Gala dated 7 or 8 April 1935. In: Eluard, Paul: *Letters to Gala*. translated by Jesse Browner. Paragon House, New York 1989.

The paper that Breton read at Manes was of particular importance both to surrealism as a whole (Breton considered it important enough to include in the later editions of the Manifestos of Surrealism) and in particular to the Czechs for whom this document with its dialectical movement between subjectivity and objectivity had a particular resonance. Breton begins by quoting Hegel:

"The art object" as someone has nicely put it, "lies between the sensible and the rational. It is something spiritual that seems to be material. Insofar as they address themselves to our senses or to our imagination, art and poetry deliberately create a world of shadows, of phantoms, of fictitious likenesses, and yet for all that they cannot be accused of being powerless and unable to produce anything but empty forms of reality." Let me say that for me it is a special pleasure to bring the world of new shadows that goes by the name of Surrealism and the sky of Prague together."¹⁹

Breton goes on to broach the theme of a

"fundamental crisis of the object"... "It is essentially on the object that the more and more clear-sighted eyes of Surrealism have remained open in recent years"... "The best way of securing agreement on this question seems to me to seek to determine the exact situation of the Surrealist object today. This situation is, of course, the correlative of another, the Surrealist situation of the object. It is only when we have reached perfect agreement on the way in which surrealism represents the object in general - this table, the photograph that man over there has in his pocket, a tree at the very moment it is struck by lightning, an aurora borealis, or, to enter the domain of the impossible, a flying lion - that there can arise the question of defining the place that the Surrealist object must take to justify the adjective Surrealist."²⁰

Breton returns to Hegel, who, he says:

"...in his *Esthetics*, attacked all the problems that on the plane of poetry and art may today be considered to be the most

¹⁹Breton, André: *Surrealist Situation of the Object - Situation of the Surrealist Object* 1935. p.255. In: Breton, André: *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. University of Michigan Press 1972.

²⁰Ibid. p.257.

difficult, and that with unparalleled lucidity he solved them for the most part."²¹

He goes on to defend Hegel, and by implication Surrealism, from the over-simple and therefore insufficiently dialectical view of Marxist orthodoxy:

"You cite Hegel and in revolutionary circles you immediately see brows darken. What, Hegel, that man who tried to make dialectics walk on its head! You are suspect, and since the Marxist theses on poetry and art, which are very rare and not very convincing, were all improvised long after Marx, the first philistine to come along feels free to garner applause for himself by throwing the words "a fighting literature and painting," "class content," and the like at your head.

Yet Hegel did come along. He came along and before our day made short work of these vain quarrels people keep picking with us...I say that even today it is Hegel whom we must question about how well-founded or ill-founded Surrealist activity in the arts is."²²

Breton is trying to explore the common context, Hegel-Marx-Surrealism, in order to show the Hegelian roots of both Marxism and Surrealism, to justify a post-Marxian Hegel, that is, a Hegel understood in the light of Materialism rather than Idealism, and to show how Surrealism, with its unity of dream and action can both explore the area of subjectivity and contribute to the revolutionary project. The aim is to open up subjectivity and allow it access onto the objective world and at the same time allow objectivity access into the subjective.

Although I don't think he uses the word once in the whole essay, the key concept here is *mediation*. The surrealist object is the mediator between the subjective and objective worlds. It has a common nature with the totem, fetish or talisman in that it gives a concrete form to a subjective

²¹Ibid. p. 258.

²²Ibid. p. 259.

emotion or sensation. At the same time of its reaching outwards from the inner, it also, as a concrete object, reaches into and stimulates the inner, subjective world.

Breton had begun to focus on this problem some years before, notably in *Les Vases Communicants* (Communicating Vessels) 1932 where he had postulated a "connective tissue between dream and waking." In this book he had examined the nature of dream and its ramifications in everyday life. In *Surrealist Situation of the Object* Breton was able to develop this theme, particularly in terms of the mediating object.

For the Czechs, this lecture was a confirmation of much that they had been working towards. Although the French surrealists had found the Czech situation far more amenable with regards to their relationship with Communism, in fact the Czech group had exactly the same difficulties as they. So a theoretical justification of surrealist activity that showed itself to be in line with the essence of Marxism was bound to be most welcome, particularly, perhaps, to Teige, the Marxist theoretician who, it will be remembered, had been reluctant to commit himself to Surrealism until he had been able to convince himself of its materialist basis.

Independent Currents - Sima - Autonomous Circle of Surrealists

Although the group around Nezval and Teige can be said to represent the mainstream of Czechoslovak surrealism, they were not the only group in existence in the 1930's. Quite apart from Sima, who joined *Le Grand Jeu*, there was a quite separate group operating in Slovakia. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of the present work to deal with Slovakian *Nadrealismus*, but it is hoped that this will be researched into before too long.

In the later 30's another, informal grouping, developed around the writer and art critic Jindrich Chaluspecky in Prague. This group, *The Autonomous Circle of Surrealists* included the painters Frantisek Gross and Frantisek Hudecek and the sculptor Ladislav Zivr. Of particular relevance to the development of Czech surrealist photography was a member of this circle, Miroslav Hak. Hak's early photographs are of about the same time, or slightly later than the work of Styrsky, and often of similar subject matter, but rather more technically assured and with a different mood. Where Styrsky's photographs are often rather softly focused, or even quite out of focus, whether deliberately or not, giving them a painterly quality, Hak's work is typically pin-sharp and very matter-of-fact, which only serves to increase the sense of disquiet that emanates from these images. He was a more committed photographer than Styrsky and his range broader, so we find technically experimental photographs, his "strucages", like *Maska-Brouka* (Mask-Beetle) 1935 for instance, entirely the product of the darkroom, alongside the more conventionally made, but equally original work with a camera. Hak's "straight" surrealist photography would seem not only to parallel that of Styrsky, but also to prefigure that of Vilem Reichmann and Emila Medkova.

Interestingly, there seems to have been little rivalry between the group headed by Teige and Nezval and The Autonomous Circle of Surrealists, when the latter had a group exhibition in 1937 under the auspices of the theatre director E.F. Burian at Theatre D.37, it was opened by Teige.

I have already mentioned the work of Josef Sima, whose work strongly parallels that of "official" Surrealism, but he was only one of many artists within the Czech cultural milieu, who, although influenced by Surrealism,

were not to join the group. Smejkal, in the catalogue *Devetsil: Czech Avant-Garde of the 20's and 30's* describes Surrealism as:

"the dominant tendency in the thirties...Surrealist influence was at times so strong that it temporarily influenced artists following totally different trends and penetrated into other disciplines such as theatre, music and writing, which in many other countries remained unaffected."²³

(A curious notion if he means that theatre was unaffected by Surrealism in other countries - what of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty?) So we find established artists like Funke producing work in a surrealist spirit and the powerful surrealist influence pervading the work of newer artists. But the movement's sphere of influence was not confined to the arts. There were also strong links between the Surrealist Group and the Prague Linguistic Circle.

Czech Surrealism and Structuralist Linguistics

The Prague Linguistics Circle had come into being in the 1920's when the Russian Formalist linguists Roman Jakobson and Mukarovsky had moved from Moscow to Prague. From their earlier Formalist stance they developed what became Structural Linguistics. Regarding their links with the surrealists Richardson and Fijalkowski tell us:

"The relationship between the Prague Linguistic Circle and the surrealist group has not yet been studied, to our knowledge, even in Czechoslovakia, yet Jakobson and Mukarovsky were both involved in the organisation of Toyen and Styrsky during 1938 and the relations between the two groups were secured by strong personal ties."²⁴

The only other source in English on this connection, apart from a translation of a piece by Teige, which I shall deal with presently, is

²³Smejkal, Frantisek: *After Devetsil: Surrealism in Czechoslovakia*. p.88. In: *Devetsil*. Oxford and London 1990.

²⁴Richardson and Fijalkowski 1996. p.20.

Smejkal's essay *From Lyrical Metaphors to Symbols of Fate: Czech Surrealism of the 1930s*. He tells us that:

"Instead of speculative psychoanalytic explications and high-blown poetic paraphrases, they (Jakobson and Mukarovsky) analyzed the work on a strictly scientific, semiological basis."²⁵

Despite Smejkal's prejudice concerning psychoanalysis and his uncritical acceptance of Structuralism as a hard science, the basic point is made that the Czech surrealists found both support and sustenance from Jakobson and Mukarovsky. This is not only important in itself, but continued to influence the course of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia throughout its history, a collaboration between these schools of thought exists even today. Smejkal is very clear as to the importance of this link in the early days of the movement:

"When they (the surrealists) were working on their translation of Breton's *Communicating Vessels (Les Vases Communicants)*, he drew their attention to the role of dreams in Czech literature. He also spoke at the opening of the 1938 exhibition of work by Styrsky and Toyen in Brno, and he even anticipated the Surrealists in his demystification of Macha's work in his essay "What is Poetry?" (*Co je poezie?*, 1934) when he discussed the poetic value of Macha's encoded erotic diary, which until then had been kept a strict secret from the public.

Mukarovsky's collaboration with the Surrealist group was even more direct. Along with generally theoretical works on the problems of avant-garde art - for instance, his 1935 *Dialectical Contradictions in Modern Art* - Mukarovsky analyzed a number of the works of Sima, Styrsky, Toyen, and Nezval. He personally took part in many Surrealist manifestations, and in 1938 he invited Styrsky to lecture to his seminar in aesthetics at the Charles University. This collaboration was a great source of inspiration for both sides. Mukarovsky provided avant-garde art with a new interpretive instrument, while contact with contemporary work influenced the development of Mukarovsky's Structuralist theory

²⁵Smejkal, Frantisek: *From Lyrical Metaphors to Symbols of Fate: Czech Surrealism of the 1930s*. p.68. In: *Czech Modernism 1900 1945*. Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Houston 1989.

that - in harmony with the evolution of Czech art from Poetism to Surrealism - moved away from autonomous signs toward communicative aesthetic signs, thus emphasizing the semantic elements of the work of art. Mukarovsky's Structuralist method also had an influence on some of Teige's postwar works."²⁶

But the influence on Surrealism was at times even more direct than Smejkal suggests. Teige's essay *On Surrealist Semiology* depends very directly, as the title suggests, on Structuralist concepts, but rather than trying to understand Surrealism in the light of Structuralism he is attempting to incorporate semiological ideas into the Surrealist totality:

"Fantasy makes the represented thing into a *symbol*, which is both an independent reality and a sign transmitting the images of all the realities to which it is linked by means of the secret ties of desire. Beyond its obvious meaning, therefore, it contains a number of latent meanings, inaccessible to consciousness."²⁷

So we see straight away that Semiology is not considered by Teige as an *alternative* to Psychoanalysis, but both can be utilized in the broader argument, being compatible with each other in their essence. not only does this statement unite structuralist and Freudian thinking within one sentence, but provides a key to the work of later Czech surrealists along these lines. We find Alena Nadvornikova, in speaking of Emila Medkova's photography declaring the "latent polysemic nature of reality", which is to place fantasy at the heart of the real rather than opposed to reality. Teige informs us:

"When the image becomes thing and the thing becomes a "pictured sign," we reach the point of exchanges between material and psychic realities in the course of which the psychic world, originally a reflection of the material world, turns the material world into its own reflection and image - the illustration

²⁶Ibid. p.68.

²⁷Teige, Karel: *On Surrealist Semiology*. 1945. p.195. In: *Arsenal Surrealist Subversion*. No 4 1989.

and manifestation of its own desire. The realistic technique of imitation thus becomes a magic technique in quest of the real, and the magic technique is subject to the *pleasure principle*. It creates a new poetic reality, which is not dependent on the restrictions and laws of the world of appearances, but rather on the power of *desire*. Infantile, narcissistic and yet eternally human and revolutionary, desire makes the impossible possible and the possible real."²⁸

We therefore have Breton's point, founded in Hegelian dialectic, of the interchange between the poles of objectivity and subjectivity restated and reinforced by Teige as a kind of "materialist magic". Without recourse to the absurd presupposition of a spirit world outside of us, this acknowledges the power of words and images, not only to allow us to interpret and understand reality, but to *create* it. But if Structuralism and Psychoanalysis were useful tools to the surrealist, they were just that. Like automatism they were means, not ends in themselves, not least because they remained limited:

"Neither detailed semantic analysis, nor vast psychological analysis (never complete, in any case, and never quite sure enough when it comes to biographical details) can totally illuminate the painter's work in all its dimensions and depth. Nor can such means give a conceptual transcription of a work, or reveal the nature of its radiance. The latent content of a dream which can, after detailed analysis, be summarized in a few sentences, is still no more than a bit of dry information regarding the terrifying, excruciating and fantastic drama of the waking dream. The emotional power of a work resides in the disturbing mystery of this internal tension between different signifying spheres, whose closeness provokes discharges of lyrical electricity between its various poles.

The polysemy of the poem's cryptogram is never totally deciphered in its depths."²⁹

²⁸Ibid. p.195.

²⁹Ibid. p.196.

Surrealism Against the Current - the Break With Communist Party

I would now like to look again at the relation between the surrealists and the Communist Party. In *"Czech Writers and Politics 1945-1969"* A. French writes:

"In Prague, as elsewhere, the Surrealist movement was espoused by artists who were in fact among the strongest supporters of the Communist Party;...From the outset the Czech Surrealist group aroused the hostility of orthodox Marxist critics, who denounced it as an example of bourgeois decadence and a betrayal of the methods of dialectical materialism. When the Surrealists spiritedly defended their methods, arguing in strictly Marxist terms, they were declared to be Trotskyists, and ordered peremptorily to follow the line dictated from Moscow. Meanwhile the atmosphere in Prague grew more tense as news came in of the Russian political trials: the Meierhold theatre closed: attacks on Shostakovitch and Eisenstein: Bukharin, the hero of the thaw, arrested and shot. The more depressing was the news, the more unquestioning was the loyalty demanded by the Party and its cultural spokesmen. Finally they were to have their way with the Surrealist group, which was liquidated by Nezval after a violent quarrel with Teige."³⁰

Perhaps after wielding a hatchet on those who have, for various reasons, misrepresented Surrealist ideas and history, I should do the same to A. French, but given that this writer has had to piece together a political and literary history from clandestine fragments it is perhaps not surprising that he should be drastically misinformed concerning the rupture in the group in 1938.

French's judgement of Nezval seems apposite here:

"For twenty years Nezval had been the typical avant-gardist, a rebel on principle, gaily rejecting restraints imposed by convention or doctrine. In 1938 he stifled all doubts and insisted on the need for loyalty to party policy, even in the face of the

³⁰French, A.: *Czech Writers and Politics 1945-1969*. East European Monographs, Boulder. 1982. p.17.

Russian political trials and the suppression of cultural freedom in the USSR."³¹

Nezval's ideological about turn was paralleled in France by the desertion of Paul Eluard to the Stalinist camp and was apparently for similar reasons. If the Czech surrealists still had a difficult relationship with the Communist Party, the French surrealists had been forced by the growing Stalinization of Russian Communism to totally abandon their links with the Party. In any case Breton's professed admiration for Trotsky would in itself have made cooperation impossible. In both countries they were forced to choose between Surrealism and the Party, and if under other circumstances they might have chosen the former, both Eluard and Nezval had one very definite reason for making this break with their old friends, the hope that Communism would be an effective bulwark against the growing threat of Fascism and in particular of Nazi Germany. The problem with such an act, as we can now so clearly see, is that it is an act of intellectual and spiritual suicide. By adhering to a formal label rather than the reality behind it, by bowing to the apparent exigencies of realpolitik one betrays oneself even in the act of trying to remain true. Although I am inclined to believe that both Eluard and Nezval moved to the Stalinist camp for the best of motives, it made them complicitous with an ideology of terror and mass murder that rivalled that which they wished to combat. Avoiding one extreme they turned round to its seeming opposite, to be confronted not with its true opposite, but its mere mirror image where right becomes left but all remains essentially the same, at least in its effects. As Octavio Paz was to say in *Alternating Current*:

"In less than fifty years, Marxism, which Marx had defined as a critical system of thought, has turned into a scholastic philosophy of executioners (Stalinism) and the elementary catechism of seven hundred million human beings (Maoism)."³²

³¹Ibid. p.17.

³²Paz, Octavio: *Alternating Current*. p.118. Arcade Publishing, New York 1990.

What French fails to tell us of this affair is that Nezval's "dissolution" of the group was not accepted by the other members. In fact they were to reply with a text, written by Teige, *Surrealism Prouti Proudou* (Surrealism Against the Current).

Although I have a copy of a reprint of this pamphlet, it remains untranslated into English and therefore inscrutable to me. Richardson and Fijalkowski tell us that it is: "...difficult to track down, but a substantial part of it is translated into French in issue 25 of the journal *Change* (1975) pp 50-55."³³ Unfortunately I have not been able to obtain this item. So I shall allow Richardson and Fijalkowski summarize:

"...he makes it clear that Nezval was not speaking for the group, which would continue its activities as before. Teige put forward six points of agreement which united the surrealists, the most significant of which was the pledge to defend the purity of surrealism and its socialist perspectives *against the current* of the cultural reaction that had become predominant and *against the current* of the retrograde cultural politics developed by the communist press and to continue their attempts to work systematically with all scientific and artistic strands that were not subservient to the reaction."³⁴

But the surrealists promise although kept in essence, was one adhered to in secret, for soon after this the Nazi threat materialized with the arrival of the German army.

³³Richardson and Fijalkowski. p.21.

³⁴Ibid. p.20.

Surrealism during the Second World War - Toyen's drawing cycles - Death of Styrsky

At the end of the 1930's we find the Czech surrealists closing in upon themselves. Increasingly strained relations with the Communist Party paralleled the situation in France. The Communist Party at this time embodied a curious paradox in its simultaneous condemnation of "deviationists" and its collaboration with nationalist and other right-wing elements. As French puts it:

"Now the Czech communists were eager to co-operate in a wide anti-Fascist front, and welcomed the adherence even of right-wing elements. The switch of support to the very nationalism which had been previously denounced was welcomed by liberal elements. The new policy was symbolised by the slogan proclaimed by a Soviet literary delegation, "Not Schweik but Zizka", as a model of behaviour for the Czech people. (Zizka was the high-born, nationalist champion of the medieval Hussites. It was a strange paradox that soviet intellectuals in their choice of a literary stereotype for Czech social behaviour, gave their preference to a nationalistic feudal knight rather than to the proletarian anti-hero of the anarchist Hasek."³⁵

We might wonder if French is not being a bit ingenuous in that last comment. Certainly, given the benefit of hindsight we can see that the Soviet model of the new socialist man was, in part, nationalistic, and certainly had no place for the anti-hero. The solemn, but very stupid heroism of the Soviet stereotypes of ideal communist humanity as expressed in the art of Socialist Realism is diametrically opposed to the ironic self-awareness that is embodied in the notion of an anti-hero.

Needless to say, this move away from principle on the part of the Communists and Nezval's betrayal of his surrealist comrades went a long way to completing the surrealists' isolation. The departure of Nezval was mirrored by the arrival of Jindrich Heisler, a poet and photographer. I shall discuss his work more fully later, it is important in the context of both

³⁵French. p.17-18.

Czech and French Surrealism, but it is important to realise that Heisler was likely to take the surrealists further into isolation. Throughout the war he was in particular danger for he was Jewish and spent much of the war hiding in Toyen's apartment.

The Drawing Cycles of Toyen

The most important aspect of Toyen's work immediately prior to, and during the war was a series of drawing cycles that reflected in the most subjective way the reality of the devastation that was taking place throughout Europe. The first of these cycles, *Spectres of the Desert*, completed in 1937, still contains many of the aspects of her earlier work. Using thick, flexible pens and brushes, she conjures up a series of fantastic shapes out of apparently natural forms. Strange creatures, part reptile or bird, part stone or wood, rear up in postures of impotent menace. I use that last term quite deliberately. They are menacing because many of the figures represented are among the most powerful and predatory of the animal kingdom, impotent because they are also revealed as fictions, they are in fact no more than a piece of wood or a chunk of stone, ultimately they are, as their technique shows us, only marks on paper. Other forms are threatened rather than threatening. A woman's head emerges phantasmically from the curling lines of the pen, a broken egg. Nothing is as it should be, everything is displaced, pathetic, lost.

As the cycles of drawing progress the technique is revised and perfected. In the cycle *Tir* (Rifle Range) 1940, Toyen has created a much more precise style in which many of the elements are depicted with rigorous realism and are scattered over the surface as a kind of debris that suggests the aftermath of some terrible calamity. In one drawing for instance we see a landscape whose space is created by the walnuts

scattered over its surface. Within this space are two busts, apparently of two men, on their torsos are a series of drawings or tattoos. On one of them a young woman holds up a dumb-bell, the weights of which circle his nipples. Soldiers stand guard with their backs to us on the stumps of his upper arms, which end in a series of crazed fractures. From another patch of cracks on his left shoulder emerges a fierce lynx's head baring its teeth. In another drawings we find a bedroom screen from which is suspended a colossal fishes head. across the stippled ground are scattered some toy birds, and a severed head of a dog or a wolf grips another, much smaller, fish in his jaws. Yet another drawing depicts a line of what look like very dilapidated cards or stone slabs on which are shown a rifle shell and the numbers 6x9, a woman's head, gagged, two animals kissing, a dog's head and another woman's head, this time upside down and blindfolded and finally a dog's mouth, its tongue lolling, echoing the shape of the inverted woman's head. Other images show a gigantic baby's head screaming, its open mouth revealing the horizon line of the landscape behind, surrounded by bird-cages, a little girl in a landscape composed of the dismembered body and scattered feathers of a bird, a child's building-brick castle surmounted by a severed rabbit's head.

The sequence *Day and Night* seems to chart the progress of a little girl, a tragic descendent of Alice, through this hell. These drawings are in pencil, which enables Toyen to vary between the tight linear discipline of her pen drawings and soft tonal areas in which the white paths left by the eraser plays as much part as the actual graphite marks. The girl hovers above the ground, yawning or screaming with airborne rocks above a group of toy rabbits on rockers, melting into a curious shape in which are embedded horses heads, climbing a gigantic mouth that apparently grows out of the ground like a bush.

The tendency towards nightmarish precision reaches a climax in the cycle *Hide Yourself, War* 1944. The title, expressing the fact of the war more directly than the others, is taken from the *Poesies* of Lautreamont. The fracturing of the world within this tight, deceptively descriptive, framework, also reaches crescendo. The blasted remains of tree stumps, a cage where one sees the fractions of skeletons,, bony arms clinging pathetically to its bars. In one, a ribcage surrounded by flies, a cart riding into the distance, in another, a sea-horse, desiccated but frightful, clinging to a kitchen table, a solitary spoon on its surface, surrounded by regimented fish, hovering above the ground like little torpedoes, the black clouds of a fire or a storm billowing up from the horizon.

The iconography of Toyen's work of this period is particularly important for the understanding of the work of her younger contemporaries and the later generations of surrealists. A direct influence can be seen in the work, for instance of Josef Istler. The sense, as I phrased it earlier, of an *impotent menace* is to be found time and time again in the works of Czech surrealist artists. If it was the menace of Nazism that first accentuated this, actually universal tendency within Surrealism, it was honed later by the oppression of the Communist regime. In this I suspect that we find both the acceptance of the fact of the thing to be feared and its overcoming within the imagination by revealing its illusory nature or its absurdity. So, for instance, we find in the works of Erben, Svankmajer and many others a lampooning of authority that destroys, not its immediate political power, but the root of that power, that of the fear it generates in its subjects. But it must be remembered that the very fact that one is undermining this source of fear and threat shows that it is very real. Clues to the self-image of the artist abound. Is Toyen representing herself for instance in the 1937 work *The Sleeper*? Here she

shows from behind, a little girl in a nightdress with a butterfly net. But the dress reveals, not only that familiar cracking as if it were eroded and rotten wood rather than cotton or wool, but it shows itself to be empty. The little girl is not there. Is her absence an indication of the existential state of the artist? Is she in some sense "empty" or absent, or is she merely in hiding? One is compelled to wonder at this, and Toyen's own reticence concerning her art throws the questions back at us and however much we may interpret her work, and some images do seem to yield to some degree to interpretation, they remain largely enigmatic.

Another key to the despair evident in these works must be the death from pneumonia of Styrsky in 1942. Whatever the exact nature of their relationship, they had been inseparable companions for twenty years.

Conclusion

The Czech Surrealist Group was born amidst the cultural ferment of the young Czech Republic and represented an advance in both the theoretical and practical applications of Surrealism. Although it had a different intellectual origin to the French group, it developed a consistent and exacting approach to the problems that interested Surrealism, increasing its scope and enriching its creativity. The contribution of poets such as Nezval, the painters Styrsky and Toyen, Styrsky's photography, Teige's photcollage and typographical experiments have still received far too little attention in Britain. Nor should the work of "parasurrealists" such as Sima, and independent surrealists like Chaluspecky and Hak be ignored. The period 1934 - 1938 was one of great creativity and the longest period of open group activity until the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989. It was important, not only in itself, but also in setting the tone for much of

the underground activity of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia for the next fifty years. The Second World War inaugurated fifty years of unbroken clandestine activity in which the surrealists, despite having to often work in secret, and being denied most opportunities to manifest in public, developed a body of work, creative and critical, of exceptional value and interest.

THE SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC AND THE CIRCLE OF FIVE OBJECTS

The end of the war brought renewed public activity, culminating in a smaller version of the 1947 World Surrealist Exhibition, organised by Teige and Heisler, reaching Prague. But in early 1948 the Communist Party took power. Toyen and Heisler left for Paris and for the second time the surrealists were forced to go underground.

A series of meetings had been held in 1947 under the title "Young Culture" in which every active cultural movement had its own evening. Teige was interested by two young poets, Vratislav Effenberger and Karel Hynek. Effenberger gave a paper, *Surrealism is Something Else* while Hynek read a satirical poem. They started to meet and Teige proposed a publication, but these plans were halted by the Communist coup. Another figure emerging at this time was the painter Josef Istler who had previously a member of the "para-surrealist" *SKUPINA RA*. This group that had been criticised by Teige as wanting to be both "surrealist and not surrealist", Istler's early work was reminiscent of Toyen's imagery of the late 30's and 40's. In his best known painting *Ecstasy* he shows strange convulsive forms, reminiscent of a draped woman's body, billowing across a desert landscape.

Signs of the Zodiac

In January 1951 Teige, Effenberger and a few others started regular monthly meetings and made a series of monthly unedited and unpublished albums of their activity, which they titled *The Signs of the Zodiac*. These, and their successors, the *Objekt* albums are the only record of collective action during the 50's and early 60's.

The Zodiac albums are bound in sage green cloth with brown card slipcases. The earlier ones are quite thick, the later ones considerably thinner. The texts are typed, the illustrations are either original works of art, drawings, etchings and photographs or images cut from books and magazines, tipped in. All references in this section are from the albums unless footnoted.

LEDEN - Aquarius - January

Edited by Effenberger. The title page is signed by Vratislav Effenberger, Karel Hynek, Josef Istler, Jan Kotik, Karel Teige, Vaclav Tikal. Contents include a study of Styrsky by Teige. He suggests that it is hard to find a dividing line between Artificialism and Surrealism. This essay was written in 1946 for a posthumous exhibition, but never published. It is accompanied by reproductions of works by Styrsky, the painting *Man Fed by Ice* and photographs from the album *Man With Blinkers*. There are also poems by Effenberger and Hynek, illustrations by Istler, Kotik, Teige. Many of the illustrations are original etchings and drawings.

Possibly the most important feature of the album is an enquiry by Effenberger. His questions, and the various answers are important enough to quote from them substantially:

"Because the current situation of surrealism is not very clear mainly because of our total isolation, it is necessary to sum up the surrealist principles in such a way as to give access to attempts to solve the most urgent problems of poetry.

- 1.1. Why do you write?
- 1.2. How do you see the role of modern art?
- 1.3. Define poetry rationally.
- 2.1. Are you an adherent of Surrealism?

2.2. What are your reasons?

2.3. Do you consider Surrealism to be a stage in the evolution of art or as a way of living?

2.4. In what direction do you see the further evolution of Surrealism?

2.5. Does a surrealist aesthetic or diction exist?

2.6. Which of Surrealism's methods do you consider to be outdated and which are capable of further evolution?

2.7. How do you evaluate the personality and work of André Breton before and after the War?

2.8. How do you see the difference between Surrealism and abstract painting?

2.9. What is your attitude to Automatism?

2.10. What is your personal experience of the theory of the Inner Model?

2.11. Do you think the Surrealist movement can be revived?

2.12. Do you think the term "Surrealism" corresponds with its ideas, and how? Or do you think it would be in place to think of a new term and which one?

3.1. From the viewpoint of your work, what attitude do you have to the cognitive method of dialectical materialism?

3.2. What is your attitude to the problem of freedom?

3.3. To what extent and how is poetry dependent on the evolution of society and its constructs?"

Effenberger questions most of the fundamental aspects of Surrealism in a way that not only allows the possibility of agreement between its respondents, but also the possibility of reinventing the surrealist adventure, or even of abandoning it.

RYBY - Pisces - February

Edited by Jan Kotik. The bulk of this volume is taken up with Teige's essay on Synthetic Cubism. *Realism and Irrationalism of Cubist Creation* (Written 1950-1951, marked as being finished March 1951. There are

also etchings by Istler, drawings by Kotik and Tikal and poems from Effenberger and a text by Hynek.

BREZEN - March - Aries

Edited by Istler. The Aries sign on the cover, it is signed by Effenberger, Teige, Hynek, Kotik, Tikal.

There are poems by Effenberger, part of Hynek's *Icarian Games*, and etchings by Istler and drawings by Kotik and Tikal.

DUBEN - April - Taurus

Edited by Kotik. This has not survived. My only information is at third hand, Alena Nadvornikova in her essay *Posledni rok Karla Teigeho*¹ (The last year of Karol Teige) refers to "...the reminiscences of J. Kotik, the editor of the volume, who kept it after its completion, it was confiscated by the State Security shortly after Teige's death." She is able to quote from a still existing contents list however, and mentions an essay by Teige, *In Praise of Architecture*, more from *Icarian Games*, Effenberger's *The Smallest World* and visual work by Tikal, Libor Fara and Istler.

KVETEN - Gemini - May

Edited by Teige. Contains poetry by Effenberger plus an essay *Poetry is not a privilege* and two chapters from his novel *The Last Days of Europe*. There is a short text by Hynek, an etching by Istler and drawings by Tikal. Mikulas Medek appears for the first time, with a selection of photographs of his paintings. We also see an essay by

¹Alena Nadvornikova: *Posledni rok Karla Teigeho. Sborniky Znameni zverokruhu* in: *Karel Teige* (exhibition catalogue) Praha: Dum U kameneho zvonu, 1994. The quote is from an unpublished translation by Roman Dergam.

Teige: *The Question of Plasticity and Obscurity in Cubist Pictures*, an essay on Juan Gris. Then come the responses to the inquiry from Effenberger and Teige.

To the question "Why do you write?" Effenberger replies: "Unconsciously - a libidinous necessity." He sees the role of modern art as being: "in its value as a testimony, through which the author manifests his inner life, and in the value of its objectivisation." Poetry is defined as "...a vain desire to find an order in the region of the irrational that would suit human sensory needs." On the question of a surrealist aesthetics he states that if it exists it "it is only a symptom of stagnation, but according to the "Almanach surrealiste du demi-siecle, 1950" stagnation still persists in Paris." He regards automatic writing is no longer tenable in the question on the methods of Surrealism, and leaves the question on automatism unanswered in consequence. On Breton he is somewhat controversial: "When he fought from 1924 to 1938, he was the most important member of the movement. From 1939-48 my only impression is that he had declined from his pivotal elan, and, worse, explained Surrealism as an art style. Also, his approximation to the Hermetic Sciences is out of the realm of surrealist experiment." There is an irony here in that the study of Hermeticism was to reach its height during Effenberger's ascendancy among the surrealists of Prague, with Stejskal and Svankmajer as the best-known students of Alchemy for instance. Of the theory of the inner model he says: "I do not think a picture can be a "hand-made photograph" as Dali said, because it is formed by an aesthetic and canvas is only a distant variant and echo of the original picture." And he agrees that the term "Surrealism" ..." does answer to the original, but a better name would be "objective poetry"". On Dialectical Materialism: "In my opinion one point became Socialism and one point Surrealism. The two poles of Materialism - Spirit" but he fails to

answer his own question on freedom. Finally, he regards poetry as "...totally dependent on the evolution of society, but independent of the establishment of society."

Teige begins by stating that his answers are not in accord with Effenberger's questions, they are only a fragmentary improvisation. He writes because: "There is identity between love and poetry. Art enables man to leave his footprint on life." On the role of modern art he states that it gives: "...the emotional life of a human being new dimensions, enrich his inner life. Art as a sovereign self-expression of the author's psyche gives new and enlivening elements to the spiritual life of the observer. Modern art wants to rid itself of conventional and traditional etho-aesthetic restraints so that the expression of the poetic thought becomes as free as it can." Definitions of poetry are not generally valid but:

"Poetry can be compared to electricity: poetry also has good and bad conductors, its course can be inhibited by resistances... In brief, in thousands of forms, phenomena and effects a single force acts and expresses itself - electricity, that is, poetry. However, unfortunately theories of art and aesthetics have to acknowledge that they lack precise measuring apparatus such as voltmeters, ammeters and dynamometers."

Teige is particularly eloquent and passionate on the question as to whether Surrealism is an art form or a way of life:

"Surrealism is at the same time a new stage in the history of modern art, a new cognition of the human world and a tendency towards new ways of life. Though the irrevocable goal of Surrealism is the liberation of the human spirit, and that generally entails the pre-requisite of the social liberation of human beings. Art and poetry in Surrealism are above all an effective tool for the liberation of the spirit. The question of the relation of the artistic, evolutionally stimulating and fruitful activity towards human life should be raised in such a way as to explore the extent to which evolutionally mature avantgarde art gives impulses for changes of ways and forms of life at least in the circle of people that live in an intimate contact with this art, and to what extent it is possible to determine the direct and indirect connection between historical

metamorphoses that take place in the artistic field , and the changes of the personal, emotional and spiritual life that occur almost simultaneously or follow with a certain delay after those artistic changes and reversals. The intrinsic and primary question of Cubism was exclusively formal and aesthetic. But because Cubism has gone so far further on the road to irrealism, it has become - despite its initiators not being fully and clearly conscious of it - a powerful force of the liberation of poetic and human expression. Surrealism influences through its ideology and its poetic creation human beings and changes their lives , without political transmissions, mainly by releasing the most substantial forces and values of humanity, it gives on a moral level a courage of freedom and of love, a courage to look into its depths; it awakes in human beings a sense of the gifts of the chances of life and the magic of encounters, it leads human beings into the domain of dreams, it teaches them a new view of the neglected facts and allows them to interpret these for themselves according to their desire. Surrealism opens completely or partially the gates towards new wonders. It creates a new myth of the reality of our lives".

On Breton he seems at odds with Effenberger and is, perhaps being defensive of his friend: "He is the initiator of Surrealism from what he published between the wars. Since 1945 the most important work is *Arcane 17*, which is as important as the Manifestos".

(Effenberger had been critical of *Arcane 17*). To the question of automatism he states that there are: "...two interesting currents: automatism of vision, the correct recording of inner world, and on the other side of creation, graphic automatism which has nothing to do with the inner model." and on the subject of the inner model responds: " As with psychological automatism, the inner model is not an absolute term. It is also impossible that the inner model should be a servile imitation of the outer model." On the revival of Surrealism he says that it is now a minority, and that the surrealists themselves chose this occultation. He hopes this loss of extensivity will be compensated by intensity. He accepts the concept of dialectical materialism and to the question on freedom quotes Marx: "The perpetual aristocracy of humankind that is freedom."

CERVEN - Cancer - June

Edited by Tikal. After some poems by Hynek and etchings by Istler and drawings by Tikal we come to Tikal's answers to the Inquiry.

On modern art: "I see this role as the liberation of human beings and it can be fulfilled by art through an irrational method only. To uncover and release evidence of the inner life of the modern man, not to conceal or soften his contradictions. Front and reverse. To seek for the point where all contradictions disappear." and poetry: "The excitement and expectations of the meeting of the objective with the subjective, with the miraculous." and Surrealism is: "...the method of changing life which is the same as social liberation of the human being." Tikal likens the development of Surrealism to an imaginary castle which can never be completed. Unlike Effenberger he thinks that automatism has a future and says unequivocally that: "Breton is the greatest and purest of surrealists." The abstract: "...which gives human beings a certain temporally limited good feeling and freedom will sooner or later necessarily bring the artist into shallow waters." He believes in the inner model, but only as raw material and then says to question 2.11. "I am against the affected elegance of Effenberger. The question is that it is the movement of revolt which makes every aesthetic establishment unacceptable." To the question of dialectical materialism he gives the paradoxical, and equivocal answer: "I would be afraid that when materialist I would be lost in the waters of idealism." With regard to freedom he finds an infinite desire to find a butterfly "...in whose wings I will find the reflection of truth and beauty." He is at one with Effenberger in finding poetry is: "...dependent on evolution of society, but independent of its establishment."

The volume concludes with a brief commentary by Effenberger on Teige's answers to the inquiry:

"2.6. It is necessary to say that there is not so much difference between us. Teige speaks of psychic automatism as not unified with automatic writing.

2.8. On Breton. I have a feeling that there is dominant in Breton a looking backwards on Surrealism like an art. Some danger of escape from contemporary reality into the forgetfulness of occultism. There is a way from looking for the miraculous in man, into looking for miracles".

CERVENEK - July - Leo

Edited by Libor Fara. Contains a monotype and ten reproductions by Fara and excerpts from a collaborative novel by Effenberger and Hynek.

SRPEN - Virgo - August

Alongside Hynek's poems and collaborative pictures by Fara and Istler is the record of some surrealist games played on the night of the 12th of August. Questions and answers:

Q: What is belladonna?

A: What a slim but beautiful music teacher.

Q: If children were born from fathers

A: We could not find the door.

Q: Why is Vratislav Effenberger afraid of moths?

A: Because during dreams he has shorter legs.

Q: Where am I?

A: In some town where they still have gaslight.

Q: How does Fara smile when he is alone?

A: Like a coffin-maker.

ZARI - September - Vahy - Libra

The album for September, Zari, introduces us to Medek's wife, Emila Medkova. She was to become one of the most important post-war surrealists and among the finest of Czechoslovakia's photographers. Her earliest works are tableaux of the living and the inanimate. A figure, (usually herself or Medek) is posed with a variety of objects which usually includes a glass eye or an egg, obsessive objects that appear in Medek's paintings. There are also Medek and Medkova's joint replies to the inquiry and more games.

Why do you paint? Medek: "I paint because I want to define with painting the subjective/objective situations". Medkova: "I photograph to serve the objective/subjective situation." On the role of modern art they both say "If modern art has any role, and we want to believe that it has, then, as we think, it should be a permanent great destroyer of indifference and stagnation."and on the definition of poetry:

"Poetry can be found where a traumatic effect of the poem, image or any poetic formation attacks the stagnation of life of the consuming subject. Poetry is all that is in disagreement with the immobility of reality. Poetry is autodestruction. We think that poetry has no other goal than to create, define and further develop forms of awe and indifference, wildness and love, indolence and death in a world of concrete reality. Poetry is indifference in movement. Poetry is a destroyer of hope, the great paralysing of action. Poetry is a questioning of existence answered in a convulsion from a feeling of existence. Poetry is a direct reaction to danger."

Intriguingly, they do not consider themselves to be surrealists: "...Why? Because we think the word "poetry" is the word of conscience and reality." They consider that "If surrealism doesn't find the strength to define man and reality and man in reality adequately to

the complexity of the situation in which both can now be found, then its development will not occur." and that: "Abstract painting places us in a zero position as far as the world of reality is concerned. It will probably never lose a social function, it is in a certain sense a reflective mirror of a *neutral* feeling, hence its popularity." a position very close to Tkal's. Automatism is of the past, and the inner model is not: "the autonomous production of the unconscious, but is the project of the movement of objective reality within us." Freedom, they consider, is an untenable convention, freedom of the individual is "any next moment."

The album closes with games of definition.

"Emila:

Her heart is small

Her silence is sensual

Her sleep is a propeller"

RIJEN - Scorpio - October

This, the last of the Zodiac albums, is given over entirely to Teige's essay on Juan Gris, following Teige's death.

Karel Teige's death was, for many years, the subject of misinformation and speculation. Breton² believed that he had

² See Breton, A. *Surrealism and Painting* (trans. Simon Watson Taylor) London 1972. *Introduction to the Work of Toyen* p.209. "Our great friend Karel Teige, the very incarnation of intelligence, culture and the struggle for a better world, the founder and incomparable animator of the surrealist group in Prague: towards the end of 1951, 'when they came to arrest him, Teige swallowed some poison secretly and died on the pavement outside his house, between the policemen. His companion, Joska, threw herself out of the window and died not far from where he lay'". (Breton quotes Arts, Paris 5 Dec 1952: *The Example of Karel Teige*. The total isolation of the Czech surrealists is illustrated by the fact that, a year after his friends death, Breton is still reliant on a magazine article for information.

committed suicide by jumping from his window, but the truth was rather more prosaic. The political situation within Czechoslovakia had steadily been worsening. As the Communists increased their grip, more and more free expressions of culture vanished. A series of show trials condemned not only right-wingers, but also prominent members of the left as well. For instance the well-known case of Zavis Kalandra who had been forced to confess to imaginary crimes by the secret police and condemned to death. He had been a close friend, not only of the Czech surrealists, but also of Breton and Eluard. Breton and the surrealists in France asked, or rather demanded, that Eluard use his influence to save Kalandra, but Eluard refused and Kalandra was shot.³ A second series of trials was planned and Teige could see that he was likely to be among its victims.

Teige was on his way to Joska's flat when he began to feel unwell. Shortly after arriving he had a heart attack and died. The next day Effenberger and Istler went to his flat and removed some of his papers, fortunately pre-empting the secret police who took the rest of his papers, many of his collages and his library. When Teige was officially rehabilitated in the sixties, they were incorporated into the National Archives at Smichov.

1950 had seen the publication of Ladislav Stoll's *Tricet let boju za ceskou socialistickou poesii* (Thirty years of struggle for Czech socialist poetry). French (p.74.) tells us "The arch villain of the Left was Karel Teige, who had infected even Nezval with his Trotskyism." Stoll's work was to become the pattern book for most approved writing of the following years. It was followed by an article by M. Grygar,

³ This incident is discussed in several places. The original "*Lettre ouverte a Paul Eluard*" was published in *Combat* 14 June 1951. The best source in English for this is currently Pollizotti's *Revolution of the Mind, the life of Andre Breton*.

serialised in the journal *Tvorba*, the culmination of a campaign by that magazine against Teige, titled *Teigovstina-trockisticka agetura v nasi kulture* (Teige - Trotsky's agent in Our Culture)⁴.

The Signs of the Zodiac constitutes a unique record of collective activity among the surrealists very definitely against the current of this period. It shows us a new generation of artists coming to maturity, against the greatest odds, and developing work that has, as yet, had far too little exposure in the West, just as for many years it suffered neglect in Czechoslovakia.

Alena Nadvornikova, a member of the current surrealist group, says:

"*The Signs of the Zodiac*" in which Teige presented his work... through the answers to the opinion poll, he also included his bequest...testify to the dignity and invincibility of his "spirit of modernism". They are also a significant and unique document of an authentic creative activity, and thus of the moral resistance of a group of people against the "Stalinist epoch". Last but not least, they are also a bridge to the revived Czech Surrealism of the later period."⁵

THE CIRCLE OF FIVE OBJECTS

The surrealists would seem to have remained in a state of shock and consequent inactivity during 1952. Although undoubtedly there must have been meetings between them, I do not know of any record of these meetings or of any kind of collective work. Teige's death was followed by that of Karel Hynek in January 1953. Suddenly, in the

⁴ *Tvorba* XX c 42 18.10.1951; c43 25.10.1951; c44 1.11.1951.

⁵ See: Nadvornikova, Alena: *The last year of Karel Teige - Anthologies "The Signs of the Zodiac"* in: *Karel Teige. exhibition catalogue* (Prague) 1994.

same year, a new album was composed, under the title *Objekt*. This was to be the first of five albums under the same title. Again, they are unique copies and constitute the only record we have of collective surrealist activity of this period.

All the albums are bound in black cloth, with illustrated covers. They are generally quite big compared to the Zodiac albums - about 2 to 3 inches thick.

OBJEKT 1 June 1953

It is signed at the front by all participants: Vratislav Effenberger, Gerda Istlerova, Josef Istler, Emila Medkova, Mikulas Medek. The purpose of the albums is stated in an introduction:

"The reason for these almanacs made in irregular intervals, is to try to make clear the situation of modern poetry, not as in the word map, but as *inner* problematics, from inner chaos to clarifying problems. This task is far more than we could do in a little almanac by several authors, nevertheless, all authentic poetry throws light on the discovery of new spaces in man and help his position in the world. Optimal conditions of human life seem to be out of reach in the chaos of the last ten years. The almanacs do not have any artistic ambitions, they are *not* in the form of an artistic revue."

The album opens with material on the surrealists' dead colleagues. There are photographs of Teige and Joska and part of a letter to Eva Ebertova and a bibliography of Teige's work by Vratislav Effenberger and Teige's last photocollage. This is followed by a photograph of Hynek, five of his poems and a bibliography. There follows a pantomime by Effenberger: *Don't Stone the Prophet*. The visual material includes Istler's etchings and photographs by Medkova. Medek contributes photographs of his most important paintings of that period, including *The Chicken Eater*, *Emila and Flies* and *The Head*

That Sleeps the Imperialist Sleep. The album closes with six alternative projects for the front cover.

OBJEKT 2 1953

The cover by Medkova, is a photograph of roots, upside down.

Signed on the right fly-leaf by Mikulas Medek, Rezny, Jana Severova, Vratislav Effenberger; Istler's signature fills the whole of the left-hand page.

The album consists of an uninterrupted stream of poems and images including works by Tzara, Peret, Cesaire, Medek (*Silence is a tepid soup which flows in my eyes and ears*), Picabia, St Pol Roux and Reverdy. There are photographs by Medkova, images by Rousseau and Dali, excerpts from Breton's *Martinique, Charmeuse de Serpent* and Tzara's *L'Homme Approximatif* in its entirety. There are poems by Effenberger and a photograph of Breton outside the Galerie Gradiva, Breton's *Sur le Route de San Romano*, accounts of dreams, photographs from Breton and Eluard's 1935 trip to Prague and a notice of the death of Jindrich Heisler alongside a selection of his work. Finally there is an explanatory epilogue:

"This Objekt is dedicated to surrealist poetry, not divided by date, nothing is confronted or divided, since Surrealism avoids such coarse instruments. It is the evoked atmosphere of surrealist poems flowing out between poems, a union which could be said to be an argument as to whether Surrealism is an art style or a state of mind. In this discussion, similar to a dream nor the poem is not conditioned by the time or place. He who turns the pages of this number of Objekt should go from one poem to another as one goes from one dream to another. We would like to have from time to time Objekt become a real object, as poetry. The dream object is the mysterious book we meet in dreams, we desire to read miraculous sentences and strange pictures, irrevocably lost".

At the back are sketches for the cover by Medek, Istler, Medkova, Severova and Effenberger. (Jana Severova was Effenberger's first wife).

OBJEKT 3 (1958)

It is the only Objekt without a case, which, presumably, was lost. Participants are: Jindrich Kurz, Josef Istler, Ludvik Svab, Vratislav Effenberger, Zbynek Havlicek, Emila Medkova, Mikulas Medek, Milan Napravnik, Vaclav Tikal.

Istler reproduces five paintings. For the first and last time Ludvik Svab printed his poems. He said of them that they were satirical, sarcastic, formed, I think, out of his admiration for Hynek.⁶ A fragment of Effenberger's poem *Spectre of the 3rd World War* is followed by three photographs by Medkova, - one now missing from the album. Then Havlicek's "*Miluji tedy jsem*" (Amor ergo sum) and then ten more of Medkova's photographs followed by Effenberger's *Fotographie Emilie Medkove*, probably the first critical text on Medkova.

OBJEKT 4 1960

The cover and frontispiece are by Medkova. The album opens with *Utek do skutečnosti* (Flight into reality) by Effenberger. There is the first appearance in these albums of Stanislav Dvorsky who was to become one of Effenberger's most important collaborators in the sixties. Effenberger himself contributes, among other things, an introductory text to pictures by Istler. These images are his *Heads*, paintings and monotypes from 1958 to 1960. He forces images out of the paint with his cruel raclage, making some of his most exciting and

⁶In conversation with the author, August 1994.

distinctive work. Sadly, this was to become in time his trademark, a technique betrayed by endless repetition into sad kitsch. The same method was to encapsulate the zenith and the nadir of Istler's career. There is a study on Medek, no author is given, but Svab believed it to be Effenberger. This is followed by 12 pictures by Medek, then another unsigned essay, an introduction to the poetry of Zdena Holubova, again probably by Effenberger. There follows a selection of *Poetry of 1960*. There are several more unsigned texts, one is definitely Effenberger on Tikal and another on the poetry of Petr Kral is probably also by Effenberger. This is followed by a selection of Kral's poems. Following this is an introduction to the interpretation of a painting by Dorothea Tanning signed by Effenberger, Havlicek and Kral with a resume by Effenberger. Effenberger also includes an introduction to a poem by Effenberger and Kral, *Venus of Willendorf* and finally an epilogue.

OBJEKT 5 - 1962

This is the last of the Objekts. It has a colour lithograph by Istler as frontispiece. As usual, there are illustrations by Medkova, Medek, Istler and Tikal, poems by Effenberger. There is also a poetic novel by Kral, *Tyrs*, a satire on the founder of gymnastics as Czech national sport, the annual "Falcon festival". Vera Linhartova makes her first appearance with *Totez pozdeji* (The same later) and Napravnik contributes *Motak* (Secret message). This is unusual in the surrealist text in that it is a poetic text in metrical form. Also making a debut is Prokop Voskovec with *Z dopisu pratelum* (Letters to friends), and Effenberger contributes an essay: *Pohyby symbolu* (Movement of symbols).

It appears that a sixth Objekt was prepared, but was lost. Also, a questionnaire of about this time: *Position of the Baton* seems to have vanished. This consisted of 200 questions(!) and was evidently prepared by Kral. I was informed by Svab that only Kral and Napravnik responded.

CONCLUSION

The period covered by the Circle of Five Objects was one of great difficulty and uncertainty. Although the time of greatest oppression was over, with the death of Stalin, the surrealists were still forbidden any public collective manifestation and the process of liberalisation was very slow and with many setbacks. Attempts at finding a collective public expression were inevitably suppressed. So, for instance, Medek and Medkova were, at this time forbidden to exhibit and they worked in factories. Even the existence of the albums had to be kept secret, Ludvik Svab remembers how they were at one point buried in a garden, and often they had to be smuggled from one place to another.

In 1958 Svab organised a projected series of conferences *The Rules of the Game* in the psychiatric clinic where he worked, but after the first one they were stopped by the police. Tikal's exhibition of that year was the first exhibition of a surrealist since 1948, then in 1960 Voskovec organised a performance of *Ubu Roi*, which ran for two performances before being closed down. In 1962 a series of tapes were made of readings of poetry and plays, read by actors. The tapes were kept for many years, and after the Velvet Revolution a performance was given of the works, read by the same actors.

The real importance of the Objekt albums is the evidence of the surrealists continued collective activity, even under conditions of secrecy, of their developing a social critique expressed through their creative praxis and the development of several important artists and poets (Medek, Medkova, Istler, Tikal, Havlicek, Kral). Denied the possibility of exhibiting as surrealists, the painters were to find an outlet in the environment of the *Cesky Informel* movement, where the influence of, and on, Medkova, Medek and Istler were particularly important.

Effenberger was, from Teige's death in 1951 until his own death in 1986 the intellectual and spiritual centre of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia. In an interview Svankmajer called him a guru, without suggesting any of the pejorative connotations of the word. As a poet and philosopher he had something of that sense of authority possessed by both Teige and Breton himself. Unfortunately, much of his work is still largely unavailable. The bulk of the published work is still in Czech although there are some French translations, often inadequate. This seems set to change, some of Effenberger's more important texts are being translated into English at the time of writing this. Effenberger was a stimulus to the creativity of his fellows and an important shaping influence on their thinking. His work initiated research into semiotics, critical functions of the imagination, phenomenology of the imagination and concrete irrationality. Czech Surrealism has tended to emphasise the sarcastic humour of Peret rather than the lyrical impulse of Breton, and a tendency towards a negative critique of the public sphere and its effects on the imaginative life of society. This difference of emphasis was bound together with Effenberger's belief that a positive, integrative model of Surrealism could no longer function in present day society and that the emphasis must henceforth be on a destructive or *disintegrative*

model. This finds its echoes in the satirical works of Hynek and of Effenberger himself, and analogically in the informalism of Medkova, Medek and Istler. The mature work of Medkova constitutes series upon series of photographs of total ruin of what was fashioned, useful. Bataille's image of the universe as a gob of spit seems so apposite, but it is the spit on Leonardo's wall, transforming itself before our eyes. The process is the same as Dali's critical paranoia, but remaining in the raw state without the mediation of Dali's technical prowess to do our imaginative work for us. The viewer is thrown into the work and completes it, reinvents it. The scarred surfaces of Medek and the torn, buckled works of Istler, as they move away from obvious representation are directly comparable, in particular Medek who worked closely with his wife mutually influencing and being influenced by her.⁷ The influence of these artists is seen, not only in the work of Svanmajer, (think of his "Bach" with its broken, but living surfaces, the formless magma that his claymations collapse into), but also of Martin Stejskal whose work operates dialectically between order and chaos, disrupting in the extreme the given image with the technique of contourage, or delivering immensely carefully painted urban dystopias, reflecting, sometimes directly, the imagery of Medkova, out of the chaos of his starting point.

Perhaps the key phrase in their, and in particular, Effenberger's thinking is *critical functions of the imagination*. This suggests that the activity of the imagination reveals the shape of the zeitgeist, a

⁷"Anna Farova: You and Mikulas sometimes had the same subjects. Were your's based on his?

Emila Medkova: It was far more complicated. For instance, "The Inquisitors" appeared among my photographs of "Heads" before they started to interest Mika. Our creative relations were intertwined and ambiguous. Something can be painted and cannot be found in reality. Of course there was a continuous dialogue and mutual influence and forming". from an interview between Anna Farova and Emila Medkova in: *Emila Medkova*, exhibition catalogue, Prazky Dum Fotografie, 1985.

common enough idea in all imaginative traditions, but also something more: the imagination is not merely a passive mirror of this zeitgeist, but also its merciless critic. Although this perspective is not unique to the Czechoslovak surrealists, or even of Surrealism in general, it is foregrounded to a greater degree, and in a unique manner. To quote from *Symboly obludnosti* in 1966, they are:

"...concerned with the investigation of such relations and radiations by means of which the irrationality, concretized in the works of art or in the psychic and social reality, becomes the ferment of critical thought".⁸

and a little later in the same text:

"...is...intended to verify the critical functions of concrete irrationality in the contemporary social, psychic, and cultural conditions and to follow the changes of signs and meanings, which also reflect the changes of these psycho-social conditions, in the sphere of surrealism. It is intended to stress all the critical functions of concrete irrationality in their semantic effect."⁹

This is, if you like, the arrival point of the period we have been discussing and the departure point of the later period. These factors, implicit in Surrealism since its inception, become realised in both the critical and imaginative works of the Czech surrealists.

Another essential factor is that of collective work. Andre Breton had always conceived of Surrealism as a collective adventure and the fruits of that collectivity have always enjoyed a privileged status in Surrealism. Forced underground, the surrealists endured what they termed a "double isolation" from both official culture and from the mainstream of underground culture. In fact they were for many years triply isolated, being cut off from the rest of the Surrealist Movement. Drawn more closely together than most surrealist groups, their collective work was to assume an overriding importance for them both

⁸*Symboly obludnosti*, galerie D, Prague 1966.

⁹*Ibid.*

for the sense of solidarity it gave them and in shaping their individual work.

SYSTEM UDS - SYMBOLS OF MONSTROSITY

SURREALISM AND INFORMAL ART

Between the late Fifties and the early Sixties there developed in Czechoslovakia an independent school of "informal art" in which several of the surrealists participated. Parallel to other varieties of informalism, the work of Tapiés etc, *Cesky Informel* had the status almost of a national school. For the surrealists it may have had the advantage of being able to reveal and conceal themselves simultaneously.

The general tendency among the informalists was to concern themselves with process, with decomposition as much as composition, the rawness of materials: rags, string, rusting metal, rough wood. No longer constrained by the flat surface, paintings often shifted towards relief. Among the main protagonists were the painters Robert Piesen, Jiri Valenta, Jiri Balcar, Zbynek Sion, the sculptors Jan Koblasa and Karel Nepras, and the photographers Karel Kuklik, Jiri Putta and Cestomir Kratky.

Although greatly concerned with the constructive aspects of their art, the informalists also took this as a way of achieving a breakthrough into the poetic and subjective. What separates the surrealists from them is that typically, the interpretative is foregrounded with the surrealists. So, for instance, in formally similar images by Medkova and Kuklik, the Medkova will tend to reveal the doubleness of the image, the brute real *and* the imaginative equivalent, while the Kuklik will tend to leave this latent and foreground the actual.

For Medkova there was no need to change style to appear "informalist", she had already discovered this in her most typical work. Medek and Istler seem to have found a liberation and an inspiration in informalism that connected up with the development of their work during the 1950s.

Istler's paintings of this period frequently buckle into three dimensions. The canvas is often roughly stitched together. The paint, highly textured, is often palette-knifed on, then glazed to produce luminous effects. Figurative elements tend to be hinted at rather than stated, the body would seem to be present, but latently rather than manifestly. Medek's evolution is strongly paralleled by this, but he is more refined, more of a colourist.

Informal art was officially tolerated, even promoted by the government, and therefore allowed the surrealist artists a platform which they were denied collectively. But changes in the political climate encouraged to risk showing themselves in their true colours.

GROUP UDS 1963 - 1967

The fifth Objekt closed one cycle and opened another. The gradual liberalisation of the regime encouraged the surrealists to re-formulate their activity in the hope that they might achieve a more public expression of their thought. They adopted the name Group (or System) UDS. This title had no meaning, being a group of letters Effenberger saw in a dream. It was intended as a blind, allowing them to explore surrealist perspectives without ever mentioning Surrealism. Although not declaring themselves

as surrealists, they were to affirm their surrealist roots in the catalogue¹ of their 1966 exhibition *Symboly obludnosti* (Symbols of Monstrosity).

The exhibition was held at Galerii D in Prague during October 1966. A slim catalogue with black and white illustrations was published on art paper. It should be remembered that *Symboly obludnosti* was the first real group exhibition since 1947 and although the catalogue is a modest affair in size, its scope is wide enough to state an ambition and an uncompromising stance. Apart from a series of texts in Czech there is also a resume in French, English, German. It announces that:

"The UDS is a conceptual, creative and interpretative system following the dialectical dynamics of symbolic structures in the sphere of concrete irrationality. In this sphere it discerns certain critical functions by means of which the ontological and ideological meanings are juxtaposed to the aesthetic autonomy and the problem of the aesthetics of form."

" It is a system of perception and differentiation which - although it does not represent a uniform and integrative theory - creates at least a communicative plane for the discussions in which the phenomena of concrete irrationality are considered in respect of their authenticity and polemic value, representing their psychological and sociological intentionality, and of the problems manifesting the dependence of the creative process on its interpretation."

"In this sense the UDS system is one of the functions of the surrealist ideology which is understood here in the extent of its atechtonic mental type."

In this curious manner we are given a simultaneously very direct and wholly indirect definition of Surrealism as understood by the Group UDS. If one were unfamiliar with Surrealism, the trail would be a blank until well into the first paragraph, and even then they do not announce that

¹*Symboly obludnosti: Tematicka vystava UDS v Galerii D v Praze, zari az rijen 1966.* (Thematic exhibition UDS at Gallery D Prague September to October 1966.)

they are surrealists, only that their system is in accord with Surrealism. For the more genned up, the mention of concrete irrationality might flash up a warning signal of what is to come.

What is particularly of interest so far is the intimation that UDS is not merely an artistic collective, but a system of philosophical and critical endeavour, which claims to have relevance in the interpreting of social, imaginative and existential levels of existence. Its tone is dry and matter of fact compared to the excited lyricism one would expect from a text by the Paris surrealists. The rest of the paragraph mentions the Zodiac and Object albums and then lists some of the participants in Surrealism of that period.

The next paragraph continues:

"The UDS system is concerned with the investigation of such relations and radiations by means of which the irrationality, concretized in the works of art or in the psychic and social reality, becomes the ferment of critical thought. It follows the problem of inspiration as an impulse to a more or less conscious protest with which the reason opposes, through imagination, the daily, almost selfunderstood monstrosity opening more and more widely the abyss between the miracles of technology and the stupefying emptiness of the spirit, whether it be manifested in the most vulgar manner or covered up by the pseudo-modern eclecticism. It considers this defence as a certain symbolizing process. This method of reacting, which is a sort of inner laughter, is undoubtedly the first testimony to the decontamination of the consciousness."²

Behind the slightly stilted translation it becomes apparent that we are not just witnessing a ferment, such as was seen in the early, heroic, days of Surrealism, but a systematising consciousness is at work, patiently developing themes and relating it in what is, for Surrealism, an

² Ibid.

uncharacteristically sober manner, to the social as well as the imaginative sphere.

The text then goes on to describe the exhibition itself:

"THE SYMBOLS in the D gallery is a thematic study exhibition to verify the critical functions of concrete irrationality, in the contemporary social, psychic, and cultural conditions and to follow the changes of signs and meanings, which also reflect the changes of these psycho-social conditions, in the sphere of surrealism. It is intended to stress all the critical functions of concrete irrationality in their semantic effect."³

"On the first plane of the conception of the exhibition there is encounter of the creation based on concrete irrationality with a few of those pictorial and fonic elements which are probably quite symptomatic of the crude reality of contemporary life inspiring this creation to such forms of protest in which it magnifies the imaginative absurdity and dark humour into critical interventions. It is a new type of resistance and reaction which is not expressed by satire, but by brutal metamorphosis. It is a method of imaginative deformations based on the *principle of analogy*. In the pictures of Karel Teige, Toyen, Vaclav Tikal, Josef Istler, Mikulas Medek, Emila Medkova, Alois Nozicka, Jaroslav Hrstka, and Ivana Spalangova this encounter' with the monstrosities of life has a stimulative function enhancing the development of their systems of signs and symbols, a function which is manifested-contrary to the principle of identity-with analogous projections."⁴

"On the second plane which, however, is of no smaller importance the development of the semantics in the sphere of surrealist expression is outlined. This second plane is concerned with one of the most important problems of the theory and the criticism of art, viz. the extent to which the semantic development is influenced by the character of the conditions of the respective period. These subjects are also dealt with in four soirees forming part of the exhibition."⁵

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

The summary gives us then quite a lot of information as to where the surrealists stand in 1966. We can see how certain developments that first become evident in the *Objects* reach a more concrete expression, but also how themes that run through the whole of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia remain constant, for instance, the concern with language. What is also relevant is that automatism is not mentioned once in this text, while concrete irrationality is constantly mentioned. Moreover, concrete irrationality is granted powers of functioning critically, what can this mean and can it be verified in any way?

Firstly, we should ask what is concrete irrationality? In the context of the present discussion we can look, for example, at a photograph by Medkova. She presents us with an image of a thing that exists in the world of facts, a piece of cloth, a fence, a splatter on a wall, a bale of hay. Upon examination this thing reveals another aspect which convulses the imagination, a spectre of something that, unwilled reaches out from the imagination. It is frozen within the object, it is objectified, having moved from the subjective world into the world of facts and of objects. We can say that it is a hysterical object, and we can look at the host of things that Surrealism has thrown up as proof of concrete irrationality. I have spoken of the parallels between Medkova and Dali for instance, where Dali's slick painting technique gives way to Medkova's brutal depiction of the matter-of-fact, but retaining within it this imaginative realm, the paranoiac-critical. Dali had emphasised the critical component, but his own interpretative mechanisms seem often more obfuscatory than explicatory and far from useful, although undoubtedly, at least in his early work, great fun. The Czechs seem far more concerned with the possibility of critique, and in a far more direct way than early Paris Surrealism, they are apparently able to build on both their own traditions and that of the Paris surrealists and direct it in a far more social way than we are accustomed to thinking of Surrealism. Effenberger had renounced

the lyrical model of Surrealism in favour of a destructive, sarcastic one which "magnifies...imaginative absurdity and dark humour into critical interventions." Maybe we are looking at the world of Swift's "Modest Proposal" in which monstrosity is calmly revealed for what it is and without a single word of condemnation being uttered, is utterly condemned.

How do we recognise that what begins as a non-volitional perception, although unconscious in origin, becomes a critique of the existing order?⁶ By the method of interpretation, by finding analogies between one thing and another. But could not an interpretation be merely arbitrary? Although the surrealists would not deny the *apparent* arbitrariness of an interpretation, they would claim that it derived from an inner necessity from which it derived its authenticity. The equation between a found image and another thing is formally arbitrary, but the need to experience it as a face, an old woman, a doorway, determines that this is the way we see it. An image becomes more or less loaded with significance in ways that are contingent upon both particular and more universal aspects of language. An interpretation may be denied us because we do not have the form of words to give that particular meaning, for example, a pun which exists only in Czech or French. The work of Bosch has been suggested as an example of this, where his fantastic and grotesque imagery, seemingly inexplicable to us except perhaps as a forerunner of surrealist grotesquery, would have been easily understandable to the late medieval Flemish imagination. His work may well be an endless illustration of word-play, now lost to most of us. The interdependence of language and image is highlighted in Ludvik Svab's short film, *L'Autre*

⁶Ignoring for the moment the possibility that a non-volitional perception or utterance may be in itself a critique. For instance, in parapraxis, (the name Freud modestly gave to the Freudian slip) the slip of the tongue reveals that true (though unconscious) opinion or intention that lies behind the consciously intended sense. But even so, it must be subjected to interpretation in order that it reveal its critical content.

Chien, a skit on the Bunuel film, in which a man, instead of slicing into a woman's eye, cuts into a fried egg. But that eye in *Le Chien Andalou* was really a cow's eye and in Czech a fried egg is, colloquially, also a cow's eye.⁷ Without the knowledge of the specific colloquialisms denies the viewer these meanings.

The violation of the identity principle by the analogy principle deprives us of the illusion that things are what they claim to be and reveal them to be baseless. The social order, declaring itself to be successful and just, is revealed as shabby, dishonest, power-hungry corrupt and dominating. Once something is shorn of its mystique whether a person or a system, it loses something of its power. A critique that reveals the regime as a monster, but a very banal monster, not at all a great mythical beast, although it does not in itself destroy its power, reduces two of the sources of its power, one no longer believes in it, and one is less afraid of it. UDS thus reveals itself as an independent Critical Theory, very different in form to that of the Frankfurt School, but with similar aims of revealing the mechanisms of ideology.

But there is also a further dimension, that of creativity itself. We are not treated to displays of ideological didacticism, such as we often find in Brecht, where the purpose of his creativity sometimes seems to be nothing more than to present us with a lesson in an entertaining manner, but in a surrealist work, we find that the critical content is revealed through the creative process. To take a rather later example than those under discussion at present, Svankmajer's *Alice*, although it relates to Svankmajer's childhood and his relation to Carroll's text, is also, particularly in the trial scene, a scarcely concealed critique of

⁷See J.H. Matthews: *The Languages of Surrealism*. University of Missouri Press. Columbia 1986.

totalitarianism. Surrealism therefore seeks to avoid both the irrelevance of "mere" aestheticism and the low mental ceiling and imaginative anorexia of most "committed" art.

Prague Platform to Analogon

I have discussed the renewed contact between the Czech and French surrealists resulting in the tract *Le Plateform de Prague* in chapter two. Between its writing and its publication, Russian forces invaded Czechoslovakia to restore a Soviet idea of order to the errant state. At first the surrealists were left much to their own devices. According to Richardson and Fijalkowski:

"Surprisingly, the invasion had little immediate impact on the group's activities. The authorities made little effort to crack down in the cultural sphere and, at least for the following year, the group were able to function in relative freedom."⁸

During this period they worked on a new magazine, published in 1969; *Analogon*⁹. This substantial, well-produced magazine was not an entirely surrealist affair, they enlisted the collaboration of psychoanalysts and structuralists on to the editorial board, but the mood and direction very clearly was surrealist. The first issue was dedicated to *Crisis of Consciousness*. It contained essays by Effenberger, Dvorsky, Svab, poems by Kral and Ivan Svitak and illustrations by Hrstka, Stejskal, Ivo Medek, Medkova, Marencin and Roman Erben. International contributions included Bounoure, Matta, Camacho, Telemaque and Bedouin. On the back cover was an announcement for the second issue to come out in October. Publication was to be delayed for twenty years.

⁸Richardson, Michael and Fijalkowski, Krzysztof: *Years of Long Days: Surrealism in Czechoslovakia*. In: *Third Text* 36 Autumn 1996.

⁹*Analogon: Surrealismus - Psychoanlysa - Strukturalismus*. no.1 *Krise vedomi*. Cerven 1969

Condemned as the "Trojan Horse of Imperialism" by Prague Radio, the surrealists found that their halcyon period was over. Marencin and Effenberger were both thrown out of their jobs and Effenberger was forced to find work as a night-watchman on a building site. The magazine was repressed and all avenues of public collective expression were closed to them from now on. It was under these circumstances that the surrealists viewed the disintegration of the Paris Group. In conversation, Ludvik Svab spoke to me¹⁰ of the despair felt within the group. Several members of the group, including Kral, Dvorsky and Napravnik had fled to the West. Those remaining were isolated, penned in, decimated. They held meetings in which they discussed whether or not to continue as a group, and eventually decided to do so. The basis of their activity was that delineated by *Le Possible Contre Le Réel*,¹¹ to be based on games of interpretation and a critique of the mechanisms of repression.

The effect of the clamp-down was to bring the surrealists closer together; from now on they functioned as an increasingly close-knit group. Both internal and external circumstances brought them to a sense of collective identity unique within Surrealism.

¹⁰Probably in 1991, I think this was before I had decided to undertake this research.

¹¹Discussed in chapter two. translation reproduced in Appendix C.

CZECHOSLOVAK SURREALISM FROM 1969 TO THE VELVET REVOLUTION AND AFTER

Renewals and Collaborations: *Bulletin de Liaison Surréaliste*

In 1970 the new Paris Group, consisting of Vincent Bounoure, Jean-Louis Bedouin, Jean Benoit, Jorge Camacho, Joyce Mansour and Michel Zimbacca, began to publish a journal; *Bulletin de Liaison Surréaliste*¹ This was intended in part to challenge the glossier publication of Schuster and his friends, *Coupure*, but, more importantly, was to inaugurate the collaboration between the French group and the Czechs. The first issue showed little sign of the Czechoslovak group's existence. A short text by Albert Marencin, a note by Ludvik Svab announcing the publication of *Analogon*, the new Czechoslovak journal and a list of recent publications by Effenberger were the only evidence of this liaison. The clamp-down since *Analogon* had been denounced on Prague Radio made even this information of doubtful value. However, the second issue, dated April 1971, opened with a short article on Surrationalisme by Effenberger, where he considered this term (originated by Bachelard) as the overcoming of the rational and irrational. Alongside the French (Mansour, Bounoure,) were works by Baron and Marencin. The third issue, dated July 1971, had a poem by the independent Czech surrealist Pavel Reznicek, but no other Czechs appear. There was, however, an increased contribution by French and other surrealists, including Jean-Pierre Guillon, Marianne van Hirtum, Francois Leperlier and the Haitian poet Magloire-Saint-Aude. It was not until the fourth issue in December 1971 that a sizeable Czech contribution appeared. It opened with a long article by Effenberger, *Le Sérieux des Jeux* which developed some of the themes of *Le Possible Contre Le Réel*. There were works by Juraj Mojzis, Milan Pasteka and Roman Erben and an introduction to the work of Martin

¹*Bulletin de Liaison Surréaliste 1970-1976*. Re-edition integrale des nos 1-10, Editions Savelli Paris 1977.

Stejskal by Marie Gruger. Stejskal himself contributed a drawing and his metamorphic sequence of a ski-lift into Bellmer's *Poupée*.

From this point the contributions of the Czechoslovak surrealists were a constant feature of the Bulletin. Svankmajer's early tactile experiment *Restaurator* (Repas) gets an airing in the fifth issue and the ninth issue has photographs recording the visit of Bounoure and his wife Micheline to Prague. The same issue contained articles on the paintings of Eva Svankmajerova and Svankmajer's collage sequence *Histoire Naturelle*.

Although *BLS* provides evidence of a far-reaching surrealist activity, connecting other publications and groups and expressing in particular the growing rapport between the Prague and Paris surrealists, it is an insufficient medium to reveal the extent of the activities of the Czechs, much of which remains submerged from view. Although I have seen some of the results of their collective research, I am aware that I have often only scratched the surface. Some aspects of these years are still almost completely unknown to me and would need more detailed research than this current project can bear. However, much can be reconstructed from the group's samizdat publications and the subsequent appearance of much material in the post-Velvet Revolution issues of *Analogon*.

La Civilisation Surréaliste

The final fruit of The *Bulletin de Liaison Surréaliste* was a thick volume published in 1976, *La Civilisation Surréaliste*.² This substantial and, admittedly, rather dry book was, an attempt to sum up the developments in surrealist theory and to trace the extent of Surrealism as an

²ed. Bounoure, Vincent: *La Civilisation Surréaliste*. Payot, Paris 1976.

independent culture. It has contributions by Bounoure and Effenberger, Martin Stejskal and Jan Svankmajer, Jean-Louis Bedouin, Robert Lebel, Robert Guyon, Bernard Caburet, Renaud, Rene Alleau, and Jean Markale, the Celtic scholar and author of *La Femme Celte*.³

As the title of the book suggests, in effect it regards Surrealism to be in effect a separate conception of civilisation, and in part it attempts to enumerate its aspects. The sections of the book deal with History and Surrealism, Language and Communication, Surrealist Exchange, Collective Life, and The Real World. Within these parameters there are discussions on the history of Surrealism, conceptions of language, automatism, Roussel, games, humour, the individual and the group, myth and magic art.

It is clearly a defiant gesture to those who had written off Surrealism, not only claiming that Surrealism had survived, but that it is, in effect a rival conception of civilisation. On the evidence of this book, however, this would be a bit difficult to substantiate, it is not cohesive enough, nor global enough to be anything like definitive. Nevertheless, as a series of discussion papers on a continuing project, it has the virtue of presenting a great deal of thought-provoking material.

Games and Experiments

In 1971 the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group reformulated their activity to foreground play as a key to interpretation. Games of analogy and interpretation had been a constant feature of Surrealism. The growth and development of the ludic in Surrealism deserves more room than can be given here, but it is worth remembering that games were a major source

³Markale, Jean: *Women of the Celts*. Translation of *La Femme Celt*. Translated by A. Mygind, C. Hauch and P. Henry. Gordon Cremonesi, London 1975.

of inspiration, not only to the art and poetry of the surrealists, but added considerably to surrealist theory generally. The Czechoslovak group were to extend play into an active critical tool of interpretation and analogy in which the intensification of collective efforts were to be among the most important aspects.

Although some of their activities were revealed in the *Bulletin de Liaison Surrealiste*, it was not until 1979, with the publication of some material in the Swiss journal *Le La*⁴ that it was possible to gain a real idea of the extent of their collective efforts. *Le La* was a small magazine, published in Geneva, by Gilles Dunant. He gave over two issues of the magazine to the Czechoslovak surrealists. They published both individual works and the results of a collective games of interpretation: *Bonjour monsieur Gauguin*. A series of interpretations, based on the painting by Gauguin, by Stejskal, Effenberger, Svankmajer and Svankmajerova and Andrew Lass lead away from the original image into strange new visions. Stejskal discovers strange new shapes, a head, resembling Alfred Hitchcock, looms out of the bush, a strange woman emerges from the wall. Eva Svankmajerova's version is a fantastic landscape with tree-women, Effenberger collages an arrow and a pair of clogs onto a Prague street and Svankmajer presents a delirium in which trees rise into the air, buildings burn and women arise from a flooded street as a man, apparently not noticing these events, stands reading a newspaper.

All of these publications only partly reveal the extent of the Czechoslovak surrealists activities. From 1971 they had worked on a series of games and internal discussions on Interpretation as a Creative Act, Eroticism, Imaginative Space and Fear. Apart from the publications already discussed, they collaborated on a further journal published by the Paris

⁴*Le La*. nos 11-12 Oct 1980. Geneva.

group, *Surréalisme*,⁵ an exhibition of collage⁶ and an issue of the journal *Change*.⁷ The early eighties gave them few opportunities for publication, but the internal activities continued unabated. Inquiries into poetry, dream, humour and, games, amplified and developed the work of the previous years. As ever, the fluctuating pressure of the regime kept them scarcely visible, even in Czechoslovakia.

Effenberger had suffered a reverse of fortune when he signed Charter 77. According to Richardson and Fijalkowski:

"Although Effenberger was among the initial signatories of Charter 77, his adherence was conditional upon the movement establishing a clear political critique and programme. It immediately became apparent, however, that Charter 77 was nothing but a popular front movement whose sole rationale was opposition to the Stalinist regime and that far from developing a coherent programme, it would actively maintain a broad front of solidarity that would embrace any opposition to the regime, no matter how contradictory or confusionist such opposition might be."⁸

Although no longer a signatory of the Charter, Effenberger was sacked from his job as night-watchman, (the only work he had been able to find after 1970) and for the last years of his life was unemployed.

The Samizdat Volumes - Sphere of Dreams - Metamorphosis of Humour - Reverse of the Mirror

The association with Gilles Dunant was to bear a curious fruit in the shape of three samizdat volumes recording their thematic work on dream, humour and a summing up of their work between 1980 and 1985. Although bearing the imprint of Le La, Geneva, these books were in fact

⁵ *Surréalisme*, 2 issues. Paris 1977.

⁶ *Collage surréaliste en 1978*. Galerie Triskele, Paris 1978.

⁷ *Change* no.25 Paris 1975. Regarding the last three publications, I have been either unable to examine them, or, in the case of *Surréalisme*, too briefly to be able to make any meaningful comment.

⁸ Richardson, Michael and Fijalkowski, Krzysztof: *Years of Long Days: Surrealism in Czechoslovakia*. In: *Third Text* 36 Autumn 1996.

published by the Czechs in Prague. For many years they had a tiny circulation,⁹ even among surrealists, which is a great pity, as they are a fascinating insight into the work of the group.

Sfera snu: The Sphere of Dreams

The first two of these publications are A5 booklets with stapled spines. *Sfera snu*¹⁰ is dedicated to the experiments and discussions of the group on the subject of dreams. It contains dream accounts, analogical images of dreams, theoretical writings, including an essay by Effenberger on the semiology of dream, paintings and photographs. *Illustrovni sen* (Dream illustrations) is a game of interpretation, where dream images are transformed through the process of drawing or, most commonly, collage. They are accompanied by brief written comments. There is also a film scenario by Svankmajer.

Promeny humoru: Metamorphosis of Humour

Promeny humoru¹¹ deals with the various aspects of humour, particularly black humour, the absurd, objective humour, sarcasm, humour in dreams, games, eroticism. A page of "imaginary portraits shows a photograph of a pile of mud by Medkova entitled *Nezval*, the resemblance to the poet is quite startling, it could almost be a rough-hewn sculpture. Effenberger's *Imaginarni portret L.S.* is his ironic vision of his friend Ludvik Svab. It consists of a fragment of a pair of spectacles glued onto a photograph of a rivulet of water. Svab's broad face emerges in cartoon form, once again, quite recognisably. Martin Stejskal provides an

⁹Although copies did circulate. I was able to find a copy of *Sfera snu* in a London bookshop that had bought up the library of the art historian Denys Sutton. I have no idea how it got into his collection.

¹⁰*Sfera snu: Tematicka exposice Surrealisticke skupiny v Ceskoslovensku*. 1983.

¹¹*Promeny humoru: Tematicka exposice Surrealisticke skupiny v Ceskoslovensku*. Le La, Geneva 1984.

extraordinary comic-strip in which strange beings are involved in inexplicable acts.

Opak zrcadla: The Reverse of the Mirror

The third of these samizdat volumes, *Opak zrcadla*,¹² is also the most considerable. It is an anthology on poetry and games. Again there are the theoretical essays, thematic illustrations, a description of a walk through a cave, with drawings by Stejskal, Svankmajer's gestural sculptures, an enquiry on poetry, an essay on concrete irrationality by Effenberger. there are works by earlier surrealists, a poem by Peret, two by Havlicek, Effenberger's *Ma vlast*, an essay by Svab on Havlicek and *Poesii a analogie* by Stejskal.

1985 and 1986 saw the deaths of two of the most important of the group, first Medkova and then Effenberger. Quite apart from their unique value within the group, they also represented a link with the group's heritage, particularly with Teige and the origins of the group, that was now forever breached. Effenberger had effected a renewal of surrealist theory and practice in the most difficult of circumstances. His development of the notion of Surrealism as a negative critique of society had been the starting point for surrealist activities since 1951 and he had been the heart and centre of that activity. Medkova had evolved a vision of the morphology of the given in her photography, that without the use of special effects was able to reveal the imaginative aspects of raw reality. A unique photographer, she influenced other generations of photographers, including Alois Nozicka.

¹²*Opak zrcadla: Antologie tvorby Surrealistické skupiny v Československu 1980-1985. Surrealistické poesie. Le La, Geneva 1985.*

Effenberger's son Jakub, had stayed away from Surrealism, no doubt intimidated by his father's preeminence in the group. After the death of Vratislav he drew closer to the surrealists and became a member of the group. Since then he has become a photographer much influenced by Medkova, but happily, with an original vision that shines through that influence.

Surrealism as a Collective Adventure

In 1986 the group was offered the chance to edit an issue of the Swedish English-language magazine *Dunganon*.¹³ The editor, and Englishman living in Sweden named Tony Pusey had published the three previous issues as an eclectic meeting of friends; surrealists, situationists, and members of the Bauhaus Imaginiste. The fourth issue appeared as Surrealism as a Collectiv (sic) Adventure: Surrealist Group in Czechoslovakia. It is largely a reissue of texts published in the samizdat volumes, but with an introduction by the editors, Frantisek Dryje and Ludvik Svab.

"One of the agonizing snares of surrealism, that "cadavre exquis" which many have for years repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to bury, is its ambiguity. Surrealism can be envisaged as a system of opinion, a movement, a creative approach to reality, an ethical or philosophical category...it all depends on which corner you choose to approach it from...The transformations surrealism has undergone with the passage of time, the exalted tenor of manifestos and proclamations, which flourished in the interwar years, are now giving way to less provocative yet more intense forms of expression detracting in no appreciable way from the message of surrealism."¹⁴

"Surrealism in Czechoslovakia has up to now sought to preserve the continuity of a movement whose most vital prerequisite is - as is obvious - the possibility to communicate. Now attempting to detail this requirement, we are bound to observe that

¹³*Dunganon* 1-4. Örkelljunga, undated but 1980's.

¹⁴ Ibid.

in the 1970's, Czechoslovak surrealism underwent a conspicuous structural transformation. With the concurrent retention of the principle of dialectic negation - as it is crystallized in the previous period - the individuality-collectivity relationship now seems to acquire a new tangible shape. Symptomatic of the process is the entelechy of the surrealist game motif, an element functioning as one of the integrating factors of the intensified pattern of group activity. A game conceived as an imaginative phenomenon makes it possible to give immediate shape and substance to the interactive relationships existing between different levels of creative thought - levels represented, for example, by *analogy* or *interpretation* now receiving thematic coverage in collective activity."¹⁵

A fascinating example of their earlier group activity is the Cabinet of Eroticism, a box made to house the anthology of their researches into eroticism, but extending the project into a series of interpretations through objects of specific "perversions". The term is used here neutrally for unusual sexual preferences, from homosexuality to paedophilia and necrophilia. Svab decided to represent homosexuality as a "plaster cast...but Carrara marble would serve as well...maybe of young Jesus Christ himself...wearing dark glasses, with lips coloured in a provocative manner."¹⁶ Effenberger's contribution is to necrophilia, which he finds arouses "dismay and disgust" is represented by a comb, the eyes of a teddy bear and a miniature tree in the drawer of the cabinet. Stejskal attempts to evoke the "scene of the crime" of paedophilia with hairpins, ribbons, sweets and beetles with the confessions of paedophiles.

In 1988 the surrealists discovered a small surrealist group working in the city of Brno. Not only had they been previously unaware of them, but the Brno group were also unaware of the existence of any other group working in Czechoslovakia. Friendly relations were established and this has led to a fruitful partnership between the two groups, who, while

¹⁵*Dunganon 4* *ibid.*

¹⁶*ibid.*

retaining their respective identities, have worked on many projects together, including *Analogon* and the Brno group's journal *Intervence*.

The Task of Surrealism

By this time, the grip of the communist party was visibly beginning to slack. A single issue of a magazine, *Gambra*¹⁷, was published as samizdat, edited by Alena Nadvornikova and Ivo Purs. members of the group lectured to the students at the Charles University. In talking to the surrealists about this period, I found that they felt they were taking great risks, sure that anew clamp-down would ensue, but history was on their side; at the end of 1989, as is well known, the Eastern Bloc governments, one after the other, collapsed. It was as if the Iron Curtain had, after all, been merely of sand.

The immediate effect for the surrealists was a greatly increased ability to work with surrealists in other countries. The previous year, the young surrealists of the Stockholm Surrealistgruppen had issued an *Inquiry to the Surrealist Groups of the World*¹⁸

asking what they considered the present task of Surrealism to be and recommending the creation of a new International surrealist Bulletin. Replies were received from most existing groups and some looser collectives and individuals. The Czechoslovak surrealist were enthusiastic advocates of the new Bulletin, but in the new political situation they had another priority, their revenge on the old regime perhaps: they were to revive their journal *Analogon*.

¹⁷*Gambra*, 1989. No other publication details available.

¹⁸*Inquiry to the Surrealist Groups of the World 1988-1990*, Stockholm 1990.

Analogon From 1990 to the Present Day

The surrealists found in the radical publishers *Lidovy Noviny* the financial support to produce their journal. Much of their work had remained unpublished for years, and the first few issues were to be a resume of that work. In fact, the first to appear, was the second issue planned in 1969 with some revisions to take in account the long hiatus. The insistence on the absolute continuity of *Analogon*, despite the twenty year gap, was an affirmation of their own continuity. The second issue of *Analogon* was dedicated to "Creation as an unfolding protest."¹⁹ Even the production standards were similar to that of the first issue, and despite the addition of recent material, it has a slightly dated look. The illustrated sections are particularly strong, not just in presenting interesting work, but in their thematic logic. One is able to construct some kind of argument from the illustrations alone. The first page of illustrations consists of three photographs, a black man lying in a street, wounded, perhaps dying, gazing at the camera. A nude model seems to mimic his posture, a sixties happening in which three men rip an animal carcass apart completes the story. The accent of the images throughout is that of bitter sarcasm leavened with lyricism. Stejskal's metamorphosis of the last photograph of Trotsky into a death's head watched by Stalin, a collage by Styrsky where medals sprout from a loaf of bread. Svankmajer contributes an extraordinary sequence of analogical images: illustrations for the Marquis de Sade's *Justine* and *Juliet* are juxtaposed with photographs of the Spartakiada, the mass gymnastic event beloved of the old regime. This had been included in Svankmajer's *Leonardo's Diary* and had contributed to his being banned from film making.

¹⁹Richardson and Fijalkowski, usually reliable, give it as "Creation as an unfolding process" which is certainly logical, but the Czech word is "protestu", which is pretty unequivocal.

The publication of *Analogon* continued, late in 1990 the Czechoslovak Surrealist group exhibited in Paris. This was organised by the Hourglass Association who operated a small press, publishing translations of French surrealist poetry in English and organising exhibitions. This was the first time the Czechoslovaks had been able to organise their own exhibition abroad and the group arrived in Paris *en masse*. Peter Wood, an English surrealist living in Paris, and with Guy Flandre the moving spirit of Hourglass, remembers having to put up many of the visiting surrealists and their spouses in his flat. The exhibition itself was to prove important to the Czechoslovaks, although it did not get the media coverage it deserved, many surrealists from different countries flocked to the exhibition, and they were able to discuss freely with each other for the first time.

In 1991 came an extraordinary opportunity; the surrealists were offered an exhibition at Manes, the modernist arts centre at which the first Surrealist Group of Prague had their inaugural exhibition. Held between November 1991 and January 1992 the Exhibition *Treti Archa* (Third Ark), was a display of force. Like all of their publications, the catalogue²⁰ is arranged thematically, giving some sense of the depth of their investigations. It differs from earlier publications by being glossier and containing colour illustrations. For the first time it becomes apparent what a fine photographer Jakub Effenberger is becoming, Frantisek Dryje's sand and photograph collages are extraordinary, Josef Janda's found readymades are provocative. There are some of Medkova's best photographs, Milan Napravnik's "Inversage" photographs, juxtaposing the image and its reverse to create a new image far exceed in their realisation the simplicity of their means.

²⁰ *Treti Archa 1970 - 1991*. Surrealistická skupina v Československu. 1991.

Despite their new success, the surrealists were finding themselves subject to an adverse reaction. By not identifying with the rather conservative liberalism of the post-Velvet Revolution government, and despite their constant opposition to the old communist regime, they were finding that many people identified them with the bad old days. In fact, of course, they opposed the rampant consumerism that seemed to be devouring Prague whole.

"The central aim of Surrealism continues to be (even despite the political debacle of Marxism) to change the world (Marx) and to change life (Rimbaud). So we have here a definite revolutionary constant. To continue to hold these beliefs in Czechoslovakia means to risk denunciation for "crypto-Communism"..."²¹

The new political situation was to present a problem that would have been impossible under the communists, and its source was within the group itself.

The Fight For Analogon - 1993

With the break-up of Czechoslovakia into two separate states, the surrealists simply renamed themselves The Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group. Despite their general sense of unity, there was an arising situation where the discontent of a minority threatened both the future of Analogon and the group itself. In March 1993 a declaration was circulated to the other surrealist groups and their friends and collaborators revealing a situation that had reached its crisis point. I will quote at length, the first-hand account of this debacle:

"On the 10th of March, 1993, after almost eight months of our unsuccessful attempts to call a meeting of the editorial council of ANALOGON, Jiri Koubek, the editor-in-chief, called together its members to announce shocking news. He said that ANALOGON would henceforth operate under a foundation which "keeps alive"

²¹In: *Interview with Jan Svankmajer; Dark Alchemy: the Films of Jan Svankmajer*, edited by Peter Hames. Flicks Books, Trowbridge 1995.

three or four periodicals in addition to ANALOGON; Koubek therefore becomes ANALOGON's co-publisher and the foundation appoints Milan Napravnik as new executive editor-in-chief. Napravnik then took the floor *at once* and announced that the editorial board appears to him to be something like a board of censors and is therefore disbanded: he said that he would lead the magazine himself and choose his collaborators personally. This action terminated the meeting despite the protests of members of the editorial council that this takeover was an illegal act and, in fact, a shameless robbery: the four protagonists (Koubek, Napravnik, the former secretary and someone who will replace her but who Koubek didn't even bother to introduce) simply left the room with a feeling of a *fait accompli*."²²

"To refresh the memories of more distant friends: The ANALOGON revue was founded in 1969 at the initiative of Vratislav Effenberger and the surrealist group, joining forces with representatives of structuralists and psychoanalysts, groups like the surrealists which had been officially discriminated against up to that time."²³

They explain how Analogon was suppressed and then reappeared after November 1989:

"The editorial council again consisted of members of the surrealist group and representatives of structuralists and psychoanalysts; hermeticists were newly represented. Jan Svankmajer became the head of the editorial council and the surrealist group designated its member Jiri Koubek editor-in-chief...This programme continued more or less easily...What gradually changed, however, was Jiri Koubek's relations to editorial work at ANALOGON and his relations to the surrealist group itself - he ceased going to meetings of the group and neglected supervision over the magazine so that terms were not kept..."²⁴

"Koubek...was more and more consumed by his personal career, especially his political career. His ambitions culminated in his taking his current position in the State Council for radio and TV

²²*Declaration of the Prague Surrealist Group on the current situation of the ANALOGON revue*, March 1993. Circular letter to the International Surrealist Movement.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

Broadcasting, which is supposed to be an independent body; Koubek, however, represents interests of the leading rightist orienting force (ODS) and has carried out these interests in such a manner that already a broadly publicized scandal has resulted. Under these circumstances we decided to exclude him from the surrealist group and we asked him to resign his position as editor-in-chief of ANALOGON, a position to which we had appointed him after all."²⁵

"The current position of Milan Napravnik in the "reconstructed" ANALOGON is by no means a coincidence...The fact is that almost all of Napravnik's initiative directed towards the surrealist group has had a prevailingly destructive character for a long time and has been motivated by his desire to become a dominating influence over the orientation of the group. This will to rule, if not the members of the group, at least the revue, which has been connected with surrealism in Czechoslovakia for more than twenty years, seems certain to now attain its hollow aim."²⁶

"The group and the editorial council have decided to continue ANALOGON with a new publisher..."²⁷

Over the next few months there were continuing arguments, threats and negotiations. Two other ex-members of the group were to rally to Koubek and Napravnik, Petr Kral and Stanislav Dvorsky. Ludvik Svab wrote in a letter to me:

"Koubek is not only using an enervating (sic) tactic of postponing and evasion, but also joined forces with two ex-surrealists of schusterian type, Stanislav Dvorsky and Petr Kral. Napravnik fell off inbetween, it's a very peculiar family of pragmatists, attracted by the respect ANALOGON has gained till now over the other magazines, closing one by one these days - they attacked us in Literarni noviny, claiming their fictive rights, and promising to "liberate ANALOGON from the convulsive proprietors clasp of the surrealist group". We answered by an article entitled "Disinterpretation as the creative act?"...As to Koubek, his case is typical for local situation here: opening of stupefying vistas of

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

joining the "new upper classes" becomes an irresistible temptation for many, and especially for somebody as immature as Koubek. Unfortunately for him, he is very clumsy in this role, and already he is entangled in a broadly publicized bribery scandal. One would be even sorry for him, were he not such a hog."²⁸

It has not been possible to obtain much reliable information of how the situation was resolved. At some point, Koubek relinquished his control of *Analogon* and the group continued to publish. I have not been able to give more than this one-sided account of the matter as I have not been able to consult Koubek or Napravnik. An important factor may have been the changes at about that time at the publishers of *Analogon*, Lidovy noviny. Named after the famous radical newspaper of the twenties, Lidovy noviny had become an important force in publishing in the period immediately after the Velvet Revolution. Apart from the newspaper, they published many of the magazines of all kinds that suddenly appeared in a short-lived euphoria of free expression. There were in fact too many for them all to survive, Lidovy noviny was itself eventually taken over by a Swiss publisher. Koubek could not have moved in the way he did without the approval of the publishers, so I would conclude that they connived in some way at the takeover of *Analogon*.

Since 1993 the group has continued to produce *Analogon* with the publishers Paseka. There have, as yet been no further crises, although *Analogon* may yet fold from financial difficulties. The Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group now has its own web-site²⁹ and surrealist activity has been enhanced by the Brno group, A.I.V.. The latter have produced four issues of their own journal, *Intervence* with a degree of collaboration of the Czech and Slovak Group, so that, for instance, Jakub Effenberger is active in both groups. Beyond the Czech speaking world, they have

²⁸Ludvik Svab: letter to the author, dated 10.7.93.

²⁹<http://www.terminal.cz/surreal>

maintained good relationships with other surrealist groups, particularly the Paris Group. There have been further exhibitions abroad and Svankmajer's films attract an increasing following. It would seem that this examination of Czechoslovakian Surrealism can end on an optimistic note. Perhaps one must be cautious though: when the view is most particularly rosy, one is often nearest the sharpest thorns. The fall of the communist world led to one kind of liberation, that of direct state oppression by terror. The situation in other parts of the Slav-speaking world has, as we know, been far from happy, and the supremacy of the cult of consumerism stupefies much of the affluent world. Resistance to the status quo is often of that of single-issue politics. This carries its own danger, for instance: ecologism is not a self-sufficient ideology, but is rather a "floating signifier" which can attach itself to a fascist ideology as easily as to a democratic one. In an uncertain "postmodern" world in which the tools of critical analysis seem often blunted we may find that the perspectives pursued for so long by surrealism in general, and by the Czechoslovak surrealists in particular, offer us the grinding stone we need to sharpen them on.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to open up some of the underexposed aspects of Surrealism to reveal a picture at variance to many published accounts. Surrealism has been shown to be both more constant and more variable in its expression than has been supposed, and more durable. This is particularly the case in the instance of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia.

Although I have made it clear that my own position in relation to this study is that of one committed to Surrealism, this is not, I hope, a naive cleaving to a doctrine, but rather to the outline of a vision of life that I share with others who still call themselves surrealists, regardless of whether that title is fashionable. I have sought a critical position within Surrealism as well as one of allegiance. I do not, as some surrealists in the past have, claim allegiance to the Communist party or the Fourth International (do either still exist?) but I do feel the need to "transform life - change the world." In the current world situation it is far from clear how we might achieve, not a miraculous Utopia, but at least a world in which, not only a general social condition be greatly improved, but the subjective conditions of humanity also. I mean by this greater mental freedom, the freedom to dream and act upon our dreams. I also see this last point as, not merely a personal, individualist project, but as a collective one of the greatest importance for the future of our culture. The question as to what degree such a project may be realised within the real world may be unanswerable, but it is essential to keep asking - and investigating the possibilities.

For me Surrealism is less a blueprint than a sounding of the depths of an unknown territory, the limits of the possible. The problem remains however: how to demonstrate that it may be of greater relevance than

merely academic study or the enjoyment of art. For the truth is that for a many years Surrealism has been out of the headlines, and its direct influence has dwindled. With the exception of Jan Svankmajer, there is no surrealist currently active in collective activities within the movement who has attained international recognition. Other surrealists, such as the poet Mario Cesariny, enjoy national reputations, but are largely unknown outside their own countries. Surrealism is represented therefore, by people with no more than local influence (if that) and even if its perspectives are accepted, its current chances of making a direct impact on the larger situation is, at present, minimal. Despite this, I would argue that Surrealism offers perspectives for the future, critical and creative, that should not be ignored. This conclusion attempts to draw some of these perspectives together.

Many aspects of Surrealism have been neglected, in some cases deliberately ignored or even repressed, and this study has given an account of some of these aspects, in particular the Surrealist Movement in Czechoslovakia. Needless to say, by concentrating on these aspects, I have had to ignore or pay perfunctory attention to others. In this way I have been an unwilling accomplice of the neglect I have condemned in others. But I knew early on in this research that the subject is too vast for any single account to cover them all adequately. The blanks still need to be filled in, and I can only hope that if I am unable to do so, another will find this research sufficiently interesting to do so.

In order to give some perspective to the material presented in this research I shall briefly discuss Surrealism in relation to Critical Theory, and in relation to Post-Modernism.

Surrealism did not spring fully formed from André Breton's brain. It was the result of a complex interlinking of causes, poetic, political and philosophical, and the attempt to supersede them. If the approach in the early years was more or less instinctive, with the development of Surrealism's original premises the most important development was the interest in dialectics. Dialectics rather than Hegel, although he is among its most important proponents in Western thought, and the single most important influence on Surrealism in this respect, dialectical thinking has other roots and expressions than the Hegelian.

Dialectic has come to seem rather problematic for many people following the collapse of the communist system and its abuse of Marxist dialectical materialism. Dialectic has been used to argue that black is white, that slavery is freedom, that the doctrine of the party is right, even when the evidence of one's eyes contradicts that doctrine. This is in part because too much has been claimed for it and it has been the means of an intellectual closure of gigantic proportions. Surely, if dialectic is to be of any use it must remain a tool for resisting closure rather than effecting it? For Foucault, dialectic is one more form of dominance, and therefore he rejects it. This seems to me to be a confusion of the *nature* of dialectic with a particular *application* of it. I would argue that dialectical thinking is, in itself neutral, and it is always the application that matters.

If we can not speak of a final dialectical resolution, but rather of a dialectical progression, nevertheless in order to effect a progression one must have a degree of resolution. However this resolution is not total, something always escapes, there is always an excess. Resolution therefore is partial and local, the microcosm perhaps, and progression the macrocosm. But even this macrocosm is not the actual totality of everything, dialectic has its limits. It is a useful conceptualisation of things and ideas, but should not be confused with their actuality. For

instance; it might be thought useful to conceptualise nature in this way, but this does not mean that nature itself is caught up in the great tide of dialectic, only that its processes can be fruitfully examined in its light.

Analogy is the means by which the dialectic between the imagined and real is expressed, the mediating force within dialectic. Although present in Surrealism from the very start, analogy was increasingly foregrounded as a term and as a concept in the post-war period. We find Breton borrowing from Constantin Brunner's work the concept of the *Analogon*, but in some ways Brunner's meaning of the term is reversed. Brunner saw analogy as an essentially negative force, as superstition. He conceived of it as the finding of imaginary likenesses where in reality none existed.¹

From this rather negative definition, Breton was able to extract a positive message. For the surrealists analogy is the basis of poetic thinking, and expresses our subjectivity with admirable precision and clarity, and finding ourselves in a world of disparate resemblances, where we find, for instance, the stag-beetle, we do not have to be hoodwinked by the analogy, it is less a final identity than an affirmation of subjectivity at work in the world. If Brunner saw analogy as a false, superstitious, linking of two realms, Breton clearly saw it as a true linking, here was the connective material that he had spoken of in *Les Vases Communicants* between the waking and dreaming worlds. A possible schema of these concepts might read:

Science - concrete objectivity

¹This is not entirely fair to Brunner who was quick to see the working of analogical thinking in poetic and fictional works. His writings are difficult to get hold of, but a brief article on Brunner and a letter of his on Jonathan Swift may be found in *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, no.3 Chicago 1976.

Analogy - concrete subjectivity

Spirit - abstract subjectivity.

(The term spirit is used here instead of mind, as the latter can be used to mean only the intellect, and something broader is meant, but I intend no other-worldly associations). Obviously this is extremely schematic and does not account for the richness of the operations and interconnections between these realms, but it does show how apparently opposed forms of experience might be reconciled. We can also see that this format is relevant to specifically Hegelian ideas of the realisation of mind. If I am reading into this strand of ideas more than Breton ever put into it (I think he only mentions Brunner twice, in *Surrealism and Painting*,²) I am, nevertheless, staying well within the theoretical remit of Surrealism and the implications of Breton's thought.

Clearly the three realms, the scientific, the analogical and the mental, do not exist in a pure state or in isolation, but in constant interaction with each other. Science, however much it may make claims to total objectivity, is always perceived by a subject, subjectivity is present, if not in the actual data at least in their presentation and how their meanings are understood by a subject. Equally, subjectivity is dependent upon exterior factors to a degree and is never purely subjective. Analogy, being a crossing over between these realms, partakes of them both, and consequently can make no claims to autonomy.

In psychoanalysis the unconscious is, by definition, out of reach of consciousness. If it comes within our reach it ceases to be unconscious, becomes an object of consciousness. Many commentators who have

²Breton, André: *René Magritte's Breadth of Vision*. In: Breton, A: *Surrealism and Painting*. Trans. Simon Watson Taylor. 1972.

thought that Surrealism has sought to realise psychoanalysis in art have not only failed to understand Surrealism as a whole, but its particular relation to psychoanalysis. Freud places the ego within an antagonistic relationship to the unconscious. It is buffeted by the desires of the id and the moral demands of the superego. Although Breton seems not to have doubted that this relation exists, his aims for Surrealism as stated in the manifestos are clearly concerned with overcoming this antagonism. For Freud this can only be done by increasing ego consciousness, by transforming our acute misery into ordinary misery, hardly the exalted aim of the surrealists, who, while desiring an increase of consciousness, refuse the reductive side of Freudianism.

Mental freedom can not be fully achieved in a world of social and political restriction. Without access to its full expression in the social world it must be somewhat illusory, or at best its reality is a small area of freedom snatched from that restrictive regime and enjoyed in private. At any rate, unless there is the maximum of freedom available in the social sphere, true intersubjective communication is at best restricted and distorted, at worst, impossible. At the same time, to privilege the social struggle against the drive for inner freedom has invariably led to the reinforcement of the repressive mechanisms the struggle was meant to abolish.

Although this was recognised, even in early Surrealism, there was no clearly seen path at that time. We know that the majority of the surrealists opted for the Communist Party in the 1920's and exited it in the 30's. Their hopes of a transformation of Communism were not to be realised. This move was not, however, anything like unanimous. Wolfgang Paalen was not a Marxist, nor an Hegelian, although he had a prominent position within Surrealism and contributed more than artistic

theory to the movement. Paalen is not an isolated figure in this respect, but represents a particular position within Surrealism. Peret's Trotskyism represents another. The current Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group have far more interest in the critical dimensions of the Marxist tradition than in that of activism, not because they have come to support the status quo, but because they have come to believe that the idea of revolution has to be re-thought from first principles.

Bearing these points in mind, it is now possible to proceed to a brief survey of Surrealism's relation to some of the other strands of modern and post-modern thought in order to see where it might be located today.

A Double-headed Serpent? Surrealism and Critical Theory

The following is, at best, a tentative sketch of some patterns, influences, parallels and divergences between some of the critical theorists and the surrealists. It is by no means definitive. I am not aware of any considerable research into this field, except the specific studies mentioned below.

Walter Benjamin

Surrealism's influence on Benjamin was largely through the medium of two books, Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* and Breton's *Nadja*. Although he repaid his debt to them in his essay *Surrealism*,³ the influence can be most clearly discerned in the formative stages of his *Passagenwerk*, or Arcades project, which was to dominate his later work. Although the Arcades project was to become an unmanageable and unpublishable

³In: Benjamin, Walter: *One-way Street*. NLB London 1979

mass of data rather than a book,⁴ we have Susan Buck-Morss' account in *The Dialectic of Seeing*⁵ of the growth and many directions of the Project to guide us.

Benjamin grasped that the subjective accounts of the city given by the surrealists, particularly Aragon and Breton, allowed him a different view of the history of Modernism, one that combined the growth of the modern imagination with the development of the material processes and forms of Modernism. Tracing the birth of the modern to the Paris Arcades in the early Nineteenth century (as much as the industrial revolution, or even to the political revolutions in the later eighteenth century,) Benjamin saw the arcades as frozen archaic ur-images of the modern that can be traced out into other manifestations from the Great exhibition to Baron Haussmann's construction of the Boulevards.

The French Revolution, and the invention of mass industry are clearly preconditions of the birth of modernism, but in themselves partake too much of the past to be wholly modern. Early modernism still bears the traumatic mark of the ancient. The transformation of the classical and traditional into new forms and new materials is paralleled by the transformation of ideas. The Nineteenth Century saw the birth of Marxism and of Darwin's theory of evolution, both of which change our view of human nature. From this point we have an apparently scientific reason for considering man as a material being. But if they are points of departure for us, they were points of arrival for the early socialists and evolutionists who could only fantasize their theories into being.

⁴Although in fact it has now been published, at least substantially so: Benjamin, Walter: *Das Passagen-werk*. 2 vols. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983. Needless to say, my references are taken from Buck-Morss and Cohen rather than the original German.

⁵Buck-Morss, Susan: *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. MIT Press Cambridge Mass.1991.

The arcades are the birthplace of High Capitalism. Perhaps this is a symbolic birth rather than actual, the womb-like nature of the arcades combined with their openness to consumerism. By the time Aragon describes the Passage de L'Opera the arcades are redundant, the focus of nostalgia for the childhood of capitalism and modernism.

Later on, Benjamin, influenced by Adorno and Brecht, sought to remove the surrealist elements in the project, relying on more obviously materialist strategies. What he kept were the stylistic elements of collage and of shock. Margaret Cohen's book *Profane Illumination*⁶ attempts to chart the interconnections and parallels between Benjamin's project and the surrealists. She particularly considers Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* as connective material between these communicating vessels, and coins the phrase "Gothic Marxism". Cohen's notion of Gothic Marxism is:

"...the first efforts to appropriate Freud's seminal twentieth-century exploration of the irrational for Marxist thought."⁷

Its form can perhaps be most conveniently described as the materialist journey through the romantic imagination:

"...the trajectory of Breton's *Nadja* is moreover among the promenade routes that the Guide to Mysterious Paris recommends."⁸

Michael Löwy, a member of the current Paris Surrealist Group, takes issue with some of Cohen's opinions:

"It seems to me, however, that the author is on the wrong track when she describes the Marxism of both Benjamin and the surrealists as a Marxist genealogy that is fascinated by the irrational aspects of the social process; as a genealogy that tries to study how the irrational penetrates existing society, and dreams of using the irrational to bring about social change. The concept of the "irrational" is absent from the writings of both

⁶Cohen, Margaret: *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1993.

⁷Cohen, Margaret: *Profane Illumination*: op.cit.

⁸Cohen. p.3.

Walter Benjamin and Breton; it relates to a rationalist world-view inherited from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which is the very thing both our authors are trying to *transcend* (in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*)."⁹

However, Löwy considers the phrase "Gothic Marxism" as:

"...illuminating, provided that we understand the adjective in its romantic sense of a fascination with enchantment and the marvellous, as well as with the spellbound aspects of pre-modern cultures and societies. We find references to the English Gothic novel of the eighteenth century and certain German romantics of the nineteenth at the heart of the work of both Breton and Benjamin."¹⁰

Benjamin's attitude towards Surrealism was generally sympathetic; his essay *Surrealism*¹¹ shows a degree of both understanding and enthusiasm. To a degree, he even "talks surrealist" - his language is one of shifting distance and focus, sometimes descriptive, sometimes almost as if speaking from the inside. His sense of empathy with Surrealism had its limits, however, and Cohen shows his aphorisms in *One-Way-Street* as being in part a critique of the surrealists:

"But while multiple features of *One-Way-Street* recall surrealism, a polemic against the movement also runs through the text. From its second fragment Benjamin defiantly criticizes those who seek to efface the boundary between dream and waking life. "For only from the far bank, from broad daylight, may dream be recalled with impunity..."¹²

Theodore Adorno

Benjamin's growing distance from Surrealism was influenced to a great degree by his friendship with Theodore Adorno, whose remarks to Benjamin often warn against a too close approximation to Surrealism.

⁹Löwy, Michael: *Walter Benjamin and Surrealism: the Story of a Revolutionary Spell*. In: *Radical Philosophy* 80. Nov/Dec 1996.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Benjamin, Walter: *Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*. In: *One-Way-Street*. NLB London 1979.

¹²Ibid. p.174.

Buck-Morss tells us that Adorno was alarmed at the "Surrealist-inspired, "wide-eyed presentation of mere facts""¹³ in the *Passagenwerk*, but that Benjamin had consciously placed himself in close proximity to the surrealists. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno criticises the surrealists because they:

"...rejected art without being able to shake it off completely. It was better, they proclaimed, to have no art at all than to have false art. Surrealism, however, was done in by its illusory belief in an absolutely subjective being-for-itself in the domain of art. It finds no other way of expressing the strangeness of the estranged than that of resorting to itself."¹⁴

Adorno comes a bit unstuck here, as Surrealism had never sought to reject art. As for the "absolutely subjective being-for itself in the domain of art" that seems to be, at least, contentious, and certainly not a universal within Surrealism. The urge towards the subjective pole, certainly very powerful in surrealist art, seeks not the simple being for itself, but the collision with otherness, this is where the mental spark is to be found at its brightest. In fact, Adorno recognises something of this:

"Surrealism once undertook to revolt against the fetishistic segregation of art in a sphere unto itself. But surrealism moved beyond pure protest and became art. Unlike Andre Masson, who valued the quality of peinture more highly than protest, some surrealist painters achieved a balance between scandal and social reception. In the end, somebody like Salvador Dali was able to become a kind of jet-set painter...Modern currents such as surrealism are predestined to align themselves with the world as soon as the surrealist law of form is damaged by the sudden invasion of content: that world finds unsublimated materials easy to get along with, for they have no critical bite."¹⁵

As it stands this statement seems to contradict the former and one needs to see it in its context. Adorno seems to be accusing Surrealism of having fallen away from its high ideals and lapsed into an art-for-art's-sake of pure formalism. In the case of Masson, in his later, post-surrealist, work there is a measure of truth in this, and Dali certainly did

¹³Buck-Morss: *ibid.* p.228.

¹⁴Adorno, T.W.: *Aesthetic Theory*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1984.

¹⁵*Ibid.* p.325.

become a "jet-set painter" again, after leaving Surrealism. Adorno does not tell us what the "surrealist law of form" is, and the concept seems opposed to any surrealist conception of what art should, or could be. In fact, surrealist art has often been accused of being concerned with content at the expense of form. The opposition to a formalist concept of art is so fundamental to Surrealism that it is hard to see how Adorno could have arrived at this judgement.

Even the most formally accomplished surrealist work of art has as its aim, not "significant form" nor aesthetic beauty, but the possibility of mapping out something previously unknown. This does not rule out formal elements nor the beautiful, but they are strategies as are formlessness and ugliness, not defining principles. Similarly, in relation to subjectivity, we can look at, say Breton's *L'amour Fou* and see in it a progression from individual subjectivity to intersubjectivity and towards, if not objectivity, at least the social. Breton begins with his desire for love, diverts us towards the fetishistic substitutions for love (the slipper/spoon) or of fear (the mask). When the beloved woman arrives there is mutual recognition so that the adventure is no longer that of an isolated subjectivity, but of subjectivity shared. Later, this shared subjectivity is seen to break down and reestablish itself in a walk along a beach. Finally, the arrival of his daughter Aube leads Breton to consider the social world, specifically the children of the Spanish Civil War for whom he expresses compassion.

It is true that the subjective is foregrounded in Surrealism, but this is typically embodied as the subjective invasion of the objective. The dream image or the surrealist object function as the mediator between the two worlds and therefore, in intent at any rate, should not be seen as merely subjective.

Adorno personifies surrealist visual style as being typically montage and unexpected juxtaposition and finds this insufficiently dialectical. Although these are elements present in a great many surrealist works they are not universally present, and this is clear in the work of, say, Matta, in which visual unity is preserved.

If Adorno was often scathing about Surrealism, many surrealists have been appreciative of Adorno. The main problem for them seems to be his overwhelming negativity, not just in the technical sense of his "negative dialectic" but negative in the sense of being unable to find any point of affirmation valid. For Adorno there seems to be no chance of affirmation, and this brings his thinking to a dead end. For Vratislav Effenberger, the idea of a negative critique was essential to the continued validity of Surrealism, and he did much to advance surrealist ideas of "non-identity."

If surrealists seek a negative dialectic it must be balanced by its positive. The difficulty of finding a point of affirmation is not lost to them, but neither is its necessity.

Herbert Marcuse: Dialectic and Poetic Language Meet?

It is not surprising that there has been a complicated and often complementary relationship between the work of Herbert Marcuse and Surrealism. The affirmative mood of *Eros and Civilisation* is in key with Surrealism's positive, utopian aspects, that of *One-Dimensional Man* with Surrealism's view of the crisis in our culture. In fact, during the sixties, Marcuse became a reference point for many surrealists, and, as we have seen, was referred to in Prague Platform. During the seventies Marcuse

was in contact with the Chicago Surrealist Group, and Franklin Rosemont has published his *Letters to Chicago Surrealists*.¹⁶

While stating his admiration for Marcuse, Rosemont seems unsure as to how much he ever knew or understood about Surrealism. He is almost simultaneously full of insights and confusions. Rosemont quotes Marcuse's *Counter Revolution and Revolt*:

"...the dream must become a force of changing rather than dreaming the human condition: it must become a political force. If art dreams of liberation within the spectrum of history, dream realization must be possible - the surrealist program must still be valid."¹⁷

Elsewhere, Rosemont quotes approvingly a passage in *Reason and Revolution*:

"Dialectic and poetic language meet...on common ground. The common element is the search for an "authentic language" - the language of negation as the Great Refusal to accept the rules of a game in which the dice are loaded. The absent must be made present because the greater part of the truth is in that which is absent...Poetry is thus the power "to deny the things" - the power which Hegel claims, paradoxically, for all authentic thought."¹⁸

Which is certainly in key with much surrealist thinking.

Sometimes Marcuse seems to make the common mistake of considering Surrealism as being an art movement. It is easy to understand why, as most accounts of Surrealism concentrate on the art and poetry produced by surrealists. It is, of course, difficult to separate these products from the corpus of surrealist ideas, the two are inextricably intertwined. The present study has had to rely heavily on the paintings, films, photographs, and poems by surrealists in order to make its argument.

¹⁶Marcuse, Herbert. *Letters to Chicago Surrealists* in: *Arsenal* No.4 Chicago 1989.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

Marcuse at least understands that there is an ambition to go beyond works of art that surrealists never abandoned. Rosemont and the Chicago surrealists were criticised for relying heavily on Marcuse's thought. The distance between it and Surrealism needs to be emphasised, but also the fascinating parallels and convergences.

The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Apocalypse of Susan Buck-Morss

Susan Buck-Morss is among the most important historians of the Frankfurt School and the author of *The Dialectics of Seeing*.¹⁹ An essay she published in the magazine *October*²⁰ Here she reflects upon the situation since the end of the Cold War. She looks back at Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* and at the end of modernism:

"A certain kind of dreamworld has dissipated, one that dominated the political imagination in both East and West for most of the century. To be sure, in the East the dream-form was a utopia of production, whereas in the West it was a utopia of consumption. But both shared intimately the optimistic vision of a mass society beyond material scarcity, and the collective, social goal, through massive industrial construction, of transforming the natural world."²¹

She shows how Fordism was effectively the common method of both societies, and sees the decline of Fordism as part of a process of this dream's dissipation. Radical workers movements become the victim of robotisation, the substance of the dream declines, leaving the empty form of the dream in the cultural products of that society. "They reproduce the dream-image, but reject the dream"²² She is attacking postmodern as refusing to either dream or wake up:

¹⁹Buck-Morss, Susan: *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 1089.

²⁰Buck-Morss, Susan: *The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe*. In: *October* 73. Summer 1995.

²¹Ibid, p.3.

²²Ibid, p.26.

"Utopian fantasy is quarantined, contained within the boundaries of theme parks and tourist preserves, like some ecologically threatened but nonetheless dangerous animal. When it is allowed expression at all, it takes on the look of children's toys - even in the case of sophisticated objects - as if to prove that utopias of social space can no longer be taken seriously; they are commercial ventures, nothing more. Benjamin insisted: "We must wake up from the world of our parent"(V, 1048). But what can be demanded of a new generation, if its parents never dream at all?"²³

Compare this last statement to one of Svankmajer's:

"We have forgotten this recommendation of Lichtenberg's (to attend to our dreams) and we pay dearly for it. Dream, this natural well of imagination, is consistently buried and the vacant space is occupied by absurdity which is produced large-scale by our "scientific, rational systems". If we do not begin once more to tell fairy tales and ghost stories before we go to sleep in the evening, and recount our dreams after we wake up in the morning, nothing can be expected from our current civilization"²⁴

The resemblance is not entirely coincidental. What they both seem to look towards is the importance of both the dream and its double, awakening. I would assume that they would both agree that the dream can no longer be a source of blind belief, but it must be transparent. Awakening without the dream is to cut oneself off from the sources of inspiration. Buck-Morss frequently refers to Benjamin's concept of phantasmagoria. This seems to have a similar meaning to Baudrillard's hyperreality and Debord's Spectacle. It is neither dream nor awakening, but the stupefaction of social life.

Postmodernism - The Plague of Indifference

²³Ibid. p.26.

²⁴ Svankmajer, Jan: In: *Jan Svankmajer Transmutation of the Senses*. Edice Detail Prague 1995.

Frankly, this is not an assessment of postmodern writers, but a stab at the parody of their thought, the glitzy bubble of PoMo. At one level, the arrival of Postmodernism looks a bit like the unannounced appearance of a hitherto unknown bastard son to the surrealists. The work of many of the writers commonly identified as postmodernist certainly bears the mark of surrealist influence, often at one remove and in distorted forms. It can also be said that postmodernists often reflect back the distorted image of Surrealism, witness the references by Baudrillard fed through Featherstone in the introduction.

One of the problems in discussing the postmodernists is that of identifying who they are. It is not a clearly defined movement, but, as Lyotard put it, a mood. This mood is so widely disseminated, so diffused, that one can, perhaps with a little jiggery-pokery, make out that almost anybody is a postmodernist or prefigures Postmodernism. My objection to the looseness of Whitney Chadwick's parameters for the discussion of women in relation to Surrealism seems not to apply to Postmodernism, the postmodern is what you want to make it.

Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge the influence of Gherasim Luca on their *AntiOedipus*²⁵, Foucault derives, in part, from Bataille and Artaud, Baudrillard's debt to the situationists is revealed, and they in turn derive substantially from Surrealism. The opening up of possibilities first broached by Surrealism would be welcomed, even if in partial form, except that the success of postmodern thought in the public sphere has quickly become bastardised. We are faced with the phenomenon of PoMo, a sort of postmodernism-lite.

²⁵Deleuze and Guattari: *AntiOedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Athlone Press, London 1984.

PoMo is a taste-free, ready-digested parody of postmodern thought for the thoughtless. Whatever the shortcomings of Lyotard, Foucault etc. they do think, but PoMo is not about thinking, but about style. It is the extreme of formalism without substance. It is rather like that popularisation of Existentialism where all you needed to become an existentialist was black clothes, Gauloises and a table at a cafe. Irony, one of the great weapons of criticism, becomes defused, tame, the mere arching of the eyebrow to show one is detached from the rubbish one consumes uncritically. All distinctions become blurred, clarity is lost. Worst of all, the capacity for invention seems to be emasculated. The typical postmodern building is a modernist office block with the addition of doric columns. No sense of integration or of reinventing the mode, just their juxtaposition and empty reiteration. Everything has already been said.

Among the immediate causes for the success of the postmodern was, no doubt, the success of the Thatcher-Reagan social/economic model in the eighties and the fall of post-Stalinist Communism. The Thatcherite right managed to equate democracy with capitalism and the power of the consumer, little regarding the rights of those without the spending power to buy democratic rights. When the rotten structures of the Eastern Bloc fell there was as much thirst for Coca-Cola as there was for freedom and the victory of free market capitalism seemed total.

What in fact seems to have happened is that, without its communist shadow, capitalism entered a crisis of confidence. The energy of the eighties seemed to peter out and the particular contradictions of that ideology became increasingly obvious. Perhaps most importantly the example of China makes it obvious that equating spending power with political freedom is fallacious. Capitalism can flourish just as happily in a

dictatorship as in a democracy, a degree of consumer choice is not the same as real political freedom.

What becomes more obvious is that both systems were blind to the possible virtues of the other. Whether we regard stalinist Russia as having been a genuine worker's state turned rotten or as innately so, it is impossible to avoid the fact that it repressed human freedom and individuality. The collectivisation of everything, being bureaucratically enforced from above, failed because it had no reason to succeed. It was wrong on every level, personal, political, social, economically. Its opposite, the western ideal of individualism was subsumed in corporate culture. Only the boss could be an individual.

If at one level Marx's prediction of monopoly capitalism seems to be becoming true (only after the destruction of the system set up in his name) the postmodern phenomenon seems to contradict this. It is the fraying of the social fabric until it reaches the point of dissolution. The social realm becomes a kind of void in which one's desires return as a diminished echo. If I feel obliged to be scathing at one level about postmodernism, I do see in this elements of something promising. refusal by avoidance, single-issue radicalism a thousand tiny rebellions, even if based on wholly false premises, all at least assure us that dissent is still there. The problem is, as always, how to bring these elements together as something like a coherent vision for a common future.

The first problem is the contamination of language. As the surrealists pointed out in the *Prague Platform*, revolutionary language becomes repressive language with surprising ease.²⁶ It can even be bent back so

²⁶Compare with Zizek: "Ernesto Laclau was right to remark that it is language which is, in an unheard-of sense, a "Stalinist phenomenon." The Stalinist ritual, the

that revolutionary rhetoric can serve openly conservative ends, as Thatcherism showed. An awareness of language and how it can be made to serve any ideology is, more than ever, essential to a theory of human freedom, and more, to its practice. The second is the lack of an existing coherent social base for any radical venture. The situation is too confused, with too many variables to bring all the elements together as a practical programme for revolution. The third is a question about revolution itself. What now should be its form, is it even desirable? Given the failure of Marxism-Leninism it is hardly sufficient to just try the old formula again. Crowds storming the palaces, capitalist, cops and priests strung up on lamp posts, forgetting that the old revolutionary is the new cop, priest, even capitalist can hardly be said to be the most constructive programme for a new society, we should know better.

Before we can envisage the form of a new society we must be able to make some more searching critique of the existing one, and a basis for its refusal. And this is where I consider Surrealism to be of some value. Although early Surrealism rushed towards its realisation with blithe enthusiasm just a little too naively, it becomes clear that a more considered model of surrealist endeavour emerged as the movement and its participants matured. This study has attempted to show the relevance, imaginative power and critical vision of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia, and it is this that might hold a key to a more general surrealist renewal that might fuel the critique that seems the necessary prerequisite to going beyond the post-modern impasse.

empty flattery which "holds together the community, the neutral voice, totally freed of all "psychological" remnants, which pronounces the "confessions" in the staged political processes - they realize, in the purest form to date, a dimension which is probably essential to language as such." (Zizek 1989.). But if the surrealists are right, along with that repressive, empty formality of language, must come, at the very least, the possibility of liberatory language which all those "magical experiments" with language are intended to reveal. The question must be posed though, how do we tell one from the other?

Vratislav Effenberger's essay *The Raw Cruelty of Life and the Cynicism of Fantasy*²⁷ is one of the very few of his works to have appeared in English, and is probably the most considerable of his essays to have done so. Although it is in part concerned with his own creativity, it was originally published as a preface to a volume of his plays, it is also the best available account of his negative critique, offering not only that negation, but also the possibility, however distant, of something more positive. To sum up the account of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia I will quote extensively from this essay so that Effenberger may speak for himself.

He opens with the statement "The *no* of negation is *not* negativism:" and quotes Artaud's *In Utter Darkness*.

The main body of the essay begins:

"At the threshold of the atomic and cybernetic age, from the moment when all hope for a religious, political, social, or psychological integration of humanity began to fade, a pervasive disintegration of functional logic began its advance - and form replaced function."

The process of formalisation is one in which the empty label replaces the actual thing, man is "forced to live *formally*, with only a *formal* power to make decisions" and this catastrophe is made worse by:

"...consequences inherent in the levelling process of formalization, which numbs man without granting him the ultimate "blessing" of utter imbecility."

Effenberger's target is consumer society, and he does not exclude the communist countries:

"Consumer society, whether advanced or backward...is perpetuated in the form of mass-produced, earnest little souls devoid of individual personality...A mind that is kneaded from

²⁷Effenberger, Vratislav: *The Raw Cruelty of Life and the Cynicism of Fantasy*. In: *Cross Currents* 6 (1987). Originally published as the introduction to the volume of his farces *Surovost zivota a cynismus fantasie* under the title *Negace negace neni negativismus* (The No of Negation is not Negativity).

early childhood into amorphous shapelessness by the mass media is increasingly cramped and stunted in its capacity for action."

Effenberger reiterates constantly that form replaces function throughout the opening paragraphs, trying to drive home the importance of this concept:

"Form replaces function: the ways in which life expresses itself have lost their content, and therefore the logic that brought them into being. They have become absurd, and their absurdity is full of objective humor, humor that is neither abstract nor satirical, since it springs from the depths of a reality that has turned sour."

In this sour reality, where quality is transformed into quantity "producing only empty boxes that life cannot hope to fill" Effenberger turns to the imagination.

The second section of the essay *The Cynicism of Fantasy*, looks at imagination as a weapon:

"Imagination, however, is only imagination when it pierces the artificial wrapping in which rationalist formalization has packaged reality...Imagination does not mean turning away from reality, but its antithesis: reaching through to the dynamic core of reality. Imagination is not irrational; it simply liberates reason from the bonds of servitude to the status quo, freeing it for service to the potential fulfilment of man's repressed capacities."

Imagination is armed with the "most effective and invincible weapon of all: humour."

According to Effenberger, imaginative humour emerges from the "conflict between the human mind and a rationalized, formalized and petrified reality", but this does not mean that "it can be nothing more than an expression of defeatism and negation, offering nothing but denial and rejection of the status quo." He makes it clear that it is not possible to "take a stand *against* something and not stand *for* something, even if

that "something" cannot be immediately and clearly formulated". He claims that:

"Like all imaginative creation, imaginative humour is governed by two principles contradictory in nature and somatically determined: the principles of *identity* and *analogy*...The extreme instance of identity is caricature, which lacks meaning without an obvious target. In Hacek's *Svejk* this element is combined with analogy, because the author wants to deal with more general, if no less concrete forms of human stupidity...The highest and most involute form of this principle of identity can be found in works such as the *Guernica* of Picasso, or Dali's *Premonition of Civil War*. Here the obvious use of allegory places these works in the domain of analogy, manifest in the eruptive symbolism of the pictures."

But these works differ considerably from the "amazing effectiveness of Jarry's *Ubu* or Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare*." In these works Effenberger finds it impossible to decipher a specific political or ideological lesson, but:

"...the less they resemble monumental allegory, which localizes and petrifies, and the less they are bound to rationalist conventions by the principle of identity, the more effective and concrete they are in a psychological and social sense. This kind of concrete expression, which strikes deeper into the substrata of the psycho-social context, deeper than the principle of identity can reach, is associated in the history of modern art with a tendency toward universalistic expression, leading in turn to the three-dimensional objectivization and realization of imaginative events."

For Effenberger Surrealism:

"...opened up this road in all its breadth and depth, although it had existed latently before. It is the road peret had followed in his verse, plays and scenarios, Aragon and Crevel in their novels, Dali in his paranoiac critical method: it is the road of surrealist experiments with the imagination, however differentiated the forms it has taken and the goals it has pursued during the past half century may be. Over and over Breton's words are confirmed anew: that the most fantastic thing about the fantastic is the reality in it, and that the imagination must necessarily tend towards the real to bring greater freedom to reality."

Effenberger's plays "bear the mark of this predicament; in them the raw cruelty of life meets the cynicism of fantasy." They are no more than illustrations of "the death throes of the civilization in which they were born."

In the third section, *Surrealist Criticism*, Effenberger sketches an account of his discover of Surrealism in the early forties. From the start, as we have already seen, his view was critical:

"There was also a spiritual problem here regarding the prospect of revolution and progress, which at that time of impending catastrophe seemed illusory. Breton thought salvation could be found in woman, Teige tried to detect the silhouette of a classless society on the far horizon of scientific progress. Nevertheless, beneath these utopian gestures which really sprang from despair, the Surrealist conception of the imagination lived on..."

"I was not willing to accept the doctrine of the trinity of freedom, love, and poetry. This utopian slogan would only submerge whatever was still on fire in Surrealism...The irrationality I found in them was different; the product of decadent rationality, it was replete with so much objective humour that one merely had to push it before a camera or onto a stage, and the rationalist shell shattered and set free a flame of purifying satire." However, the "rationalistic shell had to be preserved in some analogical form...this shell was provided by the dramatic form itself, a form destined to be torpedoed by whatever had gone wrong with rationalism."

Effenberger says his early plays were not strictly surrealist, do not depend on automatism, nor precisely on the inner model - "the more or less established imaginative whole residing at the heart of a work of art." The plays were closest to the principle of collage, but as they develop they draw closer to automatism and the inner model, the association of

ideas is under attack "by unrestrained playfulness, causing a raw and cruel reality to assume grotesque forms."

This playfulness is "foregrounded in the moment of disgust" which for him contains a positive element: "It enables us to see the limits of the infinite in the moment, to glimpse eternity and a single second in a flash, in one tremor."

From now on there is a shift towards the positive values of Surrealism and he paraphrases Breton:

"When Breton said in his *Second Manifesto* that Surrealism is most appropriately placed at the point where destruction and construction meet, he was not departing one iota from the eternal truth, "The spirit of negation is a creative spirit"...It is only in the spirit of this negation of the negation that the contours of values begin to emerge, although they cannot be positively defined yet. Freedom will not be freedom until all forms and varieties of nonfreedom have been clearly distinguished, as well as everything that formalizes freedom into an abstract fiction. The same is true of love, which endows freedom with a specific form in the relationship between man and woman. And poetry will once again be nothing other than lyricism springing from the deepest source of all, the conflict between the human being and all that binds him, and all that makes his spirit arid and destroys his body."

Summing up:

"It is on these levels and in these duties that I have always perceived Surrealism's most vital area of action, Surrealism as an optimistic affirmation rooted in the negation of negation of that deadening spiritual impoverishment. Only in this way can I see that moment of Breton's when construction and destruction meet, only in this way can I see imagination, for Baudelaire the queen of all the talents, as the force destined to change the world. Only in its capacity for negation, and today perhaps only in acting upon it, can imagination create and shape the new philosophical vistas which seem - from time to time - to have been lost forever."

In the course of his essay Effenberger moves from the image consumer society in which freedom and consciousness become increasingly difficult to develop, the negative to be negated, to a description of Surrealism's task in developing a critique of this situation. Only towards the end does he allow himself a more optimistic tone in which the affirmative vision of Surrealism is given expression. Although Effenberger is writing in the context of his own plays, the same remarks are equally true of all surrealist works. Simple affirmation is inadequate, made untrue by the social situation. Equally, simple pessimism is also inadequate, as capitulation becomes no more than cowardice, at best it is a quixotic resistance. The lead Effenberger gives is one of armed pessimism, where inner resources, individual and collective, are aimed at the diagnosis and cure of society's most intractable problems.

William Hollister, a translator of some of Effenberger's works, has suggested that the Czech surrealists have created an alternative model of deconstruction to that of Paris.²⁸ Perhaps it can equally be said that they have developed their own model of critical theory, a model that not only proposes the path for culture to take, but is active in its formation, an art that is both critique and vision. Throughout the pages of *Analogon*, in the films of Svankmajer, the paintings of Svankmajerova, Stejskal, Baron, the photographs of Medkova and Jakub Effenberger, and in their colleagues in Prague Bratislava and Brno this critical vision is given form. Most importantly, it has given a new impetus to Surrealism internationally and the activities of surrealists in Britain, Sweden, France and Spain in recent years are, viewed as a whole the most considerable for many years. A recent group statement by the Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group repeated a passage from by Effenberger that they had quoted a few years before in their reply to the Swedish Group's *International Inquiry*. This passage sums up his and their view of surrealism's task:

²⁸In email correspondence with the author.

"In my opinion the place of surrealism is not on the street (gun in hand) nor on a pulpit. Revolutionary havoc will be carried out by the formalized civilization itself in a more accomplished way than traditional revolutions which are always at the mercy of their Thermidors. Preaching salvation, even in a scientific guise also turns out to be pointless. Surrealism can only observe, analyze and look for solutions. It has enough time to do this, maybe more than Christianity had."

The search for a solution in effect declares the future to be still open. As Zizek once said, history is only inevitable in retrospect. The fact of this openness rather than the idea of an inexorable logic of history at work should be the starting point of this search. Dialectic has to be an open system that allows the examination of all the possibilities, all the contradictions and doubts, not just their elimination.

A surrealist work of art embodies (or attempts to embody) this principle. Although the return to an auratic art - or at least the search for it - is declared by the surrealists in *Hermetic Bird*, this is only half the story. The aura (iconic) rubs up against its ironic double. The affirmation is twinned by doubt. On the surface this might seem self-defeating, but its logic is that of the koan, the impossible problem is answered neither by logic nor by the irrational, although both must be employed. The problem solved by the artist is nevertheless left as a problem for the viewer to solve, the resolution is achieved in both cases only by transcending dualistic categories. But such a resolution, is not total, I repeat; there is always some excess. A surrealist painting can serve as an example of the surrealist enterprise as a whole. The resolutions achieved with Surrealism do not present solutions to society as a whole, but merely illuminates with a display of sparks the still unresolved problems that society faces. The sparks continue, if a little subdued, because Surrealism remains an "unfinished adventure". It can only be hoped that a few of these sparks can, in the future as in the past, catch fire.

APPENDIX A: SOME CASE STUDIES

Emila Medkova

Mikulas Medek

Vilem Reichman

Martin Stejskal

Jan Svankmajer

Eva Svankmajerova

Karol Baron and Albert Marencin

EMILA MEDKOVA AND HER CONCRETE PHANTOMS

Once, or should I say once upon a time, it would seem that the camera was seen as a touchstone of objectivity and truth. This idea is summed up by the maxim "the camera never lies". The naivety (or possibly ingenuousness?) that lies behind this statement should have long ago given way to irony as we see a range of visual, photographic-based media of extraordinary plasticity, that almost since their inception have increasingly been used to bend reality into new shapes and even reinvent it. But quite apart from the manipulations of the image through distortions additions, subtractions, inventions, behind all this exists the actual source of these illusions; the human mind.

If the realist photograph apes the function of the eye with its apparent objectivity, a great range of photographic images relate far more to the activity of mind and the imagination. Consequently we might, at this stage say that photography has two branches, "straight" photography, imaging the objective world, and that of the photograph composed or altered within the darkroom or studio, apparently belonging to the subjective side. It can be seen, nevertheless, that no image, photographic or otherwise, is quite as objective or as subjective as it appears at first glance. A documentary shot is likely to be cropped to enhance the composition, exposure and development are selective, on the other hand a darkroom composed piece may have its origin in actual objects, for instance as in a photogram. It should be seen that these tendencies operate not as a crude opposition, but a rich and complex dialectic in which subjective and objective traits interweave with and inform each other.

In the context of Surrealism we can easily place the solarisations of Man Ray and others, photocollage, Uzac's brulages, the technically similar experiments of Korecek and Istler with melted film emulsions and Reichmann's late work, the Graphograms and macrophotography within the camp of those dealing more directly with the subjectivist tendency. Within the second, "realist" tendency we can put the work of Styrsky, early Reichmann, Hak, Boiffard and photographers who, although not within the surrealist movement, were influenced by it and contributed to it and in turn influenced its praxis. (For instance, Brassai and Cartier-Bresson). Although the straight photograph may possess great qualities as a work of art, it has another dimension that I would consider to be the one of primary importance, it has a documentary value which can reveal the poetic in its raw state. Emila Medkova represents a culmination of this tendency, a crossroads at which we find the influence of her predecessors digested, not only at a stylistic level, but in which they are enriched by a dialectical relationship to her subject matter, to photography and to painting. In some of her rawest depictions of desolate and ruined objects and surfaces we can find a network of references and analogies to the work of painters such as Dali, Medek, Toyen Istler and Archimboldo for instance.

Although Medkova's work is situated within the context of the informal and the raw, at the same time a strong parallel can be seen between her work and Dali's. This may seem a little paradoxical at first, there is little stylistic similarity between his smooth "hand-painted photographs" of sometimes rather artificial deliria and her actual photographs of mainly commonplace objects. The relationship is more of an intellectual one in which Dali's paranoiac-critical method, instead of being mediated through a slow refining process of drawing and painting, is presented directly through the photographic image.

Dali invoked the example of Leonardo's suggestion that an old wall could summon up a multitude of images from the stains, wear and damage that the wall had sustained. In turn we can see how such marks are fundamentally similar to those of a decalcomania, but without the contrivance of squeezed and transferred paint.

Medkova could be said to be presenting us with a found readymade object, but in a way that takes us beyond the simple find that can be taken home and put into its new, symbolic context, giving us the world at large as a great symbol, as a network of signs that can be read in a way totally at variance with its customary utilitarian meanings, but remaining at the same time entirely itself.

Emila Medkova was born Emila Tlaskova in Usti in 1928, studied photography at the State Graphics School, Prague, and met her future husband, Mikulas Medek, in Prague in 1947. They became a part of the circle around Karel Teige around 1949. Her early photographs are staged compositions often featuring Medek among a series of props, glass eyes, eggs, fake flies. Some early pieces seem to look forward to the mature work, for instance "*Torso*" of 1949, where the weathered wood of an old tree, stripped of its bark and with barbed wire stretched across it mimics a human chest. Another work of the same year, "*Black*", gives us the image of what appears to be some old tar, or perhaps roof-felt. Placed upon this surface is a glass eye, transforming the whole into a face. Where there is a human presence it is often seen as a shadow like the silhouette of a woman in "*Hairfall*" (1950).

Vladimir Remes considers that:

"...the anxiety-dominated revolt of magical verism which had marked her photography from the very beginning was very much akin to Medek's own Surrealist concepts and even surpassed them"... "Its typical feature was enlarged detail and Medkova soon discovered its unique function and ability to thoroughly transform reality suddenly perceived at close range, intimately, as if under a magnifying glass. A wall ceases to be a wall; a door is no more just that, but rather a reality charged with novel meaning. In the drama of introspection, enhanced by poetic vision, reality is the protagonist."¹

The move from staged tableaux to her mature vision of enlarged or selected details of reality at about the period of the *Zodiac* albums (1951) was the most important stylistic change in her work. All subsequent development was merely a deepening and broadening of what was established in that period. We can see that Medkova was not working in isolation, but the creative exchange went beyond that of shared preoccupations with her husband, or even with other surrealists, both Medek and Medkova were involved in the *Umeni informel* (Informal Art) movement of the late fifties and early sixties at a time when they both drifted away from the surrealist group. Many of the photographers of that tendency show a marked similarity to Medkova's work on a formal level, we find the same repertoire of close-ups of ruin and decay, but we should be wary of ascribing to them the same significance. The work of the *informel* artists is often, despite the name, similar only in its formal dimension. I shall discuss this further in a later section.

After the death of Medek in 1974 Emila Medkova was to return to the surrealist group. Remes appears to believe that she "remained voluntarily in seclusion and did not even feel a need to publish or exhibit" but given the clandestine nature of the group's activity he could be forgiven for thinking so if only the same article did not detail

¹Remes, Vladimir: *Emila Medkova*. In: *Contemporary Photographers*. 2nd Edition. St James Press, Chicago and London 1988.

four solo exhibitions between her husband's death and her own. In fact, the renewal of group activity seems to have been of great importance to both her and the other members of the group. Her influence can be seen in the work of Martin Stejskal and Jan Svankmajer, and more directly in the photography of Jakub Effenberger.

In considering how Medkova's work is situated then, we have already examined several dimensions. Firstly that of Surrealism and in particular the context of the movement as it developed in Czechoslovakia, secondly we must look at the actual significations of the images and lastly, the broader cultural context, in particular the *Umeni Informel* movement and other currents including Absurdist drama.

In discussing the meanings of Medkova's work I have felt the need to introduce a classification of my own to elaborate my understanding of how it is structured.

As a starting point I wish to briefly explain a concept in Roger Cardinal's current work on the Natural Sign. Cardinal quotes St. Augustine:

"Those are natural signs which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire. It does this without any will to signify, for even when smoke appears alone, observation and memory of experience with things bring a recognition of an underlying fire".

Therefore, according to Cardinal,² the Natural Sign is:

²Letter to the author, 16/5/1995.

"usually in a context where the Cultural Sign (or some such formulation) is held in opposition to it...those external signs which we interpret...on the understanding that they do not betray a conscious intentionality on the part of their initiator."

and speaking of Andre Masson:

"Masson, as I argued, wants to enter into that primary phase of trance-like scrawling, but his secondary phase of reading what has been produced is tantamount to a cultural act of appropriation - like picking up an object which doesn't belong to you, yet which, as a *trouvaille*, now can begin to articulate a personal meaning (thereby modulating into a cultural sign)".

If, then, we see that through automatic and accidental processes such as weathering, vandalism, accident, one arrives at a perception of a figuration which, although not a conscious representation in the way that say, a landscape or portrait might be, has for us some significance, then automatism may also, at very least have some equivalence to the Natural Sign. In both cases it is typically somewhat indeterminate and has a tendency towards the polysemic, given that such indeterminacy allows different readings from the varying subjectivities of different viewers, not to mention the perpetually transforming consciousness of the artist³.

From this I propose that Medkova was among the foremost artists to arrive at the *found sign*. In many of her works there is primarily an interpretive and analogical view of both natural phenomena and the man-made when it has lost its original significance or when the

³Needless to say, I am not equating the notion of differing interpretations with the intellectually lazy "It's whatever you want it to be" attitude that I remember from my art-school days. There was a fear of giving one's own meaning, despite being the painter of a conglomeration of more or less symbolic figures. In such an instance the painter was disowning the meanings revealed. Of course, it is possible to suspend one's own interpretation in order to elicit the other's, but that is a different matter. In the case of Medkova, we find a shifting emphasis on the author's interpretation, sometimes it is fairly explicit, sometimes a suggestion for reading the image. There is an intersubjective overlapping between author and viewer, and an openness that allows difference as well.

context allows such significations to overlap. In this context the objective source could be seen as a natural sign that has, through the act of photographing, been appropriated into the cultural realm. The categories of significance are fluid rather than exclusive.

I use the term *found sign* rather than the better known one of found object, not only to accentuate its signifying function, but also because although the found sign can be an autonomous object, it can also be a far more transitory event, either a momentary juxtaposition of objects or a signifying element within an object. It is at any rate a sign found within the world of objects. It can be viewed as a form of transitional object, or maybe just a transition, moving back and forth across objective/subjective and made/natural divisions. It is a product of seemingly arbitrary, yet deeply meaningful forces that allow it finally to be shaped by our desires. It's sense is identical with the idea of the surrealist object, being a particular type of the broader category. The found has always been an important element in Surrealism, from its very origins. If we look at the early frottages of Ernst, for instance, they are made possible by his discovery of the found sign within the wood grain and his whole technique is dedicated to bringing out the hallucinatory aspect of the wood. Again, the photograph that Dali discovered of some tribesmen outside their huts which, when turned sideways, reveals a face, has something of this aspect, although here we are much closer to the original image as it has not needed to be subjected to the ageing process and its alterations.

The most important aspect of the found sign may be its equivocality, it perpetually presents itself as both being and not being the thing it seems. In allowing the radical reinterpretation of the object as given it casts doubt upon both the given and the interpreted, and in a manner

analogous to the dialectics of the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, eliminates both categories while preserving them as "empty forms".

In the 1951 work "*Pet*" (Five) the torn felt on a wooden wall reveals five forms reminiscent of the human body. They are far from being a complete illusion, possessing in fact strong qualities of abstraction away from the illusionistic. This is an important factor in Medkova's work, its visual sophistication and understanding of Modernism. This complex interplay of signs is therefore far removed from the simple recognition of resemblance such as we can find in popular magazines and television programmes, taking us to a penetrating questioning of the mechanics of perception and intentionality. Her friend and colleague in the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group, Alena Nadvornikova, is worth quoting at length:

"The power of imagination, involving the capacity to turn to a wide variety of phenomenological aspects of reality and identify possible sources of creative interpretation in them is a feature markedly apparent in a type of photography subsuming a considerable section of Emila Medkova's work. It is irrelevant whether interpretation occurs in the initial stage of the creative process - i.e. in the particular mode of vision of reality - or whether it is given full rein in the process of crystallisation of the ultimate shape the new reality acquires in the photograph. What is important is both the predilection for a certain type of visual perception as well as susceptibility to the latent polysemic nature of reality. These prerequisites overlap with the power of evocation (Breton refers to the "real gift of evocation") displaying a more sophisticated structure, the power to conjure up a new imaginative contents analogical to the specific contents of the author's individual or collective consciousness."⁴

It is this use of analogy that we find recurs with particular importance in the work of the post-war Czechoslovak surrealists. (We could remind ourselves that the name of their journal is *Analogon*, a term taken from the work of the philosopher Constantin Brunner, mentioned

⁴Nadvornikova, Alena: *Anthropomorphisation of Fragments of reality in Emila Medkova's Photography*. Dunganon no.4. Örkelljunga, Sweden 1986.

admiringly by Breton). If we also remember the object lessons of Magritte, the complexity of Medkova's work can be seen. The use of representation is not of a simple likeness, but of an analogical likeness, in which "realism" is not included. While the transformation takes place, the appearance of rough wood, plastic, sacking, rusty metal, remains, and the two create an eternal friction of opposing realities. Nadvornikova continues:

"Anthropomorphisation is thus an interpretative faculty, - a capacity, which is all the more efficient in E. Medkova's photographs, which do not acquire a veristic aspect in each individual concretization. Admittedly, this would lessen the impact of imaginative ties obtaining between an ambiguous photograph as well as between the picture and its title - both of them form an inseparable whole".⁵

An important aspect of Medkova's work is the grouping of images in series, thus emphasising the importance of their titles, which not only reveal this "latent polysemic nature of reality" as an intellectual construct, but as a container of emotional significance. Perhaps this is nowhere more apparent in the cycle "*Konec Illusi*" (End of Illusion) where waste paper or sacking takes on the character of old women, sad and huddled. In conversation⁶ In conversation Alena Nadvornikova told me how the pessimism of Dostoevsky, Kafka and Celine, (perhaps we could add the humorous, but tragic absurdism of Beckett) had shaped her vision. In comparison, Reichmann can seem almost sunny. It is partly the objects and surfaces forming the *prima materia* of her photographs that project this tragic dimension. Even in a work like "Dali" with its jokey recognition of the resemblance between some torn plastic sheeting and a soft self-portrait of Dali, because of the ruin of the actual thing photographed, and the havoc it wreaks on the

⁵Ibid.

⁶24 August 1994, Prague.

paranoiac image thus projected, lends it an air of intense pathos, not at all diminished by the humour of the work.

It is worth considering the actual process Medkova used to make a photograph, because, although she was not in any sense a technical innovator, and she said of technique only "I am satisfied with it..."⁷ yet to think of her probable procedures should throw light on other aspects of her creative vision. For many years Medkova used a Flexaret 6x6 medium format camera, moving to a Rolliflex in 1963. Her dedication to the 6x6 cm. format has, I believe, more than an arbitrary significance. By far the most popular, and most widely available format for both amateur and professional photography for many years has been 35mm. Most of the technical innovations have been concerned with making 35mm cameras do more, more easily and more efficiently. Even in Eastern Europe a range of very capable, if less technically advanced 35mm cameras, the classic Practicas for example, have driven the once dominant medium format roll-film cameras towards a marginal status. They have retained an importance for many professionals, at least for their studio work, giving us a series of beautiful cameras of extraordinary cost, unobtainable except to the rich and successful. The cheaper models, usually second-hand, tend towards the primitive technically, much greater bulk (the body is made from cast iron in many cases) and needing a much more careful approach towards taking the photograph than their more modern cousins. The Czech-made Flexaret is an example of this, comparatively clumsy and limited by fixed lenses, it has none of the versatility of 35mm.

⁷Quoted in *Emila Medkova 1928 - 1985* exhibition catalogue, Prague House of Photography, Prague, 1995.

For Medkova to retain a lifelong loyalty to this format suggests more than simple economic restraints therefore and this I think lies in the nature of this film format. Every camera magazine will tell you that whatever the disadvantages of medium-format photography, its virtues outweigh them. To begin with, the size of the negative is approximately 3 times that, or more, of 35mm negatives. This eliminates much of the grain and allows a sharper image to emerge. Several negative sizes are available with different cameras, but the 6x6 format has a kind of compositional neutrality which encourages the photographer to compose within the space revealed in the viewfinder, and allows a greater degree of re-visioning of that image. As a user of this format myself, and as someone who has hunted some of the same species of image as Medkova, I would say that all these factors are likely considerations, but they are mainly of a formal kind, and the essence of Medkova's art is on an entirely different plane.

The process of finding these images demands a kind of relaxed vigilance. One can not look too hard, nor quite cease to look. One must expect to be surprised. Also, one must be prepared to take the risk that one is not photographing the image one expects. Often the thing that stimulates the imagination when one is before it, or even in memory, is precisely that which, once photographed, refuses the embrace of subjectivity, it remains flatly itself. Images that have no apparent access to interpretive delirium, yet seem to have some interest, may yet possess the most exact imaginative properties, but as a kind of latency. Speaking from my own experience I would say that this is probably the reason that in some photographs Medkova allows herself the liberty of turning the image round to reveal the paranoid image within it. An extremely beautiful example is found in *Pohar* (Cup) where a simple inversion of the image gives us a

mysterious still-life in place of the broken metal sheeting that constitutes the manifest "reality" of the raw material. Another example is *"Zvire dle Enrica Baj* (Animal According to Enrico Baj), 1976, where she has photographed the burnt remains of a door swinging out on its hinges by a lake shore. The right way up, it is nothing but a door, but turned sideways it becomes a face that resembles, with extraordinary exactitude, the imagery typical of Baj. While it is not impossible that, in both these instances she was conscious of the latent image at the time of photographing it, she may well, on the other hand, have only become aware at the time of examining the negatives or contact-print, when one tends to swivel round the pictures to get a different view of them, an experience I am personally very familiar with.

There is another aspect of the 6x6 format that may well have appealed to Medkova, and seems apparent in her work, and that is the increased sensual, tactile range available. Even a poorly specified camera of this type is able to pick up more detail at a far better resolution than even the finest 35mm cameras. In dealing with those objects that are within our body's reach, we find a melding of the tactile and the visual takes place, and consequently also there is both a melding and an increased friction between the imagined and the concrete.

While it is certainly easy to pin too much upon one's own experience when discussing the work of another, it is, to my mind legitimated by the evidence that it is compatible with the imaginative processes of her work. Therefore the technical aspect of her photography would be of a piece with the philosophical and imaginative aspects and technique takes its proper place as the servant of vision.

I have already mentioned the importance in Medkova's work of the title. The name given to an image is far more than an indication of its subject matter, it is a key to how she wishes our imaginations to function before it. We must realise first of all that Medkova is not simply peddling the doubled image, one thing being the illusionistic simulacra of the other, but is opening up the analogical world to our gaze in a far more subtle way. Certainly some of her images are very immediately illusionistic in a "realist" way, they look very much like the thing in the same way as a drawing may depict the facts of the appearance of something from a particular angle. But many other images function in the same way as modern, post-cubist painting does, where the image is constructed from a series of clues involving a greater command of visual language than realism demands. To take as example the photograph *Skvira* (A Crevice), 1961, it is clearly a piece of metal, battered scratched and punctured. The largest puncture is a vertical gash to the left of the picture. Nothing in itself, in the context of her work, it opens up analogies with the wound and with the vagina, as well as with the formal aspects of the work of certain artists.

In an article on Medkova's work⁸ a page is dedicated to her interpretations of the work of surrealist painters. *Dali* (1949) shows a fragment of wall and a tall narrow barrel. Before them is a forked stick. Somehow it conjures up the soft constructions of Dali without ever showing them. *Magritte* (1967) gives us a pair of shoes on a doorstep. By placing them in a different context these shoes become wholly Magrittean, filled with the absent presence of their wearer. The other two pictures are titles *Istler* (*Vybuch*) (1966) (Istler (Explosion))

⁸*Analogon* 3 Prague, 1990

and *K M. Medkovi* (1967) (For M. Medek). Both are surfaces, walls or floors. The Istler picture has strange objects embedded in the surface, analogous to the relief surfaces of Istler's paintings from the late 50's, while the Medek image is possibly a sunlit bit of cracked paving, the rectangular cracking rhyming with the patch of sunlight. It does not precisely look like a Medek, but it invokes it effectively. In the case of the latter image there is also a complex of interrelated references. We have to remember that Medek and Medkova worked closely together, and their work influenced and paralleled each other's. We should not be surprised to find, therefore, that her move away from the set-up photograph with its play of illusions towards a more concrete art with its play of allusions is paralleled by Medek's move from a clearly representational language, based on drawing, to a painterly one in which hints of the body are embedded in the body of paint and the process of painting.

MIKULAS MEDEK - FROM SURREALIST VERISM TO MAGIC ABSTRACTION

I have already referred to the creatively reciprocal relationship between Medkova and her husband Mikulas Medek and I would like to examine some aspects of this relationship within the context of Medek's own work. At the same time there are obvious parallels between his work and that of Josef Istler and that of some of the *informel* artists as well as more general stylistic similarities with European art of the 50's.

Mikulas Medek was born in Prague in 1926, the younger son of two writers, Rudolf Medek and Eva Slavickova. He studied at the State Graphic School in Prague between 1942 and 1944 when the Nazis conscripted him for compulsory labour. As a member of the students revolutionary group he was involved in the Prague revolt between the 5th and 9th of May 1944. In 1945 he attended the Art Academy for one year where he produced his first distinctive works such as *Svet cibule* (Onion World) of 1945, but he transferred in 1946 to the Academy of Applied Arts to study under Frantisek Muzika and Frantisek Tichy. Although we can surmise that Musika's approximation to Surrealism, with its Romantic dream-spaces was of importance to him, Medek's own work is, from the beginning, far more fragmented, ironic and aggressive. In *Infantilni prochazka* (Childhood Walk) 1947, for example, we find a series of biomorphic and geometric shapes juxtaposed as if they are parts of an equation. Two arrows point to a shape that resembles both an eye and a vulva from which projects another biomorph, red and apparently microscopic in origin. Above this shape are two discs, on one is another eye-like shape, to the left is a biomorph and an equals sign that suggests an irrational equivalence and to the right a mysterious dark mass that is rather root-like, but is almost bisected by what appears to be a

microscope picture of tissue and then another biomorph at the far right, red and more obviously vulva-like, vanishing off the canvas.

Another work of 1947, *Objekt* (Object) now destroyed, we see a shallow box at the bottom of which a mass of hair or something similar. Two ambiguous forms rise out from this and from them in turn two thin tubes which reach up to a little portrait pendant of a woman, its glass broken and surrounded by splashes of paint to which are transfixed, by long pins, insects, and a tatter of rag. In the middle of the work is a medal. The overall effect is ambiguous, it has something of the reliquary about it, but also of its antithesis, perhaps its defiling. Also it has an air of a useless machine, its function long since forgotten. Perhaps it is worth mentioning in the light of Svankmajer's tactilism that it possesses both a sensuous tactility and a kind of repulsiveness.

The works of this period seem to move towards an increasing clarity of both technical and imaginative aspects of Medek's vision, which is perhaps to say no more than that he was a precocious student possessed of vision as well as talent. The series of canvases titled *Zazracna matka* (The Miraculous Mother) show this process. The first of the sequence has an almost empty space reminiscent of early Tanguy. Amorphous, eye-like shapes drift in the sky/sea and connect tentatively with each other. A little creature, which seems to have strolled in under the impression it *was* in a Tanguy painting is perhaps staring up at them. *Zazracna Matka II* has a more geometric, conceptual space which emphasises the flatness of the canvas and suggests some tensions between the figure and ground. At the top left is a microscopic enlargement of a water creature, possibly a water cyclops, its rear end extended into shapes rather like legs ending in bandaged "feet". This figure connects two otherwise unconnected rectangles which drift upon

another, larger rectangle. To the right are two shapes apparently taken from medical diagrams. At the bottom left is a curious object containing a staring eye, it seems to be attached by a string which also links the plane behind and pushes it forward. The third in the series is the most obviously aggressive, a bare, flat space in which three insects/birds/eyes battle and devour each other. An array of thin spiky lines within the forms prefigure the shapes that are to occur in his work of ten years later.

Usmevy poledne (Noon Smiles) 1948, is more explicit in its figuration. A torn sheet of paper, catching fire at the edges, frames a curious monster composed of two raptors heads and at their base, an eye. Together they constitute a strange amalgam head which could be floating in space or lying upon a table. What is new in Medek's work is the tearing giving us two different spaces and the fairly straightforward depiction of fragmented bird forms, but it is not quite a straightforward figuration even so; the two bird profiles and the single eye form a full-face image that contradicts its parts.

Vajicko (An Egg) 1949, possesses the same sense of a face constructed out of apparently unrelated images. The egg of the title is sitting in an egg-cup perched on a wall, but it is not definitely an egg at all, it is some strange burning matter. Above it are two shapes that seem to be simultaneously holes in the sky, torn paper, eyes. In the centre of each is a single image, a cotton reel and a grasshopper, both also catching fire. The grasshopper reappears in *Hluk ticha* (The Noise of Silence) of the following year, which also introduces another recurring obsession, that of piecing and cutting, in this instance a razor cutting into a disembodied mouth and three eyes in a mirror suspended by fish-hooks.

Increasingly at this time the style of the works becomes starker, less painterly. *Hostina I* (The Banquet I) 1950, for example is almost colourless, a few washed tones filling in the fine line drawing with a small sable brush delineating the mouth on a fork, the fanged mouth erupting into a mass of birds heads. All the works of this period share a concern with dissolution, with cutting and piercing, with a balance between strict, if somewhat diagrammatic realism of drawing and the destruction of order.

Another change is heralded in 1952 with paintings such a *Zerekure I* (The Chicken Eater I) which shows a woman seated at a table, tearing apart a tiny chicken with her hands and teeth. Although the larger part of the picture is of a stylised realism, her right shoulder stretches across the picture plane in an impossible manner. Another painting of the same time, *Emila a mouchy* (Emila and Flies) shows his wife with her back to us, leaning on a table, an egg cup and an opened egg from which emerge a cloud of flies.

If it is difficult for us to assess the reasons for particular stylistic and iconographic changes, we can, nevertheless, form a picture of his life at this period. Medek had originally been quite isolated, and his work was of a sort that was not approved of by the new Communist government. We must remember that dissent was answered increasingly with naked state terrorism, so any act of real or imagined subversion took considerable courage. Medek must have felt a natural creative confidence to continue painting the way he did, but his isolation diminished as he married Emila in 1951 and at about the same time became a part of the surrealist circle around Karel Teige. The discussions that resulted in the *Zodiac* albums lead to a consolidation of surrealist ideas that, after Teige's death, was resumed in the *Objekt* albums. If Medek was on the fringe of the rejected

avant-garde in official terms, he was increasingly part of a "scene" or a set in which he could feel himself to belong.

It is probably wrong to point to a simple, direct symbolic correlation between Medek's imagery and the social and political situation in Czechoslovakia at this time, but an image such as the bound but open mouth must surely be in some measure a scarcely coded signal of defiance. The disintegrating forms indicate perhaps the outer devastation of Europe, but can not be divorced from the particular subjective pressures of Medek's consciousness, a willingness also to dissolve the fixed. In Medkova's early work the glass eyes are used to animate dead matter, by giving to inert material a gaze she gives a focus. Medek on the other hand fragments the gaze and multiplies it beyond reason. Could this indicate feelings of persecution, justified paranoia in a man fearful of the consequences of painting as his vision dictates?

In any case, the gaze shuts down in 1953 with the work *Head That Sleeps An Imperialist Sleep*. A woman's head lies sleeping upon a table. The skin of her eyelid and shoulder are pierced by fishhooks, a labyrinth extends towards the horizon. It seems simultaneously more classical in conception and more painterly than earlier works. The underpainting is in tempera which is then glazed in oil-paint. The whole has a formal sharpness tempered by a tonal softness, somehow both dry and succulent. The colour is both simple and subtle. The woman is a dull red, the landscape/labyrinth background an equally dull blue and her head rests on a table of Naples yellow. The juxtaposition of the colours means that each heightens the other without actually being bright.

I have not come across any coherent account of the meaning of this picture. The way the hooks tug at loose flesh is a little reminiscent of

Dali's soft structures, particularly as she seems to be suspended by the hooks and would collapse without them. The title suggests a political meaning, but it is not explained. Is she in some way a symbol of imperialism or has she been put to sleep by this force? Or is her sleep a defence against the reality of imperialism? Bohumir Hraz gives a clue in his text in the monograph on Medek:

"Medek's entire creative work is based upon a few thoughts and their modification or ironic treatment made by using different emblems. One of these is the sleep theme. *From the painting Head that Sleeps an Imperialist Sleep* (1953) to those entitled *Sleeper I* (1954) and *Sleeper II* (1958) and on to the picture *Too Much Alcohol* (1965)...we can follow the transformation of one motif - the sleeping position..."¹

Hraz gives as evidence for this an account by Medek of a position adopted during the creative process:

"The position in which I fall asleep is important and there is only one position in which I am able to construct the so-called inner model. I lie on my right side with right arm drawn up over my head and bent at such an angle as to allow the palm of hand to touch my back. My left arm lies alongside my body. It is necessary for me to feel cold."²

But neither Hraz nor Medek seem to explain *why* this position is important. Given that a similar position is used in Tibetan Dream-Yoga to facilitate the recollection of the dream, it is tempting to suppose that he may have been able to gain greater access to his dreams by sleeping in this position, but this can only be pure speculation unless a fuller explanation can be found.

Akce 1 - Vajicko (Action 1 - An Egg) 1955, is again painted in tempera and oil and here the blue achieves an almost total monochrome. The only exception is the tiny dash of yellow of the egg yolk as it drips from one

¹Hraz, Bohuslav: *Mikulas Medek*. Obelisk, Prague 1970.

²Ibid. p.25-26.

half of its shell to the other. The woman who perform this curious act is far more stylised than previously. Her body is almost a cut-out, tonal changes modelling it in shallow relief. Her hair is made of shards and spikes, she fixes the viewer with a sharp and wary gaze, but she has no mouth. Her breasts are distorted and appear to float, she is ridiculously slender. The room she is in is indicated by three lines. Other paintings of this period exhibit the same features, increased schematisation, focus on a single female figure who appears to be undergoing some threat or stress, the figure increasingly distorted by the emotions expressed.

A good example of this would be *Velke jídlo* (The Great Food) 1956. There are three figures at a table. The two smaller figures pull furiously at a wish-bone as the larger figure in the middle (their mother?) apparently unconcerned by their struggle chews at a tiny chicken. The same red-blue colour scheme is present, but the figures are closer to brown, and the blue is diluted almost to a neutral tone.

There is something of the religious icon in the appearance of these works, but there is also, in a rather more vehement form, the kind of stylisation that was common in the early to mid-Fifties.

By 1957, with works like *Hra na pikolu I* (Playing the Piccolo I) and *Pritelkyne* (Girlfriends), Medek moves closer to abstraction. The viewer pick up the figure as a set of clues. Shapes towards the centre of the canvas read as the figure, but are also increasingly autonomous forms. The paint is more agitated, often scraped, the brushwork more in evidence. *Cerny gambit* (Black Gambit) 1958 is predominantly a brown-gold colour field with areas of black at top and bottom pushing the vestigial figure to the fore.

Modra Venuse (Blue Venus) 1958 reverts to the predominantly blue coloration of earlier paintings, with a single stripe of red. Just behind the picture plane the paint is darker, and we read it as a wall. The central form is rectangular and looks like a sheet or a piece of paper, it bulges with ambiguous shapes

beneath its surface. This shape could be suspended from the red stripe, which is also a neck, hanging from another, darker rectangle which reads as a hollow, but is also the head.

Cervena Venuse (Red Venus) 1959, is almost red, suggesting an all-enveloping sensuality. Only at the edges is it defined by a dark tone that gives us the clue of a waist. The red is modulated both tonally and texturally. The paint is not merely impastoed, but built up and carved. This is one of Medek's earliest experiments with enamel. From now on his technique is to lay the canvas on the floor and flood it with liquid enamel paint. He then works into it, using both its liquid and its quick-drying properties to build up the physical element of the painting. The scratched, gouged surfaces are then given depth and luminosity by the addition of oil glazes. From now on there can be seen a direct analogy between the surfaces of his paintings and those of the photographs of Emila Medkova.

I have suggested that certain of Medkova's images constitute a transitional mode between "cultural" and "natural" signs, that the assimilation of the raw, informal, natural sign into the cultural order breaks open apparently closed significations. This *found sign* can be disruptive of the cultural order. The significance attributed to a found sign is obviously dependent on our cultural knowledge and also to the context supplied by the artist. Medek's work reflects the assimilation of the found

into cultural experience in a particular way. Clearly, because his paintings are entirely made, and whatever elements of chance and accident are present are incorporated into the work process, they are entirely part of the cultural symbolic order, but because they contain and reflect elements of culture's other, the natural, the wild, brute and informal, they are also in some way a critique of culture, at least in its given form.

The actual work process from this point on incorporates techniques that are apparently at variance with each other, those of the avant-garde, from Cubism to Abstract Expressionism, and traditional procedures of the old masters, the use of glazes for instance. The picture space is both flat and deep, spatial clues move from the medieval, through a schematised form of renaissance perspective through to the typically modernist flattening of space within one picture. Medek's forms are more or less abstract, but they flip over into figuration through their juxtaposition and context. What is latent in Medkova's work becomes manifest in Medek's, he meditates upon the raw matter that she reveals, and transforms it. In relation to Medkova, Medek is the ideal witness to her work, because he transforms the information presented into his own vision and his own language.

I am, of course, only giving one particular context here, the interpenetration of working ideas and images between two people in a close creative relationship. We can place them in several other contexts, within the Surrealist Group, within the artistic milieu of post-war Czechoslovakia, and the international post-war avant-garde. The first is the more immediate context, but it is also essential to examine Medek's work in relation to the broader context of the art of his time.

The road to abstraction was by this time a well-beaten one, and, in some senses Medek can be seen as typical. If the abstraction of the Twenties tended towards the geometric and the decorative, Fifties abstraction moved towards the rough-hewn, the improvised. We can look at the abstract expressionists for example. Medek shares with them the breaking from the limitations of working at the easel, the involvement with the material itself. The tactile qualities foreground the expressiveness of the actual paint. Where they differ is in the question of the interpretative qualities of the work. Matta had complained of the New York painters that he had taught that first one produces automatically, then one interprets, but that his abstract expressionist friends were only interested in automatism as an end in itself, in the formal qualities of the work at the expense of the interpretative.³ Medek, on the other hand, is very precisely concerned with the idea of interpretation as the basis for the understanding of his work. I have mentioned his technique of painting, and this also both approximates him to and differentiates him from New York painting, or from other abstract painting of the time. Hraz⁴ mentions his technique, how he "slowly surimposes(sic) layer upon layer for weeks on end on a single painting" and while some of the abstract expressionists certainly bestowed great care upon their canvases, they often, as in the case of Kline, for example, did so in order to carefully create the effect of spontaneity.

It would be wrong to see abstract expressionism as totally lacking in subject matter of course, Pollock called himself a Jungian, De Kooning painted his women and Kline gestures reflect his experience of the city. Rothko's totally non-representational works are intended to emanate through their colours and forms the emotions that gave rise to them. But

³I was reminded of this in a conversation with Jorge Camacho in January 1994. I can not remember the source for this information, however, the point remains pertinent to the discussion.

⁴Hraz. 1970. p.47.

what is foregrounded is the formal, and in Medek the formal and interpretative are balanced and placed in a somewhat paradoxical situation.

I have said that Medek's forms are abstract, but that they flip over into figuration. It would be more precise to say that the abstract form becomes an analogy for the figurative. Although in later works he was to use more directly figurative details, in the works of this period, the late fifties and early sixties, they are only read as such through their context, their relation to each other. The work is completed by the title, which is often not at all descriptive, but is rather allusive. For instance, *21,000 cm² modrych mikroiluzi* (21,000 square cm. of Blue Microillusions) 1962, baldly describes the size of the work, but not its apparent subject, we are left to search for the "blue microillusions" ourselves. What sort of illusion anyway? The spatial illusion of the punctured picture plane? Or hallucinatory illusions arising from the paranoiac interpretation of the painting? Nothing definitive can be said of this, for my own part I can see several faces, a broken wall, a torn poster, what might be the cross-section of a log or a labyrinth, but I have to conclude that without some insight coming from Medek or someone who knew him to enlighten me about this specific work, these images are the result of my own subjectivity and of limited value in interpreting his intentions.

The other important context in which to discuss Medek's work of this time is that of Czech Informalism. Several surrealists were involved in Informalism, Medek and Medkova, Istler, Nozicka, Novak were all involved. This is not to say that Informalism was surrealist, but certainly their fingerprints were on it, along with many others. I have discussed Informalism elsewhere in this study, but it is worth repeating a few points. What all these artists had in common was a sense of the poetic

nature of the informal and of it as a starting point for visual and tactile investigation. Some artists seem to me close to Surrealism, for instance, Jan Koblasa. Others would seem to be primarily interested in the formal qualities of their work, but not excluding a certain poetry associated with decay and the accidental. It is worth mentioning that the young Jan Svankmajer was influenced by Informalism, and his early sculptures, from about 1960 to 1965, were an increasingly fantastic elaboration of this tradition.

As much as anything, Informal Art seems to have been, not only a way for the surrealists to alleviate their isolation from the artistic milieu, but also it acted as a context in which they could present their work publicly without attracting the condemnation of the authorities. It was about this time that Medek ceased to be such an outcast and began to enjoy a degree of public success. This was to lead to an increasing, but never total, estrangement from Surrealism, precipitated by Medek's fluctuating religious interests.

This area of Medek's life has been quite difficult for me to assess, and I have insufficient information to make a definitive judgement, but in conversation⁵, Ludvik Svab confirmed the religious tendency in Medek. It is a mark of the respect in which he was held that even after he completed a religious commission, and no longer actively associated with the group, Medek was represented in the 1966 *Symboly obludnosti* exhibition.

The commission in question was for an altar painting at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Jednovice. Several times before this the cross

⁵August 1994.

form had appeared in Medek's painting, often most easily interpreted as a human form. The series *Kriz zeleza* (Iron Cross) suggests an ambiguous relationship to the form and no specific religious symbolism, the Jednovice Cross is another matter. The church was decorated by Medek, Jan Koblasa, Karel Nepras and Istler. Istler designed the presbytery windows, Nepras the bannisters, and Koblasa the frame of the altar painting as well as the tabernacle and the candlesticks. Of Medek's painting, Mraz says:

"Although, in this painting, we come upon all the elements that mark his fourth period such as structures, scratches, scars and perforations, these are subjected to the main thought - the Cross from which Christ has been taken down. In accordance with his theory that a static impression of the event reveals its dynamic quality more authentically than a stiff reproduction of the scene, he does not show the erection of the Cross, the Crucifixion, or the taking down of the body from the Cross, as has been usual with all religious paintings since the Middle Ages, but the traces which Christ's body has left on the Cross - the golden wounds along the nails on the transverse beam and the golden aura in the centre of the Cross which is, in this way, accentuated as the focal point of the picture.

The altar of Jednovice strikes one both as a symbolic reflection of the mystery of religious faith and as a valuable artificial product decorated in gold. In this peculiar union between content and the decorative function of the picture, one can discern a connection with the artistic tradition of the East going back to Byzantine art."⁶

I would assume that this interpretation is based on Medek's own. It is worth noting on the formal level that the cross form is a light, bright blue, which emphasises the gold. The dark crimson background pushes the cross towards us and isolates the form, giving it far more emphasis. To this extent the painting is, in formal terms, not wholly representative of

⁶Mraz(1970) p.51.

Medek's art at this time. The forms tend towards an all-over spread, the colours work as harmonies. The greater separation of both forms and colours were increasingly to become a feature of Medek's paintings in the following years. In terms of content it would seem wholly untypical. The term most used in connection with Medek's work is existential, a very over-used term to be sure, but it would seem apt. Mraz says:

"Medek will never deny that he has worked his way through surrealism and that he has created his own existential attitude towards the world from which he draws the ideas for his pictures. In the cycle Sudden Events we have the tragic things that happen to painting matter - the title makes an ironic use of medical terminology - small catastrophes where the paint membrane gets torn and the structure appears - a crust of colour⁷."

None of which gives any sense of a religious content manifest in the work. Rather, it would seem that Medek depends on the power of analogy to make the paint embody physical and existential states in quite a materialist way. If we can ascribe a religious sense to his subjects, it would seem to be in the background, a latency rather than the manifest subject of the work.

The main cycles of this period, *Nahla prihoda* (Sudden Events), *Senzitivni signal* (Sensitive Signals), and *Senzitivni manifestace* (Sensitive Manifestations) would seem to confirm this view. The latter sequences present a large central form, an analogy for a head, the first cycle throws it towards the edge of the canvas. In the Sudden Events series this form is often broken open like a wound, mouth or vagina, *Nahla prihoda na hranici 16,200 ruzovych cm2* (Sudden Event on the Edge of 16200 sq. cm.) of 1962 for instance. The mood is one of being under threat or attack. Both the Sensitive Signal and Sensitive Manifestation series present the figure as being more stable, but maybe trapped or locked into

⁷ibid. p.48.

the space it inhabits. At the same time tendrils/nerves/hairs stretch out in every direction, sensing the environment.

Smrtka pro 21,870 krehkych modrych cm2 (Death Doll for 21,870 sq. cm) 1964, seems to act as a reversal of the earlier themes. The "Death Doll" is a thin cross-shape with a helmeted "head". The background is a cold green-blue, but the head is surrounded by diamond of black. What is also different on the formal level is the smaller forms in the painting. Whereas in the earlier works the scratches and punctures in the surface seemed almost chaotic, order established at the last moment, here they are more orchestrated.

In the mid-sixties the theme of orality emerges in various guises. This is combined, as in the instance of the paintings *162cm krehosti* (162cm of Fragility) 1964, with a new clarity of form which, typically, leaves the subject as ambiguous as ever. A pole/throat/phallus/backbone stretches vertically across the canvas (which is 162 cm high). Behind it are two dark forms, a rectangle and a circle, that are clearly to be read as torso and head respectively. Around the vertical form, within the "head" are fangs/claws/thorns. What is obvious about the vertical and the claw forms is that they are far more *drawn* than earlier works. The second work in this series works with the same components, but places the claw forms nearer the bottom, on the throat, and the head, smaller here, is at the very top of the canvas. This work is less dramatic, the first canvas would seem to refer back to the paintings of eating of the previous decade, this one could be wearing a rather uncomfortable necklace.

Sedm trnu ve rtu (Seven Thorns in the Lip) 1964 repeats the motif, but here the head is helmet-like, enclosing. It consists of two diamond

shapes, the inner, horizontal one being the mouth, the outer, vertical one the head. The title reinforces an idea of a self-enclosing masochism.

An amusing reprise on an earlier theme occurs with *Hra na hru na pikolu* (Pretending to Play the Piccolo) 1965. The basic forms of the 1957 work are repeated in Medek's current idiom, but with the added information that the creature is only *pretending* to play. (I have given the translation of the title according to the Mraz book, its more literal meaning would be "playing at playing the piccolo"). The piccolo is represented by a row of dots which should be at eye level, but the forms around them indicate that the mouth might be at the top of the head. A vestigial room is indicated by perspective lines drawn into the paint.

Rather bizarrely, the translation given in Mraz⁸ for *Restaurace vegetariana*, 1965, is The Restoration of the Vegetarian.⁹ But even a very elementary knowledge of the two languages enables one to know that the title is simply Vegetarian Restaurant. The mood is comparatively jolly, the toothy mouth is chewing away with evident enjoyment, and the being seems to be casting a sidelong glance. The picture is rather reminiscent of Paul Klee.

A key image of this time is *Prilis mnoho alkoholu* (Too much alcohol) 1964. Here the mouth is gaping, red, toothless. It expresses terrific pain. The circular mouth/head, a bletted crimson, is surrounded by a cool creamy surface scumbled over colder blue, but allowing a rusty brown to seep through. Again, perspective lines sketch in a room. It makes me think of a hospital room, which although this is an entirely subjective

⁸ibid. 1970.

⁹Restaurant is *restaurace* in Czech. Restoration is, among other words, *restaurovani*. Perhaps some pun is intended, but it is not made explicit enough for me to be sure.

impression, would fit the known facts fairly well. Everyone I have met who knew Medek spoke of his drinking. The bookseller Z. Mastnik of Interpress said: "He was a good man, but he drank too much, which is why he died."¹⁰ Ludvik Svab confirmed this account in greater detail. He said that as Medek became more successful, he attracted a circle of admirers, mainly younger painters. He felt unable to break away from them, but at the same time that they were stealing his ideas. Certainly he was influential both inside and outside of the Surrealist Group, but at a time when he was moving away from the surrealists perhaps he felt more vulnerable. A degree of paranoia is understandable, given that he had suffered a great deal of real persecution in pursuing his work and through his affiliation to Surrealism. At this time he was doing rather well for himself, and perhaps it was not possible for him to dismiss that paranoia, only transfer it to another object. In any case, the pressure told on him in terms of his drinking.

And he was indeed doing well. In 1963 the outcast artist, prevented from exhibiting was exhibited in Teplice. In the same year he was commissioned for the altar painting at Jednovice, and in 1965 he was allowed to exhibit in Prague. In 1966 he moved into a new studio, previously that of Jan Cumpelik, a socialist realist whom Mraz calls "a most subserviant (sic) artist in the fifties."¹¹ This indicates the growing acceptance of Medek and other modernists in Czechoslovakia at this time.

Mraz finds in Medek's new studio a cause for the next development in his work:

"All the more, therefore, was he attracted by the view from his window that gave on the street and by the roofs of the block of

¹⁰Conversation circa 1992.

¹¹Mraz 1970. p.53.

flats. It is here that the first elements of visual reality entered his pictures - the arcades, balustrades and sign-boards."¹²

But these are still subordinate elements within the painting. For instance, in *Svaty nahý v trní* (Saint Naked in the Thorns) of 1966, the saint's head is framed in a window, the thorns stick up like broken glass. Schematically drawn architectural motifs float within an inverted triangle which seems to also be the saint's torso, another window, a building in perspective. The scratches in the earlier works are moving towards a figurative resolution and are increasingly ordered. The small room that seems to enclose the figures becomes more emphatic, the paint calmer.

A painting of 1967, titled *Nahla prihoda* (Sudden Event) clarifies Medek's progression. Earlier paintings on this theme are built up from scratching into the wet enamel, order seems to be imposed at the very last moment. The 1967 work is more geometrical and more drawn. Two more or less rectangular shapes exist in an approximately head-torso relationship. The "head" is torn apart by several balls rendered in careful three-dimensional illusionism. The torso contains two scroll-shapes, each containing a series of outlined shapes. The balls are to become a frequent motif in later paintings. They puncture the formal flatness of the painting and disrupt the dominant emotional tone. Medek is more obviously playing with the formal elements of the work, juggling with contradictory formal and spatial ideas and with their content.

The architectural jumps to the forefront in works like *Svaty vojak* (Sainly Soldier) 1967. The soldier's head is a window and within the window we see a curious being, apparently hanging from the ceiling, part animal, part plant, peering at us with a single eye. The "soldier" is in a room, the familiar rectangular background with diagonals sketching the perspective,

¹²ibid. p.54.

thus making quite a rich and complicated space. First the perspective of the room, then the soldier's head read as a solid object, then as a window and finally, the empty space within the window, behind the creature. Mraz's claim that there is "a certain analogy between man and a house (the house is inhabited - man as a biological structure, is also "inhabited" by living organisms)"¹³ finds its justification here. The process of incorporating architectural motifs into his figures, which at the same time become more clearly figures, accelerates in the late sixties. The "microillusions", the subordinate figurations with the painting, become increasingly autonomous, paintings within paintings in effect. At the same time, they complete the main figure. *Stul projektanta vezi II* (The Table of a Tower Designer II) 1968 gives a glimpse of the mature process. The tower appears based on old depictions of the Tower of Babel, spiralling upwards. At the same time it could be a rolled scroll or plan of the tower and it is the tower designer's head. His eyes are at the same time the eyes of two birds heads seen in profile. The tower-head-scroll is surrounded by arches and arrows pointing in every direction. The whole seems to rise from a platform at the very bottom of the canvas which is maybe also the designer's shoulders. Again, several balls pierce the flattened space, as does an illusionistic cube and a target. The tower's shape is echoed in a smaller form to its right, the insides of which are more reminiscent of an alchemist's retort. To its left is a typical Medek head with an open mouth and above it a single eye.

Pokus o portet markyze de Sada (Attempt at a Portrait of the Marquis de Sade) 1969, takes the process into overlapping figurations further. Some elements are fairly obvious. Sade's mouth and fanged teeth are sharply cartooned. His head is a rectangular fortress (the Bastille?) in perspective. Each side of the thin neck is a ball, perhaps these elements constitute not

¹³ibid. p.56.

only Sade's neck, but his genitals? The fortress is partly broken, and four illusionistically painted cubic shapes are suspended behind it.

Later works contain a few more innovations, mainly consolidations of earlier ideas. Previously schematic become more illusionistic. A curious cellular/spongelike form appears in some works such as *Velka Iviska* (Big ? no trace of word Iviska in dictionaries) 1970 where it stands in for the head. This shape seems to derive from slightly earlier images by J. Hrstka, in whose work this appears regularly. *Analogon 14*, 1995, in which this work is reproduced, has immediately facing it a curious sponge shape in a photograph by Medkova, dated 1950. The much earlier date indicates to me the likelihood of it being intended as an analogical relationship in the double spread rather than a source for Medek's image.

I have not seen any paintings by Medek after the early Seventies, and for this reason wonder if his increasing alcoholism prevented him from working. If so, that was certainly a loss, as was his premature death in 1976. He was for many years a unique creative force, working under a regime that repressed all unofficial forms of creative expression. When he gained acceptance from official circles he was already, as a person, among the walking wounded, but his art never compromised itself, remained a potent independent force. His relationship with Surrealism was somewhat contradictory, sometimes explicitly affiliated to Surrealism, sometimes wavering towards Christianity, also working with other artists such as the those of the *Informel* movement. Nevertheless, almost all his work can be contained within the context of Surrealism, and in that context he is certainly a very important artist. His creative relationship with Emila Medkova is one of four male-female creative partnerships in Czech Surrealism, the others being Toyen's collaborations

with Styrsky and later with Heisler, and that of Svankmajer and Svankmajerova. In each case the collaboration seems to allow the artists an enhanced creativity beyond that of ordinary collective efforts, perhaps because the work does not end with a parting at the cafe or studio, but carries on into every part of their lives. In the case of Medek and Medkova it is plain to see the degree of mutual influence and the sharing of themes over a period of nearly thirty years. Although a number of his works found their way into both national and foreign collections, he has received far less recognition than he deserves. His technical and stylistic innovations are particularly impressive because we have to view them not just as innovations in technique and style, but as the visible signs of an analogical vision that reconciles the figurative and abstract, the emotional and intellectual, the serious and humorous, within a single image.

VILEM REICHMANN

According to one story, Vilem Reichmann took up photography after being given a Rolleiflex camera by a Jewish photographer friend who was about to be sent to a concentration camp.¹ Given that he started to work in photography in the 1930's, this is clearly not the whole truth of the matter, but if the incident really happened it may well have been a trigger for his imagination, his early work almost gives a sense that the camera is impregnated with catastrophe, his early photographs disclosing ruin and profound alienation in a shattered world. *Wounded Town*, his first photographic series, composed immediately after the war, is concerned with the ravages of war on the urban landscape, smashed buildings, piles of rubbish, fragments of wall, tattered posters, all are part of a kind of subjective documentary. The technique is straightforward, the scene is photographed much as it is, but an extraordinary and desolate poetry leaks out of the images which undercuts their realism.

In *Arabesky zkazy* (Arabesque ruin) Reichmann gives us a close-up of a pile of rubbish, cans and wire, but the wire rises up like a dancer from the debris. *Prohra* (Loss, or Defeat) presents us with some soft toys lying on the ground, an animal shows the stuffing falling out of its belly. These objects then become a simple metaphor for the destruction of war while preserving that valued surrealist quality of enigma. Another work, *Setkani v trosach* (Meeting in the Ruins), presents the image of a paper silhouette of a woman lying against a paper cut-out of a piano. It is as if the elegance of the 30's had evaporated, leaving this as an empty shell. These images were to be an inspiration to later generations of surrealist photographers, most significantly Emila Medkova.

¹Tausk, Petr: *Vilem Reichmann*. in: *Contemporary Photographers*. 2nd Edition. St James Press, Chicago and London 1988.

Wounded Town seems to have been a response to specific circumstances, the destructiveness of war and the imaginative gap that it opens up in the world. It was not his only series of that times, but the *Kouzla* (Magic) and *Metamorfozy* (Metamorphosis) series were sustained over a much longer period, from the 40's to the 70's in fact. So, for instance, in *Kouzla* we see the photograph *Rub* (Reverse) is dated 1941, and another image, *Zapnuty* (Buttoned up) is dated 1972/78. It is difficult to see a progression in his thinking between these instances, the earlier image is of the hollow mould of a casting of a funerary cherub, set up as if it were the thing itself, but it can only be an absence, or perhaps an "absent presence", three decades later an abandoned coat on a sand heap fulfils the same function, it expresses a human presence that no longer exists. The mood is of presence conjured up, despite the lack, the magic is a momentary filling of an existential gap. It is perhaps also a filling of a gap in time, in that there is a continuity between these images, they express very strongly the sense of a series and other series (Couples, Delirama) express different developments, moods, trains of thought.

Reichmann was born in Brno on the 25 April 1908, he studied architecture, but this career was interrupted by being enlisted into the German Army in 1942. In 1943 he was taken as prisoner-of-war and served on the prison camp anti-fascist committee at Ordzhonikidzeabad (U.S.S.R.) After the war he worked as a satirical cartoonist under the name Jappy for the left-wing press. In 1947 he first exhibited his photographs with *Skupina Ra*. After the breakup of *Ra*, although he never joined another surrealist group, nor went under the surrealist banner, his work wholly surrealist in spirit and informed by surrealist thought. In this context it is possible to see a dialogue between his work and Medkova's

that enriched both of them. Medkova claimed that his photographs were a starting point for her own, but he claimed the same of hers! Antonin Dufek² speaks of Reichmann's

"...method of creating, in which the principle of photographic metaphor takes the central position...similar to poetic metaphor, the photographic metaphor is a reminder of mutual similarities and connections - mostly those of shape - of the world of objects, the source of significant associations that lend to the photographed reality a new, very frequently symbolic, validity."

Petr Tausk³ finds that:

"Photography reinforced Reichmann's ability to recognise the metaphorical in everyday life, allowing him to communicate his peculiar observations directly to a broad audience."

But this audience was a long time coming, Reichmann did not exhibition in group shows between 1947 and 1966, and did not have a one-man exhibition until 1959. Like Medkova, therefore, his work was carried out in privacy, even secrecy at times, for over a decade before he was able to achieve any public recognition. What these two artists share is a vision of foundness, of the visionary, interpreted image grounded in the material and the informal. To this extent they are quite similar, but the mood is often quite different. Medkova typically concentrates on the extreme close-up, the enclosed space, the miniature. Reichmann allows much more space around his objects, allows them to breathe. Both produce a body of work in which people are significantly absent, the objects are a trace of past presence, like the slime trail of a snail. But with Medkova the image is more often the result of some accident or the direct process of decay, it is beyond the intentional to a greater degree than Reichmann in his earlier series. He rather seems to concentrate on an image where the intentional was somehow abandoned and the object gathered to itself a strange irrational life, acquiring almost the status of subject. Another image from the *Kouzla* series, *Strasak* (Scarecrow) depicts the fenced-off

² Dufek, Antonin: *Vilem Reichmann* in: *Revue fotografie*, volume II Prague 1992.

³Tausk, 1988.

shore-waters of a lake or river, and hanging on a post is a curious figure with booted legs and a vestigial torso that seems to be composed of a paper bag. The mood is one of helplessness and abandonment, the figure is at once melancholy and rather funny, its probable uselessness as a scarecrow, (if it was ever intended as such) is underlined by the presence of a large number of ducks, apparently unconcerned by the figure.

Some of the *Kouzla* photographs are lighter, more lyrical in expression; *Prazske Benatky* (Venice in Prague) for instance, with its gondola stranded on a Prague embankment, although it conveys something of the same sense of abandonment as other, more emotionally stark images, leaks out an element of gentle romanticism as well.

The *Metamorfozy* series is more concerned with the notion of paranoiac interpretation and the imaginative transformation of the image. One extraordinary photograph simply reproduces a row of shirts hanging to dry in the sun. But the breast pockets have become eyes with swollen, half closed lids and the collars gaping mouths. The title, *Zizen* (Thirst), becomes self-explanatory. In *Sestup* (Descent) a damp stain on a staircase wall summons up one of Toyen's spectral women coming down the stairs. A sense of threat emanates from *Nastup* (March formation) where concrete pillars become helmeted heads.

Dvojice (Couples) deals with a sequence of irrational pairings, variable in their meanings and emotional tone. For instance, *Vytanceno ze salu* (Danced out) of 1951 shows a crushed plaster relief of two elegant dancers. The smashing of the relief gives the dancers a dynamism and a rhythmic swirl that was beyond their creator and their placing, a rough brick wall in what looks like a farmyard, dislocates the original meaning of the image. Despite their sorry state of repair, they do not seem, to me at

any rate, to be desolate, but rather brave, melancholy and proud, like lovers in a film who are in desperate peril and can only dance to stave off the moment at which they must part. An image of twelve years later in the same series allows no such romantic interpretation, *Na tom nasem dvore* (In our courtyard) shows simply two tyres in a flooded courtyard, one lying flat, the other propped against a pole. It has the look of an early Chirico. Similarly near to abstraction is *Domleto* (Ground out) dated 1969/1991. Here, two millstones one with a square hole the other with around one, propped against a stone wall. Perhaps they are literally ground out, worn out from use, but they seem happy enough leaning together in the sun. The strength of the image would appear to be primarily formal, except in the context of the series and its theme of pairing, whereupon it develops a sense of the metaphorical that I would be hard put to explain except as pure context.

Later series move in closer, condensing the picture space. *Delirama* uses close-ups, cropping the image so that the exact context of their disclosures is uncertain. Reichmann also uses multiple exposures and overlapping negatives to produce more complex prints. For instance, in *Jinam* (Elsewhere) dated 1962, rows of numbered lockers fills the whole of the picture space. Superimposed upon this is the bird-filled sky. Presumably one of these is reality, the other reflection, but Reichmann does not let us make a choice, we have to take both at once. Although it is most likely that the image was arrived at by superimposing one image over the other, we remain uncertain. In *Utonla* (Drowned), of 1970, rounded stones, presumably from a beach, have such a strong resemblance to an arm, a breast, buttocks, that they force us to hallucinate a figure. In both images they remain inexplicable, truly surrealist in their conjunction of separate realities.

The *Tabularia* series takes the "Leonardo's Wall" motif for a brisk trot round the block. Given that this is a seam well worked by Medkova and by Nozicka, it is interesting to see how distinctive and fresh Reichmann's contribution is. To some extent *Tabularia* is a reworking of his earlier motifs in close-up, and because he has approached it with a well-developed personal vision, there is no sense of him caving in to Medkova's influence, but rather taking it on from his own standpoint. The images themselves are variable in both form and meaning; *Amonit* (Ammonite) of 1971 reveals fissured paint that resembles the chambered spiral of the fossil of the title. The look is somehow almost classical/constructivist, with the smooth pale paint almost hiding the rough texture of the wall, the black rectangle in the bottom right hand corner, and the chance geometry of the cracks. *Dar* (Gift), 1976, offers a painted advertisement, a gift-wrapped parcel in which the paint has so cracked and broken as to reveal it as a parcel bomb. A few years later, the photograph *V dome smutku* (In a house of mourning) 1980, presents a very different mood. Again, the image consists of no more than cracked paint, but here it seems turbulent and ambiguous. While *Amonit* had been both geometrical and extremely illusionistic, *V dome smutku* seems to be the abstract-expressionist pole of his sensibility. Long verticals peel back to reveal older, darker layers and stretch up to a narrow, irregular rectangle near the top of the picture. Sprouting out from this, like branches, are further cracks which at their ends peel back in the shape of leaves. Why is it the house of mourning? Perhaps those layers beneath reveal the dark and mournful heart of the image.

The following year, *Pulnoc* (Midnight) 1981 goes further into the darkness. Shallow holes crudely drilled into a wall, (perhaps by bullets?) have been drawn around with chalk and the whole smeared. The wall issues a ghost of a totally substantial nature. It's skull confronts us at absolute proximity, filling space. It would be easy to believe that this was

in fact by Medkova, both in form and mood it resembles her work, but I do not feel that this lessens the impact of the work, nor Reichmann's originality.

Antonin Dufek tells us that:

"When increasing age made it difficult for him to walk for miles and miles in search of themes for his photographs, he began to take a closer look at the surfaces of various materials from within the confines of his Brunn flat, and to discover there fantastic worlds which he recorded by means of macrophotography. When that as well became too difficult, his enlarger became a laboratory where he combined drawing with cliché verre, frottage and photogram techniques to produce with undiminished intensity his final series of *Graphograms*.⁴"

In these last years it is almost as if Reichmann walks through to another world. I have said that the earlier work showed far more of the outer world than is typical of Medkova, then he starts to move in on the image, closer, until he enters a world that has no basis in our normal visual life, but it is still our world, still resolutely physical, material in its basis.

The *Agave* series makes this plain. Thin sections of agave (a succulent plant with sword-like leaves) under the microscope reveal strange forms in perpetual metamorphosis. According to Dufek⁵ this series was begun in 1968 and was the starting point of the new introversion of his work. *Maldoror*, 1968, reveals a tear in space, which could constitute a head, a vague background with the suggestion of landscape, the sort of metamorphic potency that makes it totally in key with Lautreamont. Other images in the series have the same demonic beauty: *Fanal*, 1974, looks like a fossilised flame erupting out of the ground, *Pocta Dalimu* (Homage to Dali), 1968, shows a figure, resembling the Great

⁴Dufek. 1992.

⁵In: *Vilem Reichmann Fotografie* (1988) exhibition catalogue, Galerie Hlavniho Mesta Prahy, Prague.

Masturbator, suspended in mid-air, and wrapped by insect-like appendages.

Hibernalie (Hibernalia) runs concurrently with this series, using close-ups of melting ice. *Zimni andel* (Winter angel) of 1964 is comparatively straightforward, a piece of ice rhymes with the wing of a stone angel. Other images are more ambiguous in their origin. *Styx*, 1976, looks like a Tanguy, erect clubs of ice against what seems like a stormy sky. The 1982 photograph *Pocta Archiboldovi* (Archimboldeque head) is exactly that, but cast out of a single thing, an ice pattern, rather than an assemblage, creating a male head with its plumed helmet. The *Arbogrames* are composed of pieces of plane tree bark composed like texts awaiting their Rosetta Stone to allow their translation into human language.

Later exercises in macrophotography are more mysterious in their origin, and are probably the adventures in mixed media that Dufek mentions. In some the borderlines between the techniques can be seen to have been crossed, so that in *Tam za* (There behind), made some time during the 1980's, we can see elements of decalcomania and racleage. It has a slight look of a late Ernst, bird-like forms glide across black space. These experiments would seem to draw together the pioneering work of surrealists such as Ubac, and in Czechoslovakia, Korecek and Istler, in melted film emulsion, and graphic techniques associated with lithography and allied media.

Reichmann died on the 15th June 1991, by which time he had achieved a belated but deserved fame. I have attempted to give an idea of the scope of his work, but I know that I have left out far more than I have included. He can be considered a link between photographers like Cartier-

Bresson and Medkova, and a large part of his work can be thought of in connection with the concept of the found sign that I have discussed in the section on Medkova. But his work is not at all constrained by this categorisation, and he is clearly a more versatile artist than Medkova. She has a peculiar originality of vision and a tragic intensity undercut by the absurd, but her work is comparatively narrow, even obsessive in its scope, and this is what gives it such power. Even when working the same territory as her, Reichmann sacrifices none of his own originality, and often seems by contrast expansive and optimistic. (In a conversation with Alena Nadvornikova in 1994 she contrasted their temperaments). At the same time one can sense that the storm clouds often cross his mental sky, particularly in his earlier work, but he is saved from despair by a sense of delight with his finds. In the 1960's he made a series of books of landscape photographs of his native Moravia⁶. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss them here, but although they are not by any means his most interesting work, they do show how good a photographer he was. All his work is superbly photographed, and he has a strong sense of the tactile values of the image, as well as of composition and tone. There are any number of very competent photographers though, and what makes Reichmann outstanding is that this technique worked in the service of an imaginative vision of photography as a mediator between the mental and physical worlds.

⁶Reichmann, V. *Reka Morava*, Prague 1976, *Jizni Morava*, Prague 1977, *Northy Moravia*, Prague 1980.

MARTIN STEJSKAL - BACKWARDS TO INFINITY

Born in 1944, Martin Stejskal entered Surrealism in 1968. His earliest surrealist works seem to have been a series of drawings, fantastic satires drawn in white chalk on black paper. In 1969 he participated in a series of experiments with LSD conducted by Dr Ludvik Svab. The clinical nature of these experiments has to be emphasised, they were not simply trips. Their effect on Stejskal was profound, allowing him access to new methods of interpretation and methods of automatism that were to become the backbone of a remarkable body of work. The experiments and the subsequent unfolding of Stejskal's vision is documented in Svab's film *Backwards to Infinity*.

Backwards to Infinity explains how, after undergoing an LSD experiment, Stejskal was sitting in the waiting-room when a print of a van Gogh caught his eye. As he watched it, parts of the painting began to dissolve and reform in fantastic figurations. The bridge sprouted thousands of eyes and then became dragons and so on. This, of course, is where most "trips" end, but Stejskal pursued this metamorphosis through series after series of drawings and paintings and his trip was, in fact, a beginning. In fact, one of his first cycles, depicting the sequence of hallucinations of the Van Gogh was titled *The Trip*. The LSD-inspired works opened up several methods, the interpretation of parts of the original image, the successive metamorphosis of one object into another or its obliteration by a counter-interpretation such as in his invention of contourage. Another sequence begins with a photograph of a horse running past a house. The house becomes a bizarre cat's head, the horse, a mouse in his jaws.

An allied method allows the original image to be reduced to its formal elements and subsequently the interpretation emerges. In one for instance, an image of women shopping becomes a pattern which in subsequent stages evolves into a photograph of Bellmer's Doll. The best

known of these interpretative cycles is *Marx's Smile* 1972. A photograph of three surgeons at an operating table is, as before, schematised. Certain elements are emphasised (and here the term "foregrounded" seems especially apt) and a face emerges. The surgeons' hands become Marx's moustache, their heads his eyes. Finally the drawings are replaced by a photograph of Marx. What is so strange is that the beginning and end of the sequence are both "objective" - straightforward, documentary images with nothing apparently strange about them. At one level this works at the same level as those word games in which by the progressive substitution of letters, one word becomes another (pint, pant, pane, vane, vase etc.). However, Stejskal is doing far more than juggling with images. These interpretive cycles allow latent meanings to emerge that have far more value than a puzzle.

In another sequence we see the last photograph taken of Trotsky before his exile from Russia. His figure is silhouetted against the sky as he stands waving his hat. Trotsky gradually becomes a death's-head and the face of Stalin emerges.

The interpretive method of *konturaz* (contourage) begins, as before, with an original which is typically from a mundane, apparently objective source. *Three jets in the rear...whoosh!...That was the Europa Jet!* 1971 shows a family group, father hugging mother, son pointing excitedly at the vanishing jet. Stejskal traces around the jet, dotted lines connect the father's gaze to the embroidered jet. In the third stage a fish attaches itself to the mother's collar, odd structures appear out of the father's head, the son's eyes are framed by a letter box. In the next stage the jet is submerged by a network of "microillusions" and by the sixth stage the whole family has vanished under a welter of tiny conflicting images filling the whole space.

In *Demon vychodniho vetru* (Demon of the East Wind) 1970 only the final stage is revealed. A cathedral can just be spied through the maze of images that make the demon. The cluster of forms are drawn in ink with a suave cartoonish line, the individual forms are mixtures of the metallic and the animated. In effect, by filling the picture space they destroy space, although in *Demon...* there is some relief from this claustrophobia in the black sky above the monster.

In many of his early paintings Stejskal allows more room to breathe. *Prakmatka* (Mother Sling) 1969 depicts a kind of house/catapult with a fantastic ballistic stretching the catapult's band. ground and sky are simply depicted. The style is one of great simplicity, a kind of coloured drawing in effect, clearly outlined. All his earliest surrealist paintings share this disdain of the painterly. In the early seventies Stejskal developed a more fully realised illusionist style. *Comolunga* 1972 shows the peaks of mountains under snow. But beneath the snow there is a strange machine poking out, like a foot under a blanket. A rope dangles limply across the painting.

An early exhibition catalogue has a text in English by Andrew Lass. He discretely refers to Stejskal as a: "...young Czech representative of "dynamic painting"".

"His imagination is not conceived of statically, as a closed fantastic totality, but as a developing imaginative process registering the transformation and metamorphic relations of its individual parts...Martin stejskal's creative work is an open anti-game of the creative critical imagination directed against the false consciousness that civilisation's instruments are sovereign. This consciousness is nothing but a dishonest game , a game whose players - while believing that they are playing with great deftness

- are in fact accepting the rules of repressive tolerance of an endless circle of lethargy and rigidity."¹

Much of Stejskal's work is, in part, a work of criticism as well as of creativity. *Kvete masem* (Flowering Meat?) 1974 and *Vyvoj flika* 1977 are pictorial graphs, the first showing ridiculously shrinking legs of meat, rather unsavourily patched like old clothes. The second shows a sort of monster growing in size above an expanding note pad with five-bar gates drawn on it growing from left to right. Another work, *Poeta minor a poeta major* (Minor Poet and Major Poet) 1977 is a detoured calendar. Nonsensical number fall down the page, eventually turning into Hebrew letters. Below are two figures. The viewer guesses that the larger of the two is the major poet.

Around 1980 Stejskal's painting underwent its most drastic stylistic change. A small painting, *Dzin* 1980 depicts a glass of whisky and ice. The ice cube protruding from the glass has eye that momentarily gaze sadly and hopelessly out. The paint is smooth and extremely illusionistic. In the same year we find Stejskal painting *Tam dole* (Down There) 1980. Although he is still concerned with illusionist painting, the paint is more textured. He seems to be creating a new urban world in which the spatial paradoxes of Escher break down and decay. In this work escalators fold in upon themselves, to travel along them would be impossible. *Dolu* (Downstairs) 1981 develops the idea. The escalator emerges from what might be a wall or a floor. strange smoky luminescence drift out of it. The stairs are impossibly steep. The element of painterliness is more accentuated here, even in comparatively poor illustrations the texture is visible. This is partly the result of a different working method. The paint is now spread, scraped, or laid down as decalcomania. The results are

¹Lass, Andrew: *The Anti-Game Game*. In: Martin Stejskal: *Hra proti hre*. Dum Umeni, Brno (undated, but 1972-3).

interpreted in a way that brings together the intentional and the accidental. areas of raw paint are sometimes only very slightly altered, but it is enough to give the illusion of immense carefulness. Combined with the illusionist technique made richer by the textured underpainting, the whole is both more fleshed out and more spectral in appearance, as if real object materialised out of a puff of smoke.

Poznamky o hmote (Note of Matter) 1982 has a curious look of being both a hole in a wall, from which a tongue protrudes, and a scene from outer space. In fact many of Stejskal's painting of this time have a rather science-fiction feel about them, he would have been well employed on the sets of *Bladerunner*. An important series of the early to mid eighties was *Perpetuum Debile*. The perspective puzzles amid ruin in *Zapas s probouzenim* 1983 are something like a concrete bunker, but also maybe a helmet. A barricade of planks shields it, but there is no way in, the perspective defeats entry.

Another strand of Martin Stejskal's work that must be mentioned is his interest in alchemy and magic. Around 1970 this interest led him to try to read the works of Theofanos Abba² a hermetic scholar from the thirties and a member of the Universalia Society. His works were not publicly available and Stejskal had to apply to the government to obtain copies. His request was denied, but a few weeks later he noticed a small advertisement in a magazine on occult matters and replied. It emerged that the advertiser was none other than Theofanos Abba, now an old man.

²In this context Abba is the Hebrew for "father" and has nothing to do with Swedish pop groups.

Over the next couple of years, until Abba's death, Stejskal was his pupil, studying ideas that bore strong correspondences with those of Fulcanelli. The key was the ancient architecture of Prague, many of the old house signs were alchemical symbols (including the Golden Key where Svankmajer had his studio) the marks of a lost tradition were everywhere in the old and small towns. In 1972 Stejskal created his own tarot pack and a series of paintings reflected this influence. *Smrt* (Death) 1972 is an original interpretation of the tarot trump of that name. In a barren landscape either a window or a television screen reveals a skull and other bones bathed in red light. A crescent moon is just visible. The influence of his hermetic studies led him, after the Velvet Revolution, to produce a book of the magical sites of Bohemia.³ This was made in the style of a nineteenth century guide with black and white illustrations drawn by Stejskal.

In his more recent work, details of mysterious shapes, sometimes reminiscent of clothing, and often with a hint of fetishism, combine with occult signs across surfaces that both suggest and deny limitless spaces. In *Nebe a dudy* (Heaven and Bagpipes) 1992, the "bagpipes" are reminiscent of breasts in a leather bra. The scattered body is also a lunar landscape. The elements are torn or held together by sutures, magical signs are dotted across the picture. The central form in *Ocel Berana* (Steel Sheep) 1992 is reminiscent of a bat hanging on a trapeze. A stone above it could be falling from the sky or sitting on the ground. It is impossible for the viewer to get reliable bearings, what is up could be down, solid could be air, and so on. Sensuality is expressed and denied.

Stejskal's most recent experiments are in computer animation. This unexpected departure is one that could only come about through the

³Stejskal, Martin: *Labyrintem tajemna*. Paseka, Prague 1991.

wider availability of computers since 1989, and coincided more or less with the development of the Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group's website. I have not yet seen any of this work, and can make no further comment on it except that I would expect it to be the development of Stejskal's metamorphosis series into a time-base medium.

In some ways the interest in the arcane must seem contradictory to anyone who meets Stejskal. He is an urbane, apparently worldly man, not a new-age mystic. But as this research has frequently indicated, the surrealist's interest in magic is typically on the level of analogy. If certain kinds of mental metamorphosis and transformation seem to correspond, at least on the subjective level, with magical or mystical practices and beliefs, then it should be possible eventually to analyse them phenomenologically. But more than that, the writings and symbols of these traditions, being half revealed, half hidden, give an impetus to look beyond surfaces towards the source of the marvellous and the mundane alike, the mind. That both categories are one and the same, experienced differently, is hard to dispute, but too often they are seen to be separate and contradictory. Perhaps this is why too many expressions of the lyrical marvellous suffer from a kind of sweetness that needs the acidity of humour to balance it. Martin Stejskal undercuts his most lyrical imagery with sarcasm and wit, the seemingly mystical bears the grubby finger marks of the everyday. It is, above all, a bleak urban reality into which subjectivity bleeds, and if his world has something of the Prague of Meyrink's Golem as well as *Bladerunner*, it is not so surprising.

JAN SVANKMAJER AND EVA SVANKMAJEROVA

Jan Svankmajer - Alchemy of Touch

Of all the surrealists discussed in this research Jan Svankmajer presents a unique problem. While Medek or Effenberger remain little known even within the field of the study of Surrealism, although better known to the surrealists themselves, Svankmajer has enjoyed an increasingly high profile for over a decade, and is widely known to even the general public. Although his work is known in very different contexts to those in which he understands it to exist, there has been from the beginning an attempt to place his films in the context of Surrealism. Therefore we find, for example, *Afterimage 13*⁴ devoted to "Animating the Fantastic" essays by Roger Cardinal and, more extraordinarily, translations of essays and interviews by Effenberger. The book *Dark Alchemy*⁵ even has a lengthy essay by his friend and fellow member of the Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group, Frantisek Dryje, which contains significant extracts from essays by other members of the group, including Effenberger, Stejskal, Baron and Svab. Even in his English-speaking commentators Svankmajer seems to have been unusually lucky, Michael O'Pray has written several scrupulous essays on Svankmajer that have included both surrealist and wider historical perspectives.

Given that a considerable body of critical work exists on Svankmajer, I propose to deal with the trajectory of his career and an examination of the earlier films only very briefly, and concentrate instead on those

⁴*Afterimage 13. Animating the Fantastic.* London 1987.

⁵*Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Svankmajer.* ed. Peter Hames. Flicks Books, Trowbridge 1995.

aspects of his work that, although important, have received less attention. Specifically these will be:

1. His early work, particularly the sculptures, up to and including his early films.
2. His collaborations with Eva Svankmajerova, including collective paintings and the ceramics under the names E.J. and J.E. Kostelec.
3. His work within the group, including games and collective experiments.
4. The tactile experiments, their context within Surrealism, their effect on his films.
5. The feature films, their interrelation.

It is the nature of his work that each of these subjects is closely related to each other, and can not be discussed in isolation, so although I will deal with each under separate headings, they will bleed into each other.

Introduction: a Summary of the Career of Jan Svankmajer.

Jan Svankmajer was born on September 4th 1934 in Prague. He studied first at the College of Applied Arts and then later at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts in the Department of Puppetry. He variously studied etching, puppet making and stage design and direction. He began to make sculptures in the Informel tradition and worked in the Black Light Theatre. His first film was made in 1964, despite having no training in film-making. Most of the films that followed took the path of animation of real objects, juxtaposing the magical effect of their inner life with an ironic vision of human behaviour. An exception is the film *Zahrada* (The Garden) 1968, which is entirely live action and which Svankmajer

considers to be his first surrealist film, two years before joining the surrealist group. He joined the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group in 1970, and was later to cite his meeting with Vratislav Effenberger and Martin Stejskal and among the most decisive in his life. After his film *Leonardo's Diary* he was banned from making films for several years (1973-80). During this time he dedicated himself to surrealist group activities and to his tactile experiments. When he resumed film-making in 1980, the sense of the tactile in the films was greatly enhanced. His first feature film, *Neco z Alenky* (Something From Alice) was released in 1987 and made a great impact in the west. His later features *Lekce Faust* (Faust Lesson) 1994 and *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1997) have added greatly to his international prestige and influence.

Early Work: Sculpture to Film

Although Svankmajer was for a long time active in the theatre, as I have not seen any of his work in this field, which is, after all, by its nature more than usually ephemeral, I have very little to say about it. It is worth noting however, that he was involved in productions of both *Don Juan* and *Faust*, later to be subjects of his films, and was a puppeteer in Emil Radok's film *Johannes doktor Faust* (1958).

Looking at Svankmajer's early drawings, we find caustically witty cartooning in *Obeseni vlastniho palce* (The Hanging of My Thumb) 1958. He describes them as "Klee-like"⁶ and says that they were done during his national service. Another drawing of the same period, *Muzi* (Men) 1959, is made on crumpled paper in ink and watercolour shows similar figures, but here overlapping and merging in the mess of colour. They are

⁶Jan Svankmajer: *Transmutace smyslu/Transmutation of the Senses*, Edice Detail, Prague 1994.

Klee-like in sharing Klee's sense of "taking a line for a walk," and they seem to reflect his vision of man, at once playful and sardonic.

Svankmajer says that he could not resist "...the enticement of Prague's avant-garde artistic life of the beginning of the 1960s, engrossed in a Tapiés-Burro metamorphosis of structures of matter."⁷ This is seen at its most abstract in *Spad* (Descent) 1961, a relief consisting of gouged marks in a falling rhythm across the surface. I have no details of the medium of this work, but I would surmise that it is clay cast in bronze. *Vse, co potreba k umleti kavy* (All That You Need for Grinding Coffee) 1962, shows a major advance towards Svankmajer's mature style. Out of an assemblage of scrap wood and metal are two arms. They add a note of humour to the work. Sculptures of the following year introduce elements of strange metamorphic bubbling/melting, such as in *Velka korose* (Big Corrosion) and *Vytesneni* (Displacement) both of 1963. In the latter work the found element of a cupboard door dissolves on one side into a kidney/foetus shape. Works of 1964 emphasise the organic, metamorphic elements, but they are placed in ironic contexts. For instance in *Izolace preypacich hodin* (Isolation of the Hourglass) 1964, the central form, reminiscent in outline of the two bulbs of an hourglass, but full of holes, is placed in a structure within an hourglass frame and two arms emerge from it as if trying to escape their prison. A similar sense of imprisonment is evident in *Lahev utonula* (Bottle - Drowned Woman) 1964. In this instance the sculpture is placed in a bell-jar, with an arm reaching up, the hand just coming out of the jar's mouth.

Tri hlavy (Three Heads), 1965, is entirely biomorphic in nature, presenting a series of bulges and hollows, forms within forms, suggestive of heads. It would seem to be one of his most purely sculptural works. In

⁷Ibid.

an almost opposite spirit *Tabulae XIV* (Table XIV) 1966, consisting of laboratory bottles, boxes, sculptures with glass eyes, eggs, with each part of the work marked fig.1., fig.2., etc, resembles later works, both the etchings and objects of the 1970's and the objects Alice sees in her descent into Wonderland.

I have not seen any works of the late 1960's and do not know if there is any substantial body of work outside of the films of that time, so the trail picks up with the objects and prints just mentioned, in particular the series *Prirodopisny kabinet* (Natural Science Cabinet). Both the objects and etchings are made from ready-made elements, the etchings are collaged out of medical, anatomical, botanical and zoological engravings, transferred to the etching plate and reworked. They parody with wicked glee their original source. The objects transform stuffed animals, skulls and eggs into new beings. *Prirodopisny kabinet I*, for instance, has a human skull, but his body is a tortoise shell. He is uselessly winged and his genitals are a bird's foot clutching an egg. Snail shell eyes gaze at several other broken eggs. The aping of early science and its follies is apparent, (think of those curious mermaids, half fish, half monkey, or the furred trout that was supposed to have evolved its fur from existing in cold water!). Thus this series pays homage to those crazed collectors of curiosities which include Svankmajer's spiritual patron, the Emperor Rudolf II. Vratislav Effenberger says of these works:

" Thus the natural science denying the dual form of rationality - the rationality of natural science and modern art - comes into being. And still it is obvious that natural science does not adopt an uninvolved attitude. It shows the limits of rationalist routine, rather anxious like some old maid in its contemporary dressed-up appearance. With a smile it understands the old natural science wisdom together with its punctilious diligence, comical in a charming way. Last but not least there are fantastic visions which can be seen in a dream, a space full of imaginary animals

whose descriptive numbers seem to refer both to a didactic narration and a hermetic initiation.

They resemble a school cabinet with the insidiousness of sexual symbolism unveiled to young eyes on the seamy side of school books, through the horrible humour of which vitality resists deadening categorization."⁸

The Bohemian Hermaphrodite - the Collaborations of Eva and Jan Svankmajer

As I have already noted, there is an unusual and strong tradition of creative collaboration by couples in Czechoslovak Surrealism. Even if Toyen and Styrsky do not quite match up to conventional standards of the couple, they were certainly very close, and their work together was one of mutual influence and support. For all the time they were together, their work moved in parallel directions. After Styrsky's death in 1942 Toyen's creative partnership with Jindrich Heisler followed a slightly different path as Heisler was not a painter, but nevertheless the collaboration seems to have been both close and intense.

In the case of Mikulas Medek and Emila Medkova, we can see them working at similar themes in different media. What is more surprising is the ways in which her photographs and his paintings resemble each other stylistically. Both reach into a chaotic magma to find a new, irrational order. Significantly, in the Zodiac albums, they made joint answers to Effenberger's questions.

With Svankmajer and Svankmajerova we approach a new closeness of the working relationship where individual works may fuse into one and where many levels of collaboration may exist over a large body of work.

⁸Effenberger, Vratislav: *Jan Svankmajer's Natural science Cabinet*. In. *Jan Svankmajer: Transmutace smyslu/Transmutation of the Senses*, dice Detail, Prague 1994.

For instance, in the films, Svankmajerova often makes significant contributions. Example would be the Queen of Hearts in *Alice*, or the court of the King of Portugal or the stage set in *Faust*. This is a distinct contribution made visible by the mannerisms of her style as a visual artist. It is subordinate in this instance to Svankmajer's role as director and writer of the film.

There is a series of unusual jointly made paintings in which their individual contributions are both visible, but rub up against each other as a series of questions and answers create a strange friction. The interplay between question and answer, painting and tactile object, leads to a curious hybrid where the sumptuousness of paint and the somewhat repellent appearance of old socks and scrubbing brushes jammed together creates a confusion of aesthetic and anti-aesthetic sensations.

The majolica sculptures are perhaps where the respective arts of Jan and Eva approximate each other most closely. Majolica is a technique originating from Mallorca (hence the name) and made popular in Italy, where red clay pottery is glazed white and then often painted with coloured glazes. Although originally often crude and simple, the technique has, in the hands of more cunning potters given us a strange array of dishes in the shape of the vegetables that they might be designed to contain. The Svankmajers subvert this tradition with a series of works that overturn their immediate, utilitarian purpose and concentrate on their other symbolic use. For instance, *Maly a velky demon* (Small and Large Demon) 1990, is a jar, the body of which is a man's head (a head familiar to viewers of *Dimensions of Dialogue*) which has sprouted arms and legs and a gigantic pair of ears as large as himself. The ears are red-veined and presumably double as handles. The lid of the jar is a female head, gazing serenely above the male demon. *Po*

skole (After School) 1992, resembles a bird, consisting of a head, a small body, legs, and to balance the whole an arm projecting from the back like a tail. It is described as a sugar-bowl. Another piece apes nineteenth century bourgeois classical, *Beethoven portretovany Archiboldem* (Beethoven portrayed by Archimboldo) 1993, resembles those busts found in old middle-class living rooms that assure us that the owners are people of culture. But Beethoven is represented by a cluster of sea-shells, even if we go beyond this into the appearance of the face the composer looks rather fishy and goggle eyed.

"The ceramic resurrection reveals latent meanings of the original models; their relationship is a relationship of communicating vessels (Breton)...The snow-white or meaningfully coloured surfaces of the objects hide cavities - for food, for fingers. To guess the purpose of the object from which we take or eat something, we must not only watch it but also stroke it, lick it, taste it with a mixture of pleasure and fear...This is majolica which has the logic of humour and dream, communicating vessels of desire and its fulfilment."⁹

Tactilism - Touch and the Imagination

As I have said, Svankmajer's experiments in tactilism began after he was banned from film-making in 1970. However, this strand of his work has a pre-history both in his earlier works and in Surrealism. Remember that Karel Teige wished to create an *Ars Una*, with arts for all the senses. In this he was developing Futurist ideas, but for the most part this idea was never taken beyond theorising. Introducing *Perversion for Five Senses*, described as a "synesthetical game of analogy", Svankmajer quotes Teige's *Second Manifesto of Poetism*:

"It would seem that in the course of analysing chromatic hearing, we arrive at a deep universal law valid for various other phenomena and forms of human thinking. Psychological

⁹Nadvornikova, Alena: *Communicating Dishes* in: *Jan Svankmajer: Transmutace smyslu/Transmutation of the Senses*, Edice Detail, Prague 1994.

experiments have shown that even such sensations as smell, taste , touch, as well as bodily well-being and pain, can be translated into optical images; that one can attribute colours to numbers, the days of the week, vowels (Rimbaud), and other systems. It has in fact been demonstrated that oneiric (dream-like) visual images can be aroused by auditive or tactile sensations which yet again points to a certain correspondence, to a certain functional complementarism and sensorial equivalences."¹⁰

The tactile qualities of Svankmajer's early sculptures are apparent, and even in his early films a fascination with the tactility of things is apparent. For instance, in *J.S. Bach Fantasia g-moll* (J.S. Bach Fantasy in G-minor) 1965, we are confronted with endless surfaces in close up. As they disintegrate or build up, we are in the position of one who could reach out and touch them - almost. There is a scene at the beginning of *Zahrada* (The Garden) 1968, where the sense of touch is emphasised through disgust. It opens with two streams of liquid hitting a tin can. It turns out to be two men pissing. They are old friends who have not seen each other for a long time. Having relieved themselves, they tug affectionately at each others cheeks and eat some food. The viewer is uncomfortably aware of the fact that their hands are unwashed and pissy, so each contact is contaminated, repulsive.

To turn to the tactile experiments themselves, as has already been said, they began after Svankmajer had been banned from making films. I remain unsure of Svankmajer's original motivation, he says that "At first it seemed merely a chance play".¹¹

Is it possible that, isolated from the main outlet for his work, film, forced further upon more inward-turning resources, that is his surrealist friends

¹⁰Quoted in: Svankmajer, Jan: *Hmat a imaginace*, Kozoroh, Prague 1994. p.233.

¹¹Ibid. p.234.

and his own imagination, the tactile objects represent sources of both comfort and pleasure on the one hand (made for stroking, masturbation) and punishment (cutting, scratching, tearing)? There is a definite sado-masochistic element in the objects, which are of extraordinary variety of form and purpose. For instance, there are simple objects where fur, pins, corks, have been glued to wooden spoons. The work, perhaps of a few moments. On the other hand, a piece like *Otroctvi utilitarismu (taktilni zidle)* (Useful Slave (tactile chair)) 1977 obviously cost a great deal more effort and thought. This began as a conventional wooden chair, to which have been fixed dozens of rubber glove fingers, scrubbing brushes, cheese graters. The whole thing is a mixture of simultaneous and contradictory sensations. Other works include mysterious boxes with sleeves. One is intended to extend one's hands inside and feel a variety of objects, a sock full of drawing pins, some chicken wire, a crocodile's head. These objects formed the basis of a collective game in the group, where the members drew or wrote up their experience of the invisible objects.¹²

There is a further category of tactile experimentation, that of the *gestural sculpture*. At it's simplest level this involves squeezing a piece of clay in one's hand. It bears the imprint of both the force of the hand and of the emotion of that moment. Left at this level the experimentation would probably have little interest to anyone except Svankmajer himself, but these gestures, a kind of three-dimensional automatism, are incorporated

¹²I remember at the exhibition *Communication of Dreams* in 1992 in Cardiff, a number of these objects were on show. I had already seen some in Svankamjer's studio in Prague. I went round the exhibits, happily sitting on the chair and putting my hands into the boxes. As I came round the corner I saw a notice saying "Please do not touch the objects". Although one recognises the need to preserve an object on exhibition from harm, there is a wonderful absurdity about not being able to touch a tactile object. Rather like Nougé's notice that read "It is forbidden to read this notice".

into other tactile works and other media. Two pieces entitled *Taktilni marioneta* (Tactile Marionette) both of 1990, consist of a mass of clay gestures strung together as a roughly human puppet. They are shown in *Jan Svankmajer: Transmutace smyslu/Transmutation of the Senses* in a double spread with a similar piece titled *Nemrtvy - nezivy* (The Non-Dead - Non-Alive) 1993. An equation can be deduced here; the puppet, neither dead nor alive, the use of clay, Svankmajer's immersion in the magical traditions of Prague lead us to suppose that he intends these figures as a kind of Golem.

The Golem, it will be remembered, was the creature fashioned out of clay by Rabbi Loew to protect the Prague ghetto. To animate the creature the rabbi wrote the Hebrew word for life "Ameth" on it's brow. Because he was ceaselessly active, or perhaps because he was not of God's creation, each sabbath eve, Loew would erase the Aleph, leaving the word "Meth" - death. One day he forgot, and the Golem ran amuck. In some versions it is another rabbi who creates the Golem and when he finally erases the Aleph the Golem collapses into a mass of clay on top of him and crushes him. A famous novel *Der Golem* by Gustav Meyrink is based on this story, as are several films.

The Golem is central to Svankmajer's conception of animation, which is magical in intent, or rather magic is the analogical equivalent of his animation. I shall examine some of these aspects in my discussion of his film work. The Golem idea is taken further in a relief *Loutka Golema* (Golem Puppet) 1993. This combines gestural pieces with doll-like hands and legs attached to a board on which is painted the Golem's outline.

This piece also relates to another area of Svankmajer's tactile experiments, the tactile collages and realised photographs. A pair of

collages of 1978, *Muz* and *Zena*, (Man and Woman) show as abstract diagrams the male and female genitals. Each is made of torn and cut paper to which has been added fur and drawing pins, point upwards. They are both seductive and dangerous, the fur inviting caresses, the pins repelling and wounding. *Dvoubarevna* (Two Colours) 1978, is, at first sight, rather gentler. Positive and negative shapes are created by paper-cuts almost in the manner of a Matisse, fur is attached at various points. But examined more closely the cut-out material turns out to be emery paper, so the same pattern of sensuality and pain presents itself.

The realised photographs are more visual in nature, the given visual aspect is subverted by the tactile. Take *Fosilie* (Fossil) 1990 for instance. It is a photograph of two men, apparently prominent communists, shaking hands. The addition of a series of clay gestures creates a new interpretation of the image. The clay has a bone-like appearance, creating new absurd noses and travelling down the arms. A clay arm of the dark suited man on the left is apparently reaching into the trousers of the man on the right who is wearing a clay medal. Their apparent dignity is usurped, they are fossils engaged in a rather dodgy activity.

Another work of the same year, *Sila zadosti (venvane E.S.)* (The Power of Desire (dedicated to E.S.)) shows a crowd reaching out their arms towards something or someone obscured by a cheeseboard stuck over the photograph. The presence of German soldiers indicates that the hidden figure is probably that of a Nazi leader, possibly Hitler. To the left of the photo is a strip of fur and a wooden spoon. The cheeseboard has on it two pieces of clay and a tuft of fur. This being the new focus of attention, we can surmise that it represents desire on various levels. There is the irony of flat photographic beings reaching out hopelessly to an embodiment of desire that exists in three dimensions, there is the

possibility of the viewer touching the board as thus expressing (imperfectly) their own desire. Again, the visual is both completed and disrupted by the tactile. Do the tactile forms have a specific meaning? I have no first-hand information on this, but would suggest that the clay forms, one flat with dimpled hollows, the other rounded and projecting from the surface, might be male and female. The fur is what unites them in sensuality.

Svankmajer has even taken the tactile into the textual. *Taktilni basen* (Tactile Poem) 1988, is a series of clay shapes arranged like a text upon a board. Formally it resembles some of Reichmann's photographs of tree-bark arranged in a similar manner. The title does suggest that individual shapes have specific meanings, but these meanings are hidden from us. The frustration of being refused meaning can only be overcome by submerging the instinct of the visual reader into a tactile exploration. The following year Svankmajer made *Co je milosrdenstvi?* (What is Charity?) 1989, an interpretation of a poem by Eva Svankmajerova. He has made in the form of a rebus, so that the text is largely present, but some words are substituted by clay shapes. The sense that the gestures must *mean* something is accentuated by their juxtaposition with words. Anyone familiar with the text could, presumably, de-code the gesture in a literal fashion by reading the poem and supplying the missing words. But would this not be to fail to understand the tactile interpretation? A poem translated into another language inevitably loses some meanings and accrues others. Translated into the language of touch what do these words mean?

Orality and Tactility in the later short films of Jan Svankmajer

"In the early 80s, when I was allowed to start making animated films again, I became obsessed with the idea of making use of my tactile "experience". At first it may seem paradoxical. After

all film is an overwhelmingly audiovisual form. later when I started working on Poe's story The Fall of the House of Usher (there was one condition attached to my return of film-making - that I would not make films based on my own scripts, but on "classical" fiction) and when I was beginning to become familiar with the intricate world of Poe's imagery, I realised what significant role touch played in his psychological study of pathological behaviour.....Touch played an important role in my older films (e.g. the close-ups of structures and objects). Since the 80s (The Fall of the House of Usher, Dimensions of Dialogue, The Pit, the Pendulum and Hope etc) I have been trying to evoke these ignored or repressed tactile sensations that can enrich the emotive arsenal of available means of expression used in film making."¹³

In fact, all the senses are accentuated, exaggerated. Real sounds are foregrounded and used with music or in place of music. They are united in *Možnosti dialogu* (Dimensions of Dialogue) 1982, while in *Do pivnice (Do sklepa)* (Down to the Cellar) 1982 the sounds scrape scratch and clank in a way that, although perfectly synchronised, seems curiously disjointed, accentuates the dream-like element by being too real to be real. The loving couple of the second sequence dissolve into each other in their love-making. The clay ripples sensuously until once again they are facing each other. The dispute that arises over a little blob of left over clay (sperm?) leads them to maul each other into annihilation. Both the initial love-making and the later aggression connect with the sense of touch as the dynamic force of the action. When one gouges out the face of the other, the force of that anger is felt through the screen.

The same sort of action is given a more comic twist in *Muzne hry* (Virile Games) 1988. The footballers constantly smash each other to pulp, the violence is certainly of the Tom and Jerry kind, but because the figures are three dimensional and apparently closer to reality than drawn animation, the impact of that violence is more keenly felt. So when a

¹³Svankmajer, Jan: *Hmat a imaginace*, Kozoroh, Prague 1994 p.234

footballer has a tap smashed onto his face, the viewer feel its impact. When the tap is turned on and he pours through the tap like water, the violence seems initially heightened and then dissolved (like the figure) as the occurrence becomes more manifestly absurd.

One of the most common themes is that of eating, in itself an eminently tactile pursuit which is also potentially erotic and aggressive. The Archimboldo heads in *Dimensions of Dialogue* swallow each other, an analogy of sex at its most primitive and aggressive. *Zamilovane maso* (Meat in Love) 1989 is a duet between two slices of steak that are cut off a large piece of meat, embrace, dance and finally fall into a plate of flour before being forked into a hot frying pan and cooked. In *Jidlo* (Food) 1992 eating is, as the title suggests, central to the film. In the first sequence the sadistic manipulations required to obtain food again foreground the tactile, savage twists and prods to make the human vending machines work. Great attention is paid to the textures of the food, it is unattractive, it looks rather greasy and stolid. In the second sequence, Lunch, there is no food at all and the protagonists, eat the contents of the table, the table itself, their own clothes and finally one is about to devour the other. The final sequence shows scenes of autophagia, people eating their own limbs as the height of epicureanism. One of the strangest being when a woman squeezes two half lemons over her severed breasts, a curious formal rhyme.

The Feature Films: Alice - Faust - Conspirators of Desire

Although he had been making films since 1964, in was not until the 1980s that Svankmajer attempted a feature length film. Released in 1987, *Neco z Alenky* (Something From Alice) was an international success. In Britain alone it enjoyed a surprisingly wide circulation for a foreign art film, and was shown twice during the Christmas of 1987,

once in daily instalments and once in its entirety. Some of its success was no doubt due to its subject, an adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. I remember when I went to see it shortly after its release at the ICA, somebody had brought their young son, who laughed uproariously throughout. I think Svankmajer would have liked that, but it perhaps suggest a confusion on the part of the public, an animated film of *Alice in Wonderland* must imply a target audience of children.

The themes of the short films are present, the accentuated sound, a wide range of tactile experiences and again and again that of eating. Alice eats and drinks, she drinks ink and eats cakes to grow and shrink. When she eats the caterpillar's mushroom, it is a wooden darning-mushroom, so the act of biting is accentuated. The White Rabbit is the presiding demon of the film, instead of the rather foolish character of the book, he is vicious and dangerous. He starts off as a stuffed rabbit in a case, and when he comes to life he continually leaks sawdust, which he then gobbles up. The oral and the repulsiveness of eating thrusts at us again when, at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, the Dormouse, not the cuddly, sleepy creature of the book, but a slinky animated stole straight out of Toyen's paintings, slides out of the tea-pot and gobbles the scraps and slops on the table. He is the only one to get any nourishment out of the tea party.

I do not intend to discuss *Alice* at any great length in isolation, as it has been extensively discussed over the last decade, but rather I shall discuss it in relation to *Lekce Faust* (Faust Lesson) 1994.

Given the success of *Alice* it is perhaps surprising that it took so long for Svankmajer to make another feature, even given the intensive work involved in making real animation films. For one thing, he did make seven new short films, but the main problems seem to have been financial.

When I first met Svankmajer in 1991 he was just starting work on *Faust*, and despite having support from BBC2 and Channel 4 and several other European television and film bodies, he was plagued by the shortage of money. An irony here, previously he had everything provided for him by the state studio under the communists, but was constrained by them as to what he filmed. Now he could make a film about anything he liked politically, but was now constrained by the market.

The character of Faust is played by Petr Cepek, a leading Czech actor, who had for Svankmajer the added attraction of his physical resemblance to Walter Matthau.¹⁴ Another order of problems with *Faust* was the run of bad luck that culminated in Cepek's death.¹⁵

Briefly, Svankmajer's *Faust* is a reworking of the Faust legend into a kind of parable of consumerism. The protagonist *becomes* Faust, he is an ordinary, rather shabby citizen who is tricked into playing the part of Faust and thus becoming the agent of his own damnation. In the opening sequence he is handed a map which shows a location in the old town. When he investigates this place he finds a theatre dressing room with the robes and make-up for *Faust*. He dresses up and reads from the script. Nonchalantly, he animates a homonculus, then destroys it, finds himself

¹⁴According to Ludvik Svab. (Conversation, August 1994.)

¹⁵ The following quote from Svankmajer's diary of the filming of *Faust* (Svankmajer, *Jan Svankmajer's Faust: the script*, translated by Valerie Mason. Flicks Books, Trowbridge 1996) is indicative of these troubles. "Another victim of Mephisto? Before we even started shooting, the animator who was going to be working on the film with Bedrich Glaser [animator] cut her wrists. During shooting, our best technician, the carpenter, went mad (having done everything necessary for the film). He left the stove (the athanor) half-built in the alchemist's kitchen and told us his doctor had said he was mentally ill. The second day he was found hanging in a barn. Everything is going to be blamed on *Faust!*" p.ix.

"2 September. Did a couple of shots in Tynska Street in the Old town. While shooting Cepek's feet running, the cameraman tripped (on completely flat ground), fell and broke his front tooth, grazed himself all down his face and hands, and hurt his knee. Camera destroyed." p.x."

"...Someone stole Kallista's car from outside his house in broad daylight. And ran over his dog. Let's be reasonable. We can't blame it all on *Faust.*" p.xi.

on stage, escapes and finds himself in a restaurant where two characters, the same who handed him the map at the beginning, push a bag towards him. He runs off with it and finds ceremonial robes, a magic circle, censer and other implements of evocation. He calls up Mephistopheles in a sequence that combines marvellous terror with comedy. Mephistopheles appears initially as a demon face with tusk-like fangs which he changes to resemble Faust. Having sold his soul to Mephistopheles, Faust embarks on his short career as a miracle-worker at the court of the King of Portugal. Eventually, realising he is damned, he discards his robes and flees, leaving the building that is the locus for these events, knocking over a man who is entering at the same time, the next victim/Faust. He is run over by a car which, strangely turns out to have no driver, and an old man, who previously had been seen with a human leg wrapped in newspaper, steals his, now severed leg and runs off with it.

I would suggest that *Alice* and *Faust* are a dialectical pair, in that they undergo broadly parallel experiences, but their differing reactions create for them different fates, these two films should be viewed in relation to each other as a larger argument. What happens to both Faust and Alice is that they are taken on an inner journey and encounter a variety of marvels. During this journey neither is master of their fate. Where they differ is in their attitude to their experiences. Alice is at first wondering, then fearful, then defiant. Throughout she is brave and takes necessary risks to achieve her aim. She is curious, investigative, experimental. Faust, on the other hand, is passive and strangely disenchanted. He moves from one event to another almost as if he does not believe in their reality. His face shows puzzlement or amusement or irritation where dismay and wonder are called for. Only when he calls upon Mephistopheles does he become fully alive, and in the moments of disgust and terror leading to his death. At various times he becomes a

Faust puppet in the play within the film, and we see the hands of an otherwise unseen puppeteer pulling his strings. Although he removes the puppet head and rids himself of the literal strings, we know that someone is pulling his strings all along.

Faust becomes his own puppet and Alice becomes her own doll. When Alice shrinks, we see her become the girl's doll seen at the beginning of the film. The difference is that she retains her autonomy, nobody pulls *her* strings. Alice is always very direct, even though she is continually moving into the unknown, she is brave. Faust reveals a shifty and furtive side of his character when Cornelius and Valdes, the two men who haunt and manipulate him, pass him the bag of magical regalia, he makes off like a thief.

To a major degree the difference between Alice and Faust, both films and characters resides in Svankmajer's views on childhood, which he has spoken and written about several times. He does not view childhood with rose-tinted spectacles, the fact that Svankmajer grew up during the Nazi occupation suggests some of the anxieties that have been transmitted to his films, but nevertheless, he does see a particular sense of optimism, intransigence and, perhaps above all, a spirit of playfulness, in the experience of childhood that he has attempted to keep.

" I have never viewed my childhood as something that I have left behind me"¹⁶

"The vision of childhood as a paradise lost is certainly a distortion. From the start, our entry into the world is probably an unpleasant experience. Afterwards, childhood itself is likewise full of constraints, injustices and cruelty. Moreover, children are

¹⁶*Svankmajer on Alice in: Afterimage* 13 Autumn 1987.

pressured into adulthood - an error which, from their point of view, must look analogous to the mistaken idealisation of childhood which we adopt as we get older.

No-one knows than a child how to be cruel...But in no way do I mean to disavow my own childhood by this, I just want to retain an active attitude towards it."¹⁷

"Play is a substantial part of my life. Of course, not every kind of play. I have spent my life developing my childhood. In fact all life is merely looking (and building) an "alternative world" of a kind. I perceive it as a certain infantilism which probably bothers people around me. The truth is that I am willing to ruin my family because of these games. They are essentially games of chance (in the sense of the risk of children's games, where everything is actually also at stake)."¹⁸

Alice fights. At the end of the film she picks up the scissors that the White Rabbit has used as a weapon and says that perhaps she will cut off the White Rabbit's head. She apparently contemplates a return bout with some relish. Faust acquiesces, he goes along with events. Although *Faust* was conceived in part as a parable of consumerism, he is also in the position of those who acquiesced with totalitarianism. Faust is seduced by the promise of power and riches and the satisfaction of his desires, but would he be that bothered if nothing were on offer? He is an easy man and it is his easiness that is his undoing.

In all the versions of Faust, the achievement of his desires bring disillusionment, nothing meets his expectations. Svankmajer sees modern, post-communist Czech society in exactly that position, and therefore in need of warning and waking up. Desire and dream are reduced to consumables, Coca-cola and MacDonalds are everywhere and people are told to want them. Meanwhile, the freedom that so many

¹⁷Kral, Petr: *Questions to Jan Svankmajer in: Afterimage 13* Autumn 1987.

¹⁸Svankmajer, Jan: *Z anket a rozhovoru* (From Surveys and Interviews) in: Jan Svankmajer: *Transmutace smyslu* Edice Detail Prague 1994.

apparently wanted and finally stood up for in the "Velvet Revolution" is reduced to a change of master, the Market instead of the State. This is, of course, the same everywhere, but made more poignant in a country where public freedom was for so long curtailed and now the inner resistance to an insupportable public sphere is flattened out into a post-modern purgatory.

Alice and *Faust* are, respectively, Svankmajer's Songs of Innocence and Experience. But whereas in Blake innocence is endlessly joyous and paradisiac and experience counters this with passion, anger and death, for Svankmajer the world is always a dangerous place and it is our attitude to the world and the many threats to our integrity that takes centre stage.

Conspirators of Pleasure

Svankmajer's third feature film, *Conspirators of Pleasure*, released in 1996, represents in formal terms a change in direction. Almost all the film is live action, there is almost no animation until the last few minutes, where it erupts into a kind of magical feast. This must be felt as a disappointment to many who watch Svankmajer's films precisely for the brilliant and imaginative animation that is his trademark. Instead, we are given a curious comedy of manners where various people, all apparently separate, but curiously connected, act out their secret desires. Because, at the time of writing, the film is still recently released and its meanings and impact are hard to judge, most of the critical writing so far has been film reviews in magazines. The name most frequently mentioned as a precursor to *Conspirators* is that of Bunuel. It is surely the Bunuel of *Exterminating Angel*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* or *That Obscure Object of Desire* that is being considered, although each of these films has an elegance that is completely missing from *Conspirators of*

Pleasure, it is an exceedingly scruffy film. One expects Svankmajer films to accentuate the worn, scuffed, battered, and something of this is usually present in his human characters, the spy in *Tichy tyden v dome* (Quiet Week in a House), the two men in *Zahrada* (Garden) or the bizarre characters that populate the frightening underworld of *Do pivnice* (Down to the Cellar). I have mentioned the down-at-heel appearance of Faust in the film of that name, and this is also the case here. Most of the characters are shabby and unattractive in appearance, one could imagine that most of them are only nodding acquaintances with personal hygiene.

Although this has been described as Svankmajer's funniest film, it is pervaded by a deep melancholy and pessimism which undercuts the comedic elements, and it is this that differentiates it from Bunuel, who is typically more heartless. As the characters act out their desires the viewer sees how isolated they are. For instance, the news vendor creates a masturbation machine in order to act out his fantasies centred on a glamorous newsreader. The machine imitates all the mechanical aspects of sex, machine arms with mannikin hands clasp his body, a half closed hand grasps and pumps his penis, he has a zoom control on his television to bring the image of the beloved newsreader closer, but of course, despite all this, she is an absence. The newsreader, in other scenes, is at home, tearful. Her husband returns home and locks himself in his workshop. It turns out that he is a tactile fetishist and is creating a mass of objects that are in fact Svankmajer's own collection. In her frustration the newsreader buys two huge carp for an as yet undisclosed purpose.

For several of the characters the only thing that seems to link them is the postwoman whose own fetish is centred on rolling bread into small balls. A middle-aged landlady and her younger male tenant are involved in sadistic fantasies of each other which launch us, at last, into a furious,

burlesque animation sequence. The tenant creates a model of his landlady, and for himself a huge cockerel's head constructed out of pornographic magazines. The landlady for her part has created a model of the tenant and the uniform of a dominatrix.

On Sunday all the characters act out their fantasies. When the news vendor starts up his masturbation machine the newsreader seems to be dissolving simultaneously into sexual ecstasy, then we discover that while reading the news she has her feet in a bowl of water and her toes are being sucked by the carp. Her husband strokes himself with the tactile objects and the sequence speeds up as he reaches a sensual frenzy. Meanwhile, the tenant drives into the country to a deserted house, ties up the doll of his landlady and dons his costume, becomes Loplop the Bird Superior. The landlady enters a cellar and begins to act out her fantasy. The dolls come to life, the tenant doll cowers as the landlady whips him, tearing his cloth skin and revealing the straw that fills him. The tenant flies above the landlady doll, terrifying her and throwing rocks at her until at last one huge rock crushes the doll. The landlady finishes her ritual by drowning her doll.

Returning to reality, the tenant packs away his things and drives home. On return he finds the police in the house, among them the tactile fetishist. He sees into his landlady's room and sees that she has been crushed by the same boulder that he dropped on the doll. He goes up to his room to find that it is set out just as in the cellar where the landlady had conducted her ritual, in the middle is the a chair with a bowl of water on the seat where she drowned the doll of him. He approaches the chair, knowing he is doomed and the film fades.

Svankmajer has been greatly concerned with the processes of communication and with its breakdown. In *Dimensions of Dialogue* the dialogue between lovers seems at first ideal, but descends into mutually destructive violence. The dialogue between two heads who stick out their tongues at each other has them initially matching each other, the process disintegrating into chaos. Here the lack of communication is almost total throughout. Nobody acknowledges their passions to each other, they actively exclude all others. This I would consider to be an important critical point that Svankmajer is making. When the film was released in London, Svankmajer published a satirical praise of masturbation in *Time Out*.¹⁹ He appears to be making one series of statements in good faith, while doubling them up with Swiftian modest proposals for masturbation machines installed in workplaces to save time.

Svankmajer is unique among Czech surrealists in gaining international public recognition, as opposed to merely national recognition or merely in artistic or surrealist circles. However, the range of his activities extends well beyond the confines of his films and is, in fact centred on the activities he shares with his wife and surrealist comrades, not least the continued publication of *Analogon*. His power as a film-maker comes from the fact that he works beyond the ordinary confines of film and is able to bring non-filmic elements into the medium of film to enrich its language, and this in turn depends to a large degree on his activities within the Surrealist Group. He is already considered by many to be the most important maker of animated films alive and there is every indication that his reputation will continue to grow.

¹⁹ Svankmajer, Jan: *Coming Attractions*. In: *Time Out* no.1382. Feb 12-19 1997.

Eva Svankmajerova

At first glance, the casual viewer of Eva Svankmajerova's early painting might assume that she was one of the sprightlier naive painters. A closer examination would show, not only great skill, but a sophisticated imaginative vision that is at odds with the apparent naivety of her style. This "naivety" is employed as a stylistic ruse, it allows certain liberties, of scale, proportion, juxtaposition, to be employed without immediately jarring as they might in a more realist context. She plays language games with both the style and the content of her pictures, for instance in her Rebus series. An early example, from before her entry into Surrealism, *Beda obrazu, který potřebuje slovní vyklad* (Woeful reflection, which needs a dictionary explanation) 1967, demonstrates both the superficial unity of image and title and its breakdown. The tearful face hanging upside-down, the letters scattered across the surface, the pregnant nude, her womb exposed, the mouth in the letter "B", all work as a composition, but the sense of the painting is not immediately obvious. What is the explanation? Perhaps in part it is that the dictionary meanings of words always miss the point, can never explain the unhappiness in the woman's face?

In a 1973 statement on rebus, Svankmajerova said:

"A rebus is a picture in which it is possible to perceive the visualisation of a statement. The statement is cast in images which, however, do not resemble the statement, in spite of the fact that they resemble it with mischievous accuracy. The statement is broken up into images, visions, actions which do not illustrate the meaning of the statement but which express themselves independently. Thus a new vision arises, a different story which by means of confused logic draws on the statement for its very existence - defenceless, abused, insignificant, the statement undergoes a thorough description. It is abused into a new existence, the creation of something new which does not confirm the statement but ruins and destroys it. The rebus

becomes the proof of the statement's potential. Proof of the devaluation of words. The rebus is a dry virtuoso performance of the impossibility of a statement, the absurdity of information, the superfluity of announcement. The rebus re-evaluates understanding which should exist between two beings who are in communication with one another. The rebus points out the infinite futility of words."²⁰

Which is saying quite a lot about the futility of words.

Beda obrazu... is therefore, both communication and its failure, construction of a message and its deconstruction within a single image. At one level the point of a rebus is likely to be missed unless one is fluent in the language in which it is written. Simple equivalents, such as "I", "eye" and the image of the eye are easy enough, but the breakdown of more complex units of language into images are made difficult by the specificity of language. It has to be emphasised that these are not barren diagrams of linguistic logic, but vital paintings of great charm, feeling and humour.

It is the humour of her work that is uppermost in a gentle early painting *Snidane v trave* (Dejeuner sur L'Herbe) 1968. As the title suggests, it is a parody of the Manet, two naked men sit with the woman in the foreground, another clothed woman bathing in the background. A more anxious vision is evident in *Dopravni prestupky* (Traffic Offence) 1972. A swimsuited woman lies in the road. She is larger than the bleak modern building behind her, beneath her the paving mimics the motion of waves. The following year she paints *Mestska divka* (City Girl), an Archimboldo head made of hungry birds swallowing fish. A bridge stretches behind her towards the city. The Archimboldesque double image is a frequent feature of the paintings of the seventies. Women's bodies become hillsides, as in *Pobrezi s milenci* (Beach With Lover) 1975, or integrate

²⁰Statement by Eva Svankmajerova. In: *Communication of Dreams: An Exhibition by Jan and Eva Svankmajer*. Cardiff 1992.

land and sea, as in *Laska na prvni pohled* (Love at first Sight) 1973. In the latter, the "first sight" of the landscape transforms it into the image of desire.

Sekce (Section) 1976 is a painful image. On the centre of a table is a baby on what could be a cushion or a womb. Also on the table are scissors and thread. This belongs to a sequence of works, *Cisarsky rez* (Caesarian) reflecting giving birth, the traumas of birth and the menstrual cycle. *Rez I* (Cut I) 1977 is a vagina/eye and also a landscape of a castle on a lake with a mountain in the background. The waters flow to and from the castle gate.

In her early work Svankmajerova's paintings are usually comparatively static. The paint is applied carefully and slowly, it fills rather than creates form, but from the late seventies onwards a growing dynamism of form can be seen. Although the brushwork remains closed, it moves across the canvas with ever increasing energy. The bent figure in *Tam* (There) 1982 is the victim of forces of nature beyond her control. Earth and air rush along in the same motion, tipping, swaying, melting. In other works, such as *Zakouti* (Quiet Place) 1983 such violent motion is absent, but the still, swelling body of the woman melts slowly across the street. *Siti* (Sewing) 1984 fractures the image of the sewing woman, she seems to be trying to stitch herself together.

From the late eighties onwards there are many images of women merging with (or emerging from) buildings or furniture. It is not a happy blending, but a struggle with and for identity. *Kam jsi sel?* (Where Did You Go?) and *Tady jsem byl* (Here I Was) of 1990 both reveal this merging as a painful process. Recent works concentrate on the equally difficult coming together of women and furniture, chests of drawers, chairs, ironing

boards. Is this a reflection on how female identity is traditionally constructed from the domestic?

Eva Svankmajerova's ceramic work, made under the name E.J. Kostelec, to differentiate it from her husband's work, (J.. Kostelec) usually, but not always, is softer and more whimsical than Jan's. In fact, their work is often hard to tell apart, it seems to merge, then separate, marked by distinct creative personalities. The six genital jugs of *Pocta markyzi de Sade* (Homage to the Marquis de Sade), a witty demonstration of both polymorphous perversity and "connecting vessels" could only be Eva's work.

The particular quality, of Eva Svankmajerova's work is its modesty. It is never showy or pretentious, there is no attempt to impress, it is just itself, but it is itself in defiance of everything. It expresses both intellectual concerns and the expression of inner states with equal power. It is always heartfelt and never false and it is this quiet strength that makes Eva Svankmajerova such a remarkable painter.

KAROL BARON - ALBERT MARENCIN

I have had little opportunity to do any concrete research into the work of Karol Baron and Albert Marencin, but their importance to the collective work of the Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group is such that I feel it is impossible to ignore them. In both cases I know their work well by sight, but have had no opportunity to read about or discuss it. To make some amends, I have included several illustrations by these artists. The following notes on Baron are, but the slightest of sketches.

Karol Baron

Karol Baron was born in 1939 in Slovakia. he studied in Bratislava quickly developed the basis of his later style. The early works are often small, with very smooth surfaces (they are often painted in enamel). The figures are reminiscent of folk-art, but more fantastic. By the early seventies Baron's work has reached its maturity, and the mixture of sardonic humour and fantastic figuration has locked into place.

Brightly coloured, bizarre forms populate his landscapes. They are engaged in playful, sometimes aggressive games, locked in silent contemplation of each other, grinning or snarling. They might be flying (Baron's characters have little regard for gravity) or be on skateboards. Like many of the Czech and Slovak surrealists, he works in series, sequences that often span years. Between one work and another games and correspondences emerge, although their import is often unclear.

Baron is playful but not frivolous. His characters are comical but tragic, locked into situations that they can neither understand nor extricate themselves. Perhaps they are us.

Albert Marencin

Collage is perhaps the most overplayed medium in the surrealist armoury. Marencin brings it back to life, one of the very few to do so in our time. His collages are exacting and precise *visions*, not mere assemblages. They have a dark humour tinged with a sardonic eroticism and lit by shafts of sheer lyricism.

Appendix B: CHRONOLOGICAL CHART OF SURREALISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

THE SURREALIST GROUP OF PRAGUE 1934-1939

1934

Foundation of the Surrealist Group of Prague. (Nezval, Honzl, Jezek, Toyen, Styrsky.) At first Teige refuses to join, but joins a few weeks later. They publish the tract *Surrealismus v CSR* (Surrealism in Czechoslovakia), the collection *Surrealismus v diskusi* (Surrealism in Discussion) and the translation into Czech of Breton's *Les Vases Communicants*. Voskovec and Werich are forced to temporarily evacuate the *Osvozene Divadlo* (Liberated Theatre) following fascist provocation.

1935

First exhibition of the Surrealist Group of Prague is held at Manes. Breton and Eluard visit Prague, Breton lectures in Prague and Brno. "Bulletin International du Surrealisme" is published in Czech and French.

Translation of *Nadja*.

Zena v mnoznm cisle (Woman in Plural) by Nezval.

Utate ruky (Severed Hands) by Fabry

First collection of *Nadrealismus* in Slovakia.

1936

Publication of *Surrealismus*, one number only, directed by Nezval.

In the collection *Ani labut ani luna* (Neither Swan Nor Moon) published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of K.H. Macha. The surrealists evaluate his revolt in protest at his glorification as a "National Poet".

1938

Nezval announces the break-up of the surrealist group. All the remaining surrealists around Teige produce the tract *Surrealismus proti proudu* (Surrealism Against the Current) maintaining their stand and announcing their rupture with the Communist Party.

The second group exhibition is accompanied by conferences in Prague, Brno and Bratislava (beginning of 1939).

First collective publication of the Slovakian Nadrealists *Ano a ne* (Yes and No).

Final closure of the Liberated Theatre.

THE FIRST CLANDESTINE PERIOD - THE SECOND WORLD WAR 1939-1945

1939

German invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia. Slovakia is declared "independent".

One public lecture is given of the poetry of the *Nadrealistes* in Bratislava.

1942

Death of Styrsky.

Foundation of *Skupina 42* (Group 42) many of whose members later form the Ra Group. (Istler, Ludvik Kundera, Zdenec Lorenc, O. Mizera).

Clandestine publication of the anthology *Roztrhane panenky* (Broken Dolls).

1943

Robert Altschul and Z. Havlicek form the "Surrealists of Sporilov".

1945

Death of Altschul.

Defeat of Germany and Liberation of Czechoslovakia.

1946

Group Ra present a collective publication *A zatím co valka* (And Now what War). Participants are: Istler, Korecek, Kundera, Lacina, Lorenc, Mizera, Jaroslav Puchmertl, Vilem Reichmann, Vaclav Tikal, Vaclav Zykmond.

REFORMATION AND THE SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC 1946-1951

1947

Heisler and Toyen move to Paris, take part in the international surrealist exhibition *Le Surrealisme en 1947*.

The exhibition "International Surrealism" in Prague, (a reduced version of the Paris "Exposition Internationale").

A debate is organised during the exhibition in Prague towards renewing activities around Teige.

Group Ra produce a collective work of that name and participate in *Le Surrealisme Revolutionnaire* with a congress in Brussels and exhibitions in Brno and Budapest.

Vratislav Effenberger and Istler make a film *Ebauche de l'etude d'un fragment de reel* (Outline of a Study of a Fragment of Reality), finished in 1948 at the Institute of Cinematography.

1948

The Communist Party come to power following "The Prague Coup".

1950

Public condemnation of the Nadrealistes and of Karel Teige.

Execution of Zavis Kalandra.

Karel Hynek and Effenberger present the first of their "black farces".

1951

Consolidation of a new group united around Teige. (Effenberger, Libor Fara, Hynek, Istler, Jan Kotik, Mikulas Medek, Emila Medkova, V. Tikal...) This had existed since '47 as a free collaboration. Their activities are recorded in the nine albums titled *Signs of the Zodiac*. (Eight extant).

Death of Karel Teige.

THE CIRCLE OF FIVE OBJECTS 1952-1962

1953

Death of Karel Hynek.

Secret compilation of the albums *Objekt 1* and *Objekt 2* by the group (Effenberger, Istler, Medkova and Medek).

1956

The group prepare several theatrical events, which are, however, not performed.

Meanwhile, separately, Milan Napravnik organises with his friends a spectacle titled *The Public Rose* (1 showing).

1957

Nezval's memoirs "De ma vie" which breaks the long silence concerning Teige and surrealism, begins to appear in the journal *Kultura*. (Note: find the Czech title).

1958

Objekt 3. (New participants Z. Havlicek, Jaroslav Kurz, Milan Napravnik, Ludvik Svab).

Vaclav Tikal exhibits in Prague. This is the first public manifestation of the group since 1948.

A series of conferences is organised by Ludvik Svab in a psychiatric clinic, titled *Rules of the Game*. They are stopped by the police after the first session.

Death of Nezval. Buried with full honours as a "national poet".

1959

Stanislav Dvorsky, Petr Kral and Procop Voskovec join the group.

1960

Objekt 4 (New contributors: Dvorsky, Kral, Zdena Holubova). Voskovec mounts a performance of *Ubu Roi* (collaborating with Kral and Holubova). It is forbidden after two semi-public performances.

1962

Objekt 5 (new contributors Vera Linhartova, Alois Nozicka, P Voskovec).

A series of readings of poetry and plays, read by actors, are taped.

GROUP UDS 1963-1968

1963

During a period of political liberalisation, the group feel encouraged to be more public. They publish a new poetic anthology *Fragments 63* published by Klub Manes (Prague) where a series of conferences prepared by the group is pursued from then until 1965.

1964

First republication of a book by Teige, first books by Linhartova and Wenzl. A number of surrealist works are shown in the exhibition *Imaginative Painting 1930-50*, (curated by Vera Linhartova and Frantisek Smejkal) shown in Hluboka, then, after being forbidden, - in Prague in an amputated version with all contemporary writers removed.

Istler and Tikal participate in a *Phases* exhibition in Brussels.

A polemical dossier containing accounts of new internal discussions is established by the group under the title *UDS*. (This title is intended as a blind for their activities, it actually has no meaning).

In Slovakia the revue *Slovenske pol'ady* dedicates a special issue to Nadrealism. Death of Tikal.

1965

The inquiry *The position of the baton* examines the extent of contradiction and agreement within the Prague group. (This inquiry, consisting of 113 questions, is apparently lost and was, in any case, never completed.).

1966

Symboly obludnosti (Symbols of Monstrosity), the first collective exhibition since 1948 is accompanied by four events. (New participants: Jaroslav Hrstka, Ivana Spanlangova). Linhartova and Napravnik break with the group.

Contact between the Prague and Paris surrealists is renewed when the Prague group send a letter-manifesto.

Publication of the first volume of Teige's selected works and in Slovakia a selection of Breton's poetry is published.

1967

Effenberger and the Prague group organise a large retrospective exhibition dedicated to Karel Teige.

1968

With the "Prague Spring" the group organise in Prague, Brno and Bratislava, an exhibition of the Paris Group, *Princip slasti* (The Pleasure Principle), accompanied in Prague by a series of conferences on "Surrealism and Art". A number of Paris surrealists visit Czechoslovakia for this occasion and the two groups write a communal declaration *Le Plateforme de Prague*. The text is published in a special number of the French group's journal *L'Archibras* following the Russian invasion, minus the signatures of the Czechs, several of whom flee to Paris (Kral, Voskovec et al.).

The remainder of the group (Effenberger, Svab, Albert Marencin from Bratislava) declare a crisis. They are joined by old members Medek and Medkova. The group attracts several new members: Karol Baron and Albert Marencin (Bratislava) Eva Svankmajerova, Jan Svankmajer, Martin Stejskal. The Czech and Slovak surrealists are thus joined in one group for the first time.

ANALOGON

1969

Phases exhibition in Jihlava. Death of Zbynek Havlicek. Delayed publication of several books by Effenberger, Kral and Napravnik.

Surrealisticke vychodisko (Surrealist Departure-point) edited by Effenberger recounts the history of the group's activities since the end of the 30's.

First issue of *Analogon*. It is condemned by Prague radio as "The Trojan Horse of Western Imperialism" and the group is condemned to work clandestinely for the next twenty years.

In Paris the old Breton group are in crisis. At the beginning of the year the tract *SAS* announces the suspension of the group's activities. Vincent Bounoure issues an inquiry, *Rien ou Quoi?* Czech group's collective discussions on Bounoure's inquiry results in the tract *Le Possible contre le reel* (The Possible Versus the Real). In this text they lay out their programme and refuse to consider that the history of Surrealism is finished.

In October Jean Schuster publishes *Le Quatrieme Chant* in Le Monde, announcing the end of the Surrealist Movement.

THE CZECHOSLOVAK SURREALIST GROUP 1970-1994

1970

Collaboration between the surrealists around Bounoure and the Czechoslovak group on the journal *Bulletin de Liaison Surrealiste (BLS)*.

1971

The Czech surrealists reformulate their collective activity based on games of interpretation, *Ticha Posta* (Place of Silence). Collaborate with the group that has gathered around Bounoure on the revue *Bulletin de Liaison Surrealiste*. Thematic symposium *Interpretace jako tvorci cinnost* (Interpretation as Creative Act) (organised by Jan Svankmajer and Martin Stejskal).

1972

Anketa o erotismu (Inquiry into Eroticism) as part of a thematic symposium on Eroticism. (Organised by Effenberger).

1973

Collective work *Jistota* (Safety, Security).

1974

Group study exhibition at Svankmajer's studio.

1975

L'evolution du Surrealisme en Tchechoslovaquie collective text of surrealist group in *Change* no. 11/25. (Paris) (edited with introductory text by Effenberger). Participation in surrealist exhibition *Armes et Bagages* (Galerie Verriere, Lyon). *Panorama*, collective game of visual analogy as part of thematic collective symposium *Analogie*. (Directed by Stejskal). *Restaurator* collective tactile experiment. (Directed by Svankmajer).

1976

Participate in symposium *La Civilisation Surrealiste*, Ed. V. Bounoure, Payot, Paris.).

1977

Co-operate with Paris surrealists on journal *Surrealisme*, (2 numbers).

1978

Participate in exhibition *Collage surrealiste en 1978* (Galerie Triskele, Paris). *Obrazovorne prostory* (Imaginative Space) symposium and project "ideal surrealist exhibition" (directed by Effenberger).

Anketa o strachu (Inquiry into Fear) as part of thematic symposium *Fear*. Directed by Karol Baron).

Otevrena hra (Open Game), symposium on the work of the Surrealist Group 1969-1978 directed by Svankmajer.

1979

Prizraky a fantomy (Spectres and phantoms) exhibition at Martin Stejskal's studio as part of inquiry into fear.

1980

Antologie Surrealistické skupiny v Československu (Le la nos 11,12 Geneva. Edited Ludvik Svab).

1981

Vystava Surrealistické skupiny v Československu (Exhibition of the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia) Galerie Phasme, Geneva.

Autoanalýzy k souboru (Self analysis to collection) *Mentalní morfologie* (Mental Morphology) directed by Effenberger.

1982

Illustrovaný sen (Illustrated Dream) collective experiment directed by Svankmajer.

Hledání Zugone (Search for Zugon) Collective experiment directed by Frantisek Dryje. (Zugon is an invented being, the "personal spectre" of Marencin).

1983

Anketa o poesii v surrealismu (Inquiry into Poetry in Surrealism) as part of thematic symposium *Surrealistická poesie* (Surrealist Poetry) directed by Jiri Koubek and Jan Svankmajer.

Sfera snu (Sphere of Dreams) exhibition, Sovinec. Closed by police on opening day. Intended as part of symposium *Sen* (Dream), directed by Albert Marencin.

1984

Promeny humoru (Metamorphosis of Humour) thematic collection directed by Effenberger and Svankmajer.

Ostrov mrtvych (Isle of the Dead) Collective experiment based on the painting by Boecklin, directed by Martin Stejskal.

Jednim uchem dovnitr (In one ear and out the other) group game organised by Svankmajer.

1985

Inquiry for symposium *Hra* (Games) directed by Josef Janda. Group game *Analogicke these* (Analogical theses) directed M. Stejskal.

Opak zrcadla (Behind the mirror) Symposium on surrealist poetry organised by Koubek and Svankmajer.

Surrealism as a Collective Adventure Special issue of surrealist revue *Dunganon* (no.4) Orkeljunga, Sweden. Introduced and edited by Dryje and Svab.

19th September, Emila Medkova dies.

1986

Group game *Imaginarni portrety* (Imaginary Portraits). Prepare symposium on Emila Medkova (Directed by Alena Nadvornikova).

10th August, death of Vratislav Effenberger.

1987

20 let od Prazske platformy (20 years after the Prague Platform) programmatic group text.

1988

Svoboda revoluce moralka (Freedom Revolution Morality) inquiry directed by Alena Nadvornikova and Ivo Purs. Left unfinished as Koubek is unwilling to help.

Contact with Swedish Surrealist Group and the Surrealist Group of Brno.

1989

First number of samizdat revue *Gambra* (edited by Nadvornikova and Purs).

Series of lectures on the activities of the Surrealist Group to students of the Philosophy Faculty at Karlovy University.

Participate in *International Inquiry to the Surrealist Groups of the World* organised by the Stockholm Surrealist Group.

The "Velvet Revolution" brings down the Communist government.

1990

Analogon no.2 published after 20-year gap. It is subtitled "Surrealismus, psychoanalýza, strukturalismus, antropologie, pricne vedy" (Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, structuralism, Anthropology, Diagonal Sciences). Issue is dedicated to *Tvorba jako rozvinuti protestu* (Creativity as a development of protest?).

Group exhibition *Analogon 1969-1990* in Paris. (Hourglass, Galerie Neuf)

Collective texts by surrealist group in magazines *Inicialy* and *Romboid*

1991

Analogon continues to appear: no.3 dedicated to "Interpretation as creative act" 4. "Eroticism" 5. "Between market and free intelligence".

Exhibition *Sen, Erotismus, Interpretace* (Dream, Eroticism, Interpretation) in Stredoslovenska galerii, B. Bystrice and in galerii Medium, Bratislava.

Treti Archa (Third Ark) exhibition, Manes, Prague.

1992

Analogon. 6. "Games". 7. "Myth and Utopia". 7. "Psychic Automatism and Conscious Intervention".

1993

Analogon no.9 on "Picture of Psychoanalysis".

Jiri Koubek is expelled from the group following his involvement in a right-wing political scandal. Koubek, still editor-in-chief of *Analogon*, and Napravnik attempt takeover of *Analogon*.

Ownership of the Analogon title and its funds are fought over. The Surrealist Group eventually win and prepare issue 10 with new publisher (Paseka).

1994

Analogon no.10, dedicated to "Hermeticism-oral tradition". no.11. to "Humour".

1995

Analogon no.12 "Woman in Plural".

This chronology was compiled from several sources, including other chronologies, primarily those of Petr Kral in *Le Surrealisme en Tchechoslovaquie* for information up to 1969 and to the catalogue *Treti Archa* for post-69 material. I would not have been able to complete it however without the help of Dr. Ludvik Svab who was able to fill several gaps and correct my Czech. I would like to make a special mention of the depth and breadth of his knowledge and of his great kindness.

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SURREALISM SINCE THE WAR WITH
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO SURREALISM IN
CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

Stuart Inman

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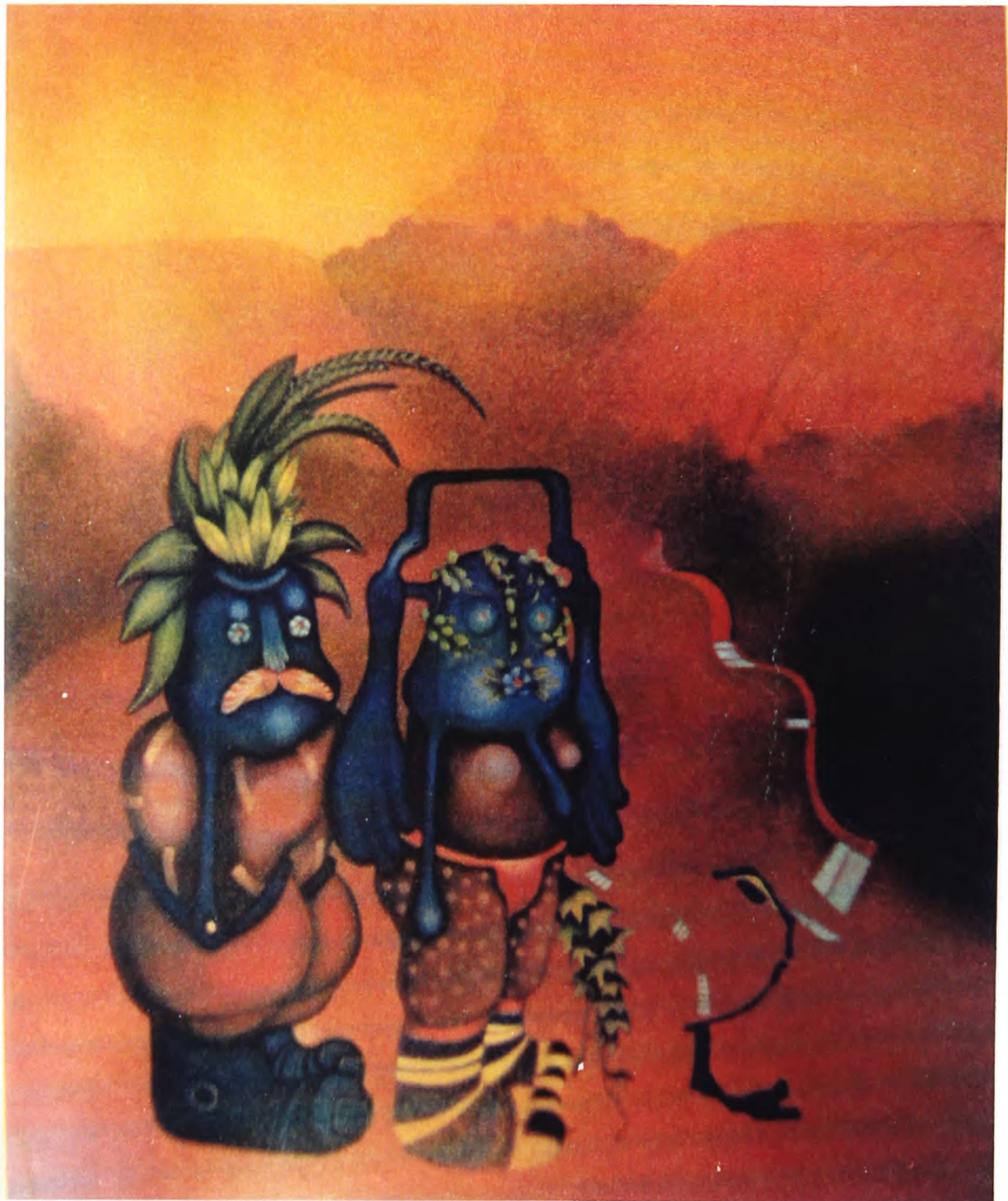
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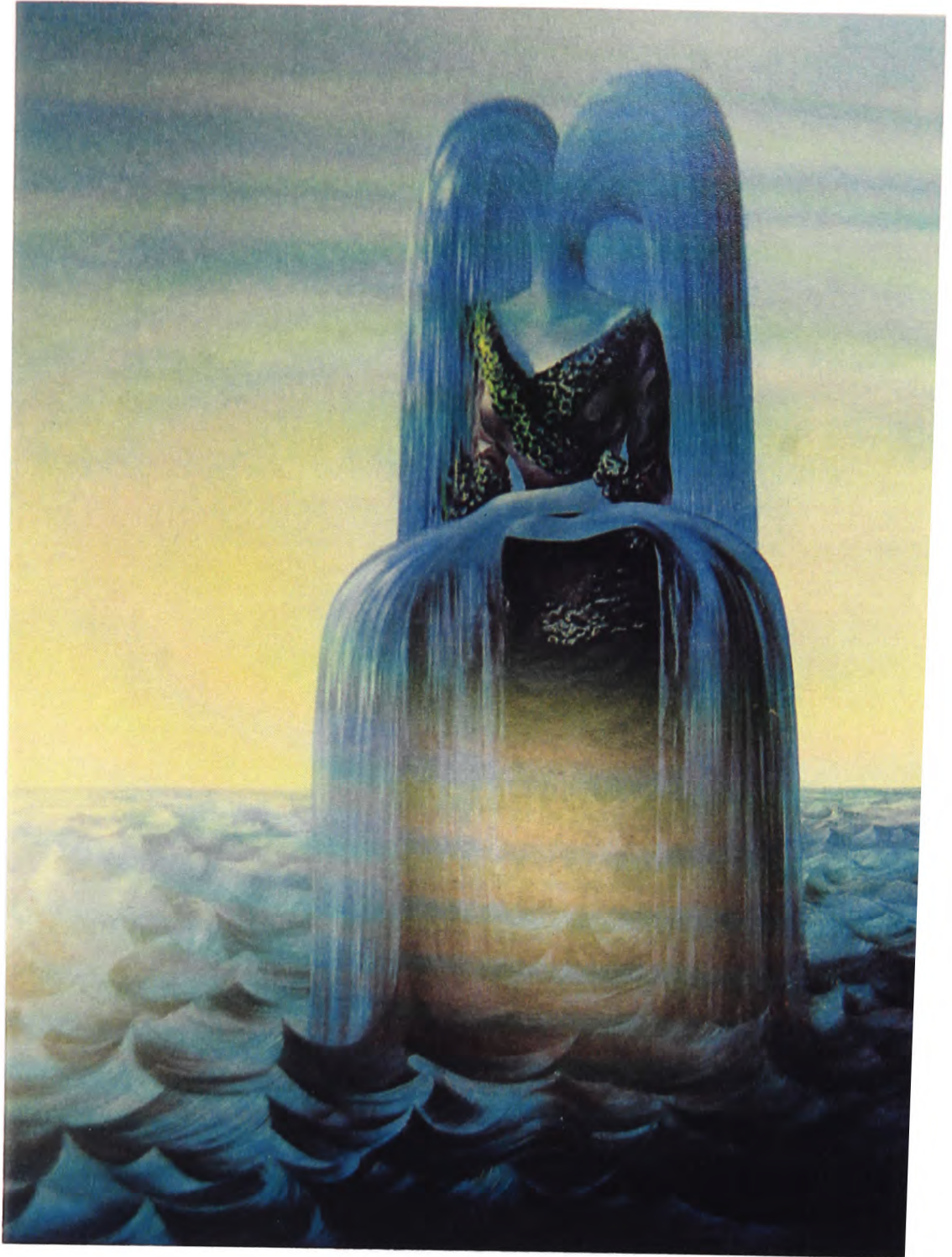
Karol Baron: *Painting*



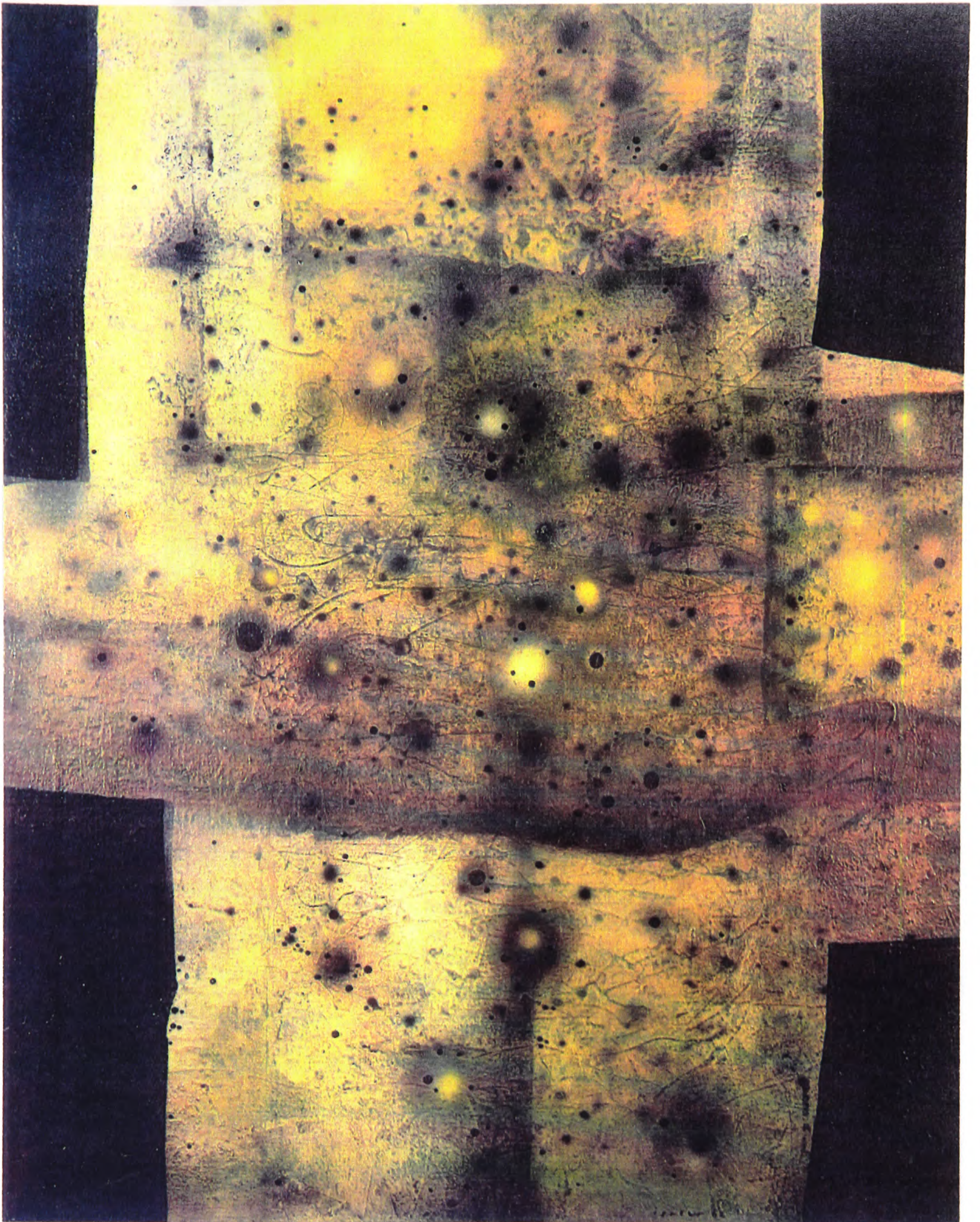
Karol Baron: *Painting*



Josef Istler: *Ecstasy*



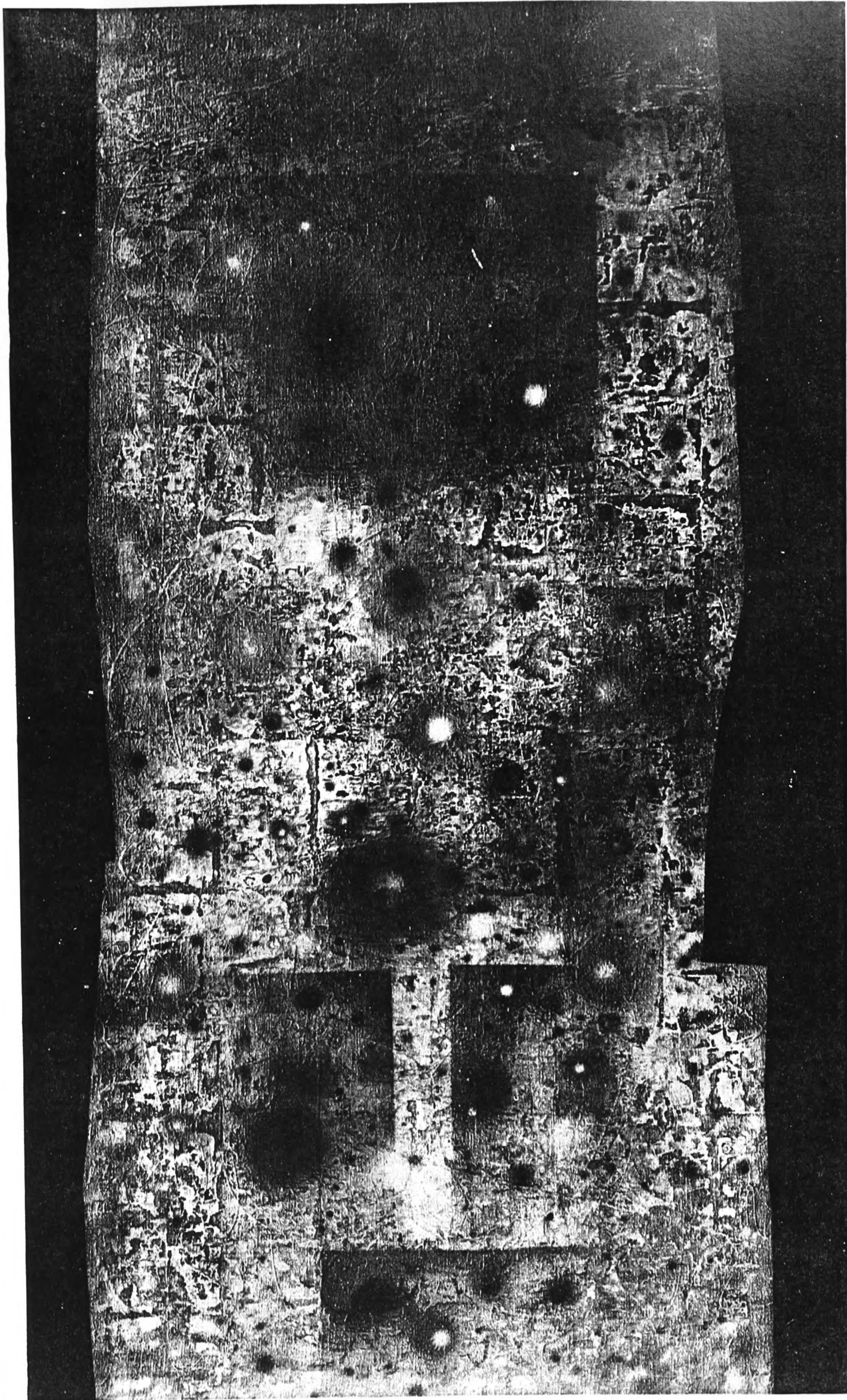
Josef Istler: *Aquarius* 1951



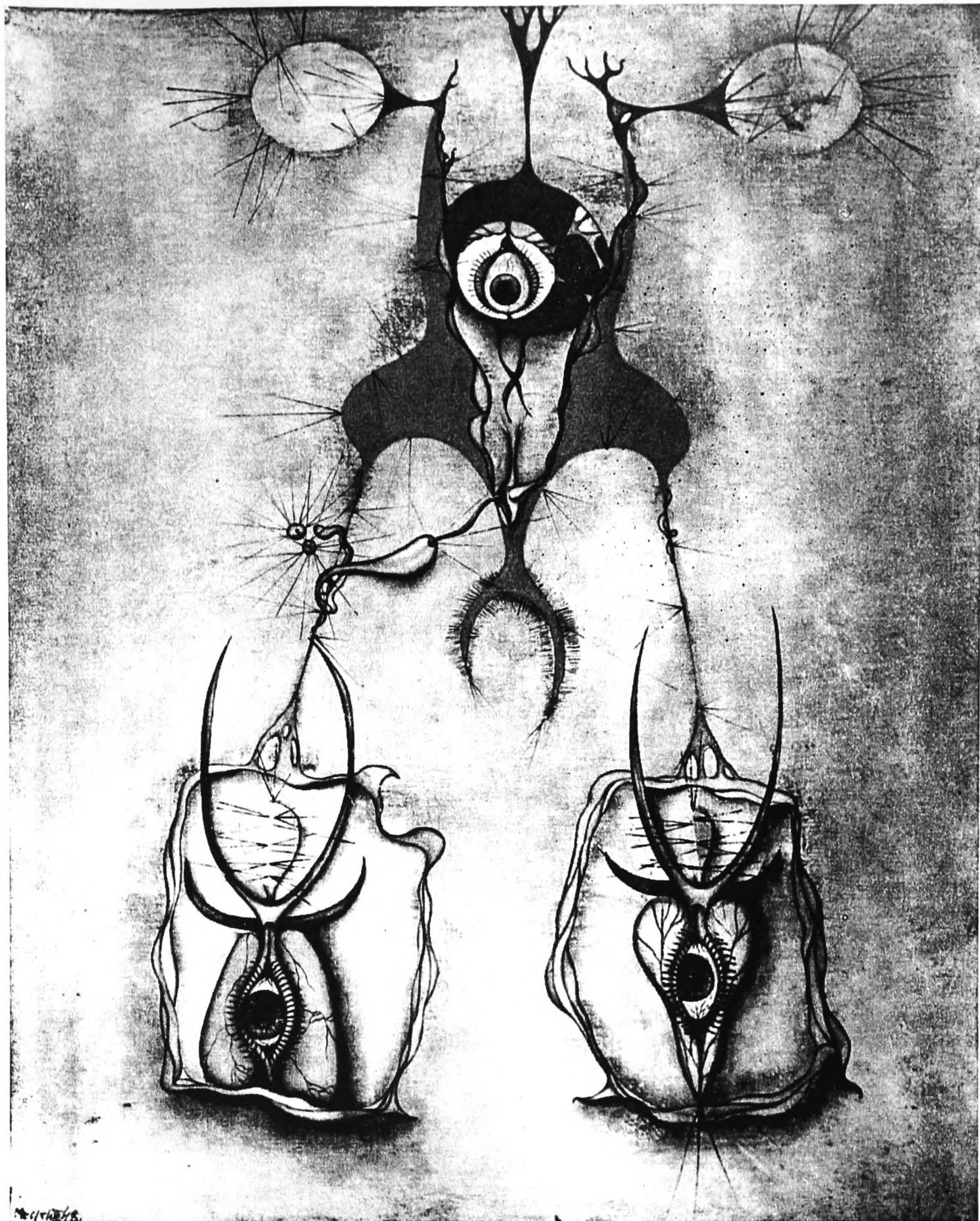
Josef Istler: *Painting* 1962



Josef Istler: *Painting* 1962



Josef Istler: *Painting* 1962



Mikulas Medek

15
Zázračná matka III,
1948, olej, 72/60,
Hluboká nad Vltavou, AJG

The Miraculous Mother III,
1948, oil, 72/60,
Hluboká nad Vltavou, AJG



Mikulas Medek

25
Hlava, která spí imperialistický spánek,
1953, tempera—olej, 85/100,
Praha, sbírka J. Puchmertla

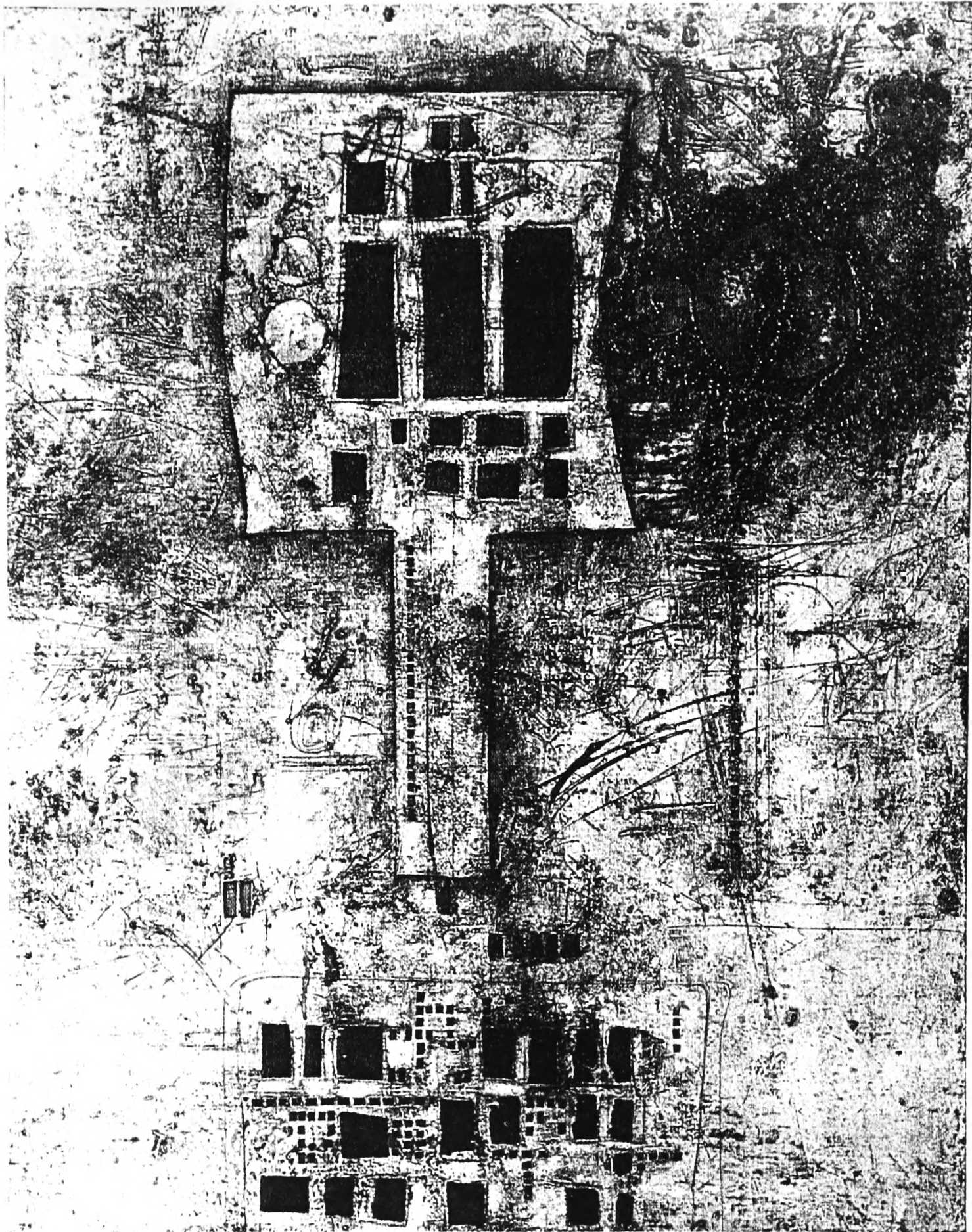
Head that Sleeps an Imperial Sleep
1953, tempera—oil, 85/100,
Prague, Collection J. Puchmertl



Mikulas Medek

65
Příliš mnoho alkoholu,
1964, email—olej, 162/130,
Praha, sbírka dr. B. Mráze

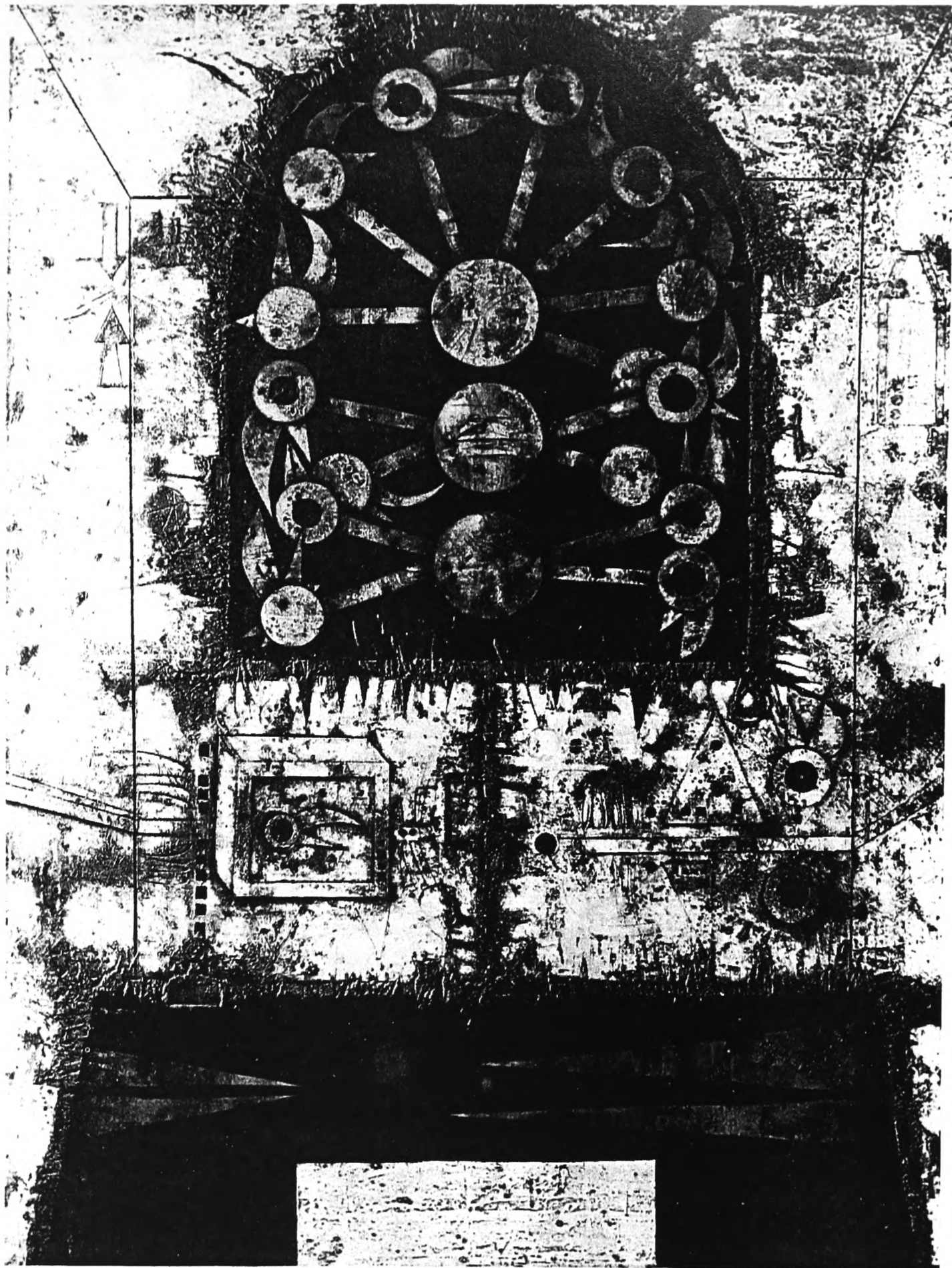
Too Much Alcohol,
1964, enamel—oil, 162/130,
Prague, Collection Dr. B. Mráz



51
Senzitivní signál II
1963. email – olej, 98 70.
Praha, sbírka D. Plichty

Mikulas Medek

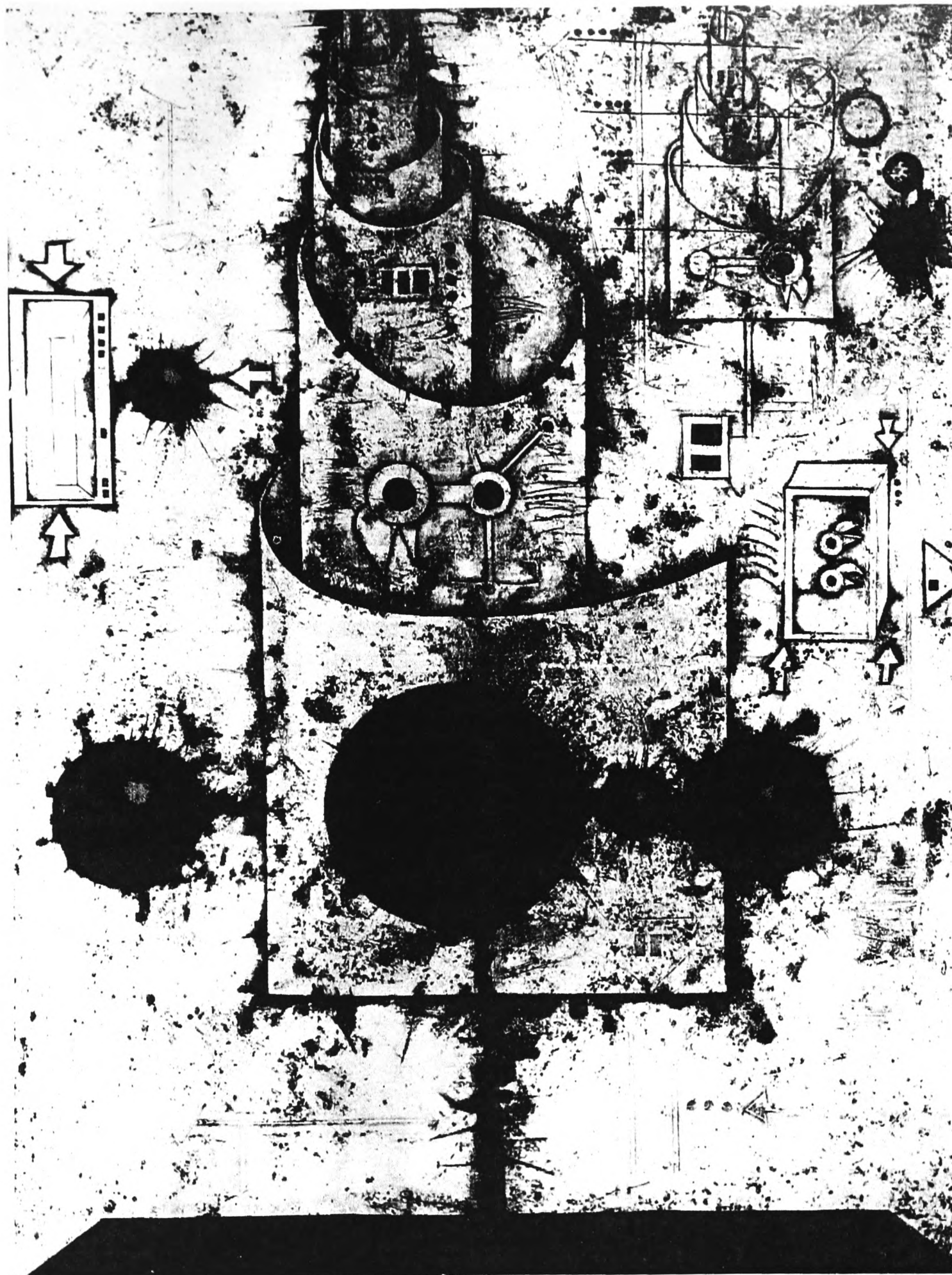
Sensitive Signal II.
1963. enamel—oil, 98 70.
Prague, Collection D. Plichta



85
Muž v napětí,
1967, enamel—olej, 162/130,
Pardubice. Východočeská galerie

Mikulas Medek

Man in a Tension,
1967, enamel—oil, 162/130,
Pardubice, Regional Gallery



90
Stůl projektanta věží I.,
1968, email—olej, 162/130,
autorův majetek

Mikulas Medek

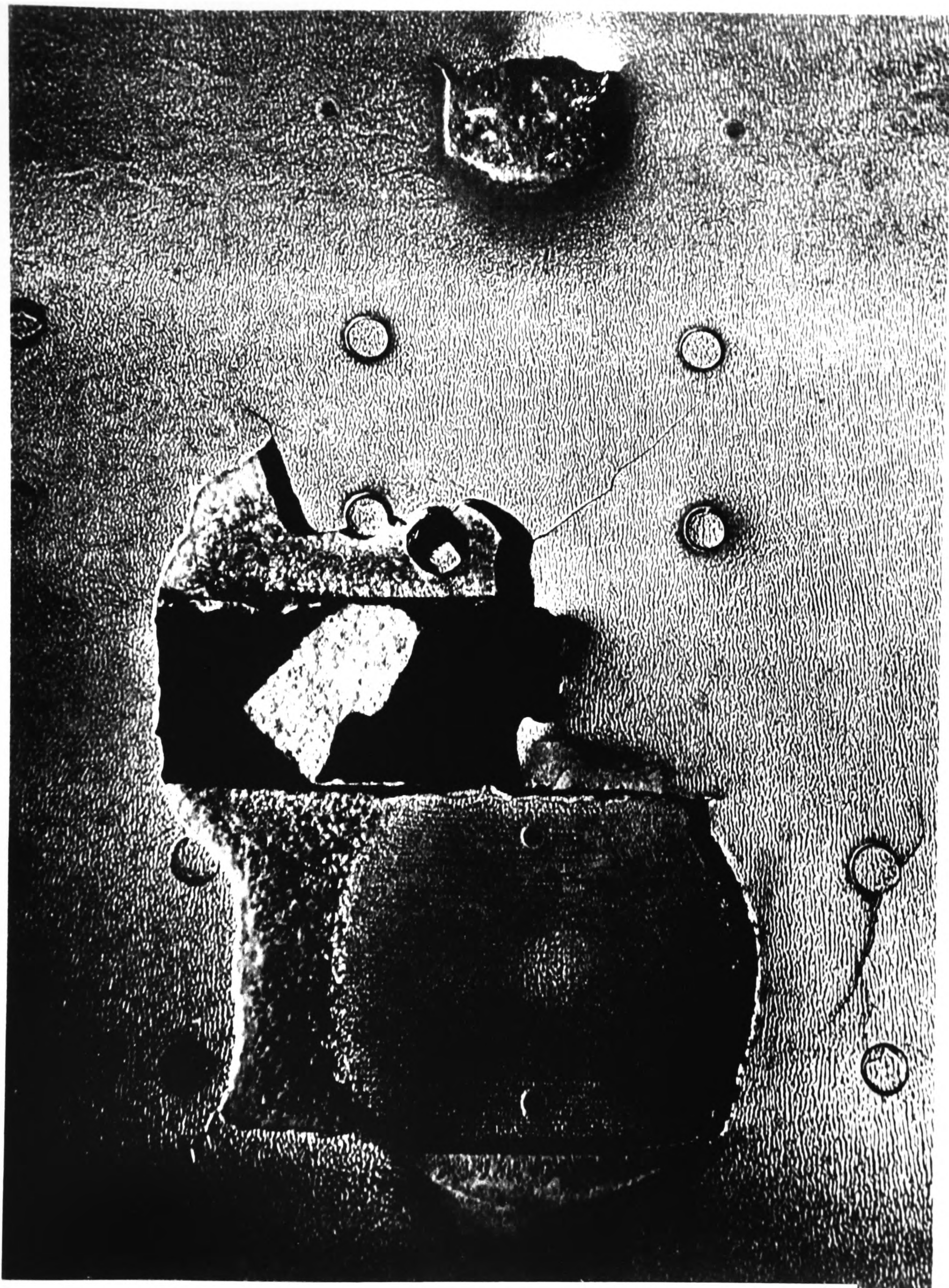
The Table of a Tower Designer I,
1968, enamel—oil, 162/130,
property of the author



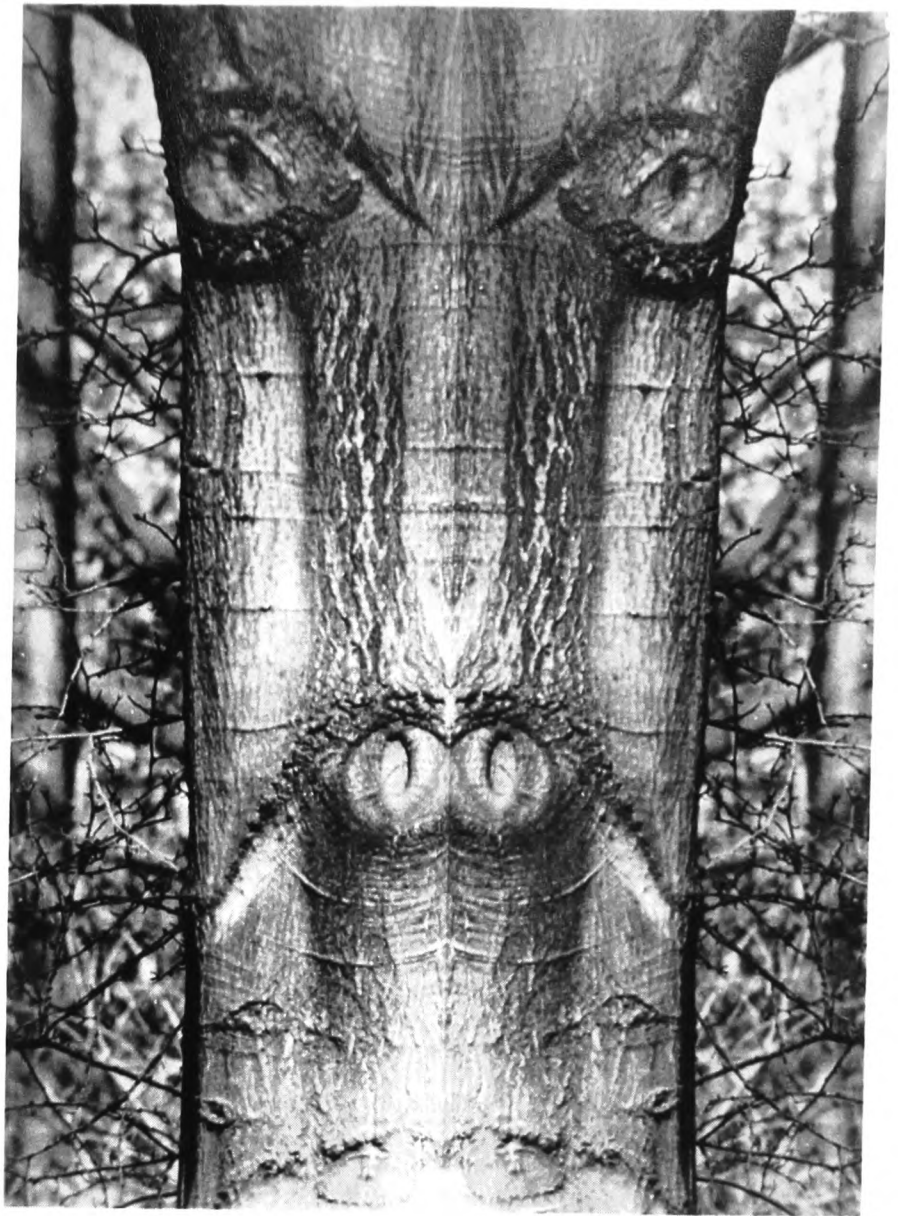
Emila Medkova: *The Wind* 1949



Emila Medkova: *Two Squares* 1960



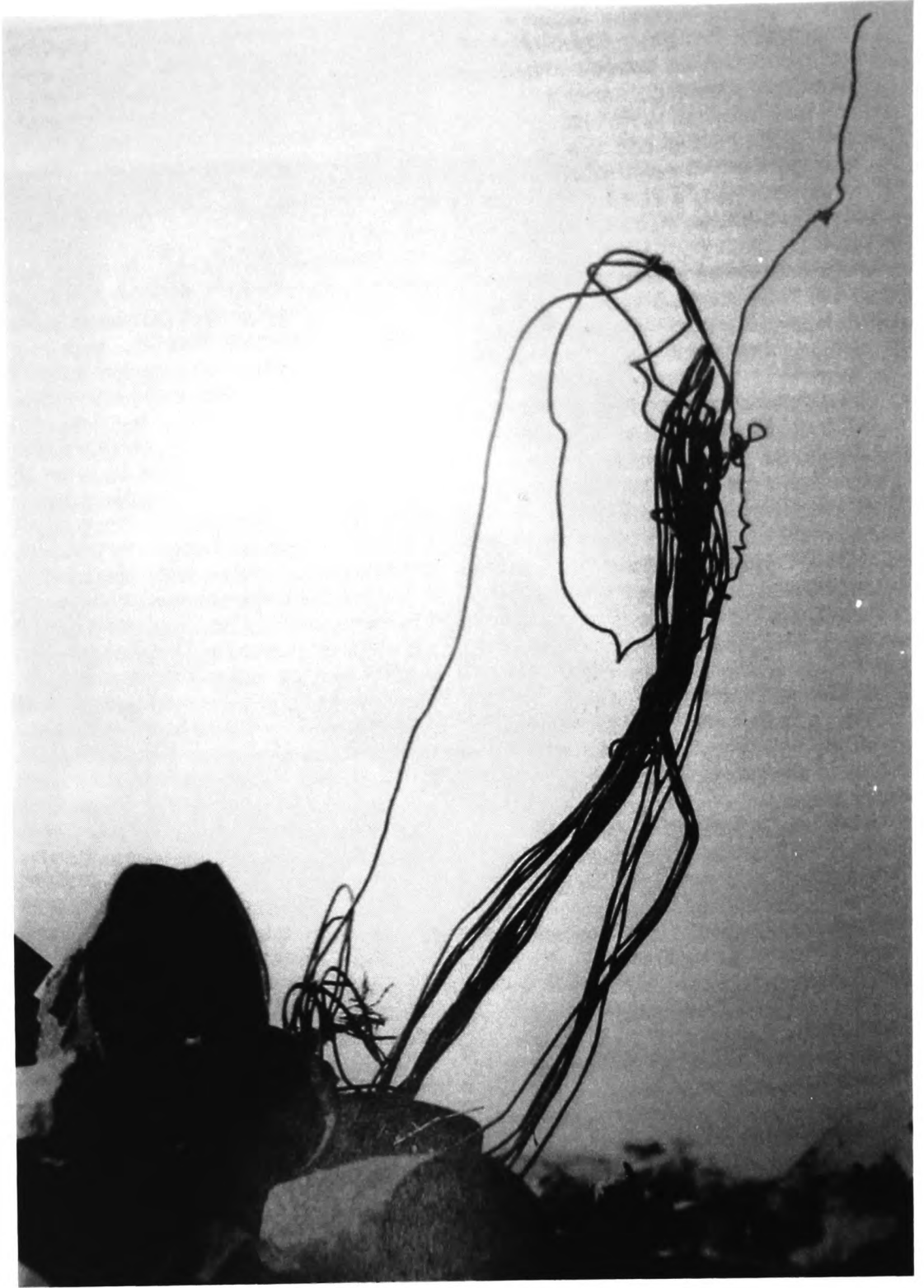
Emila Medkova: *Cup*



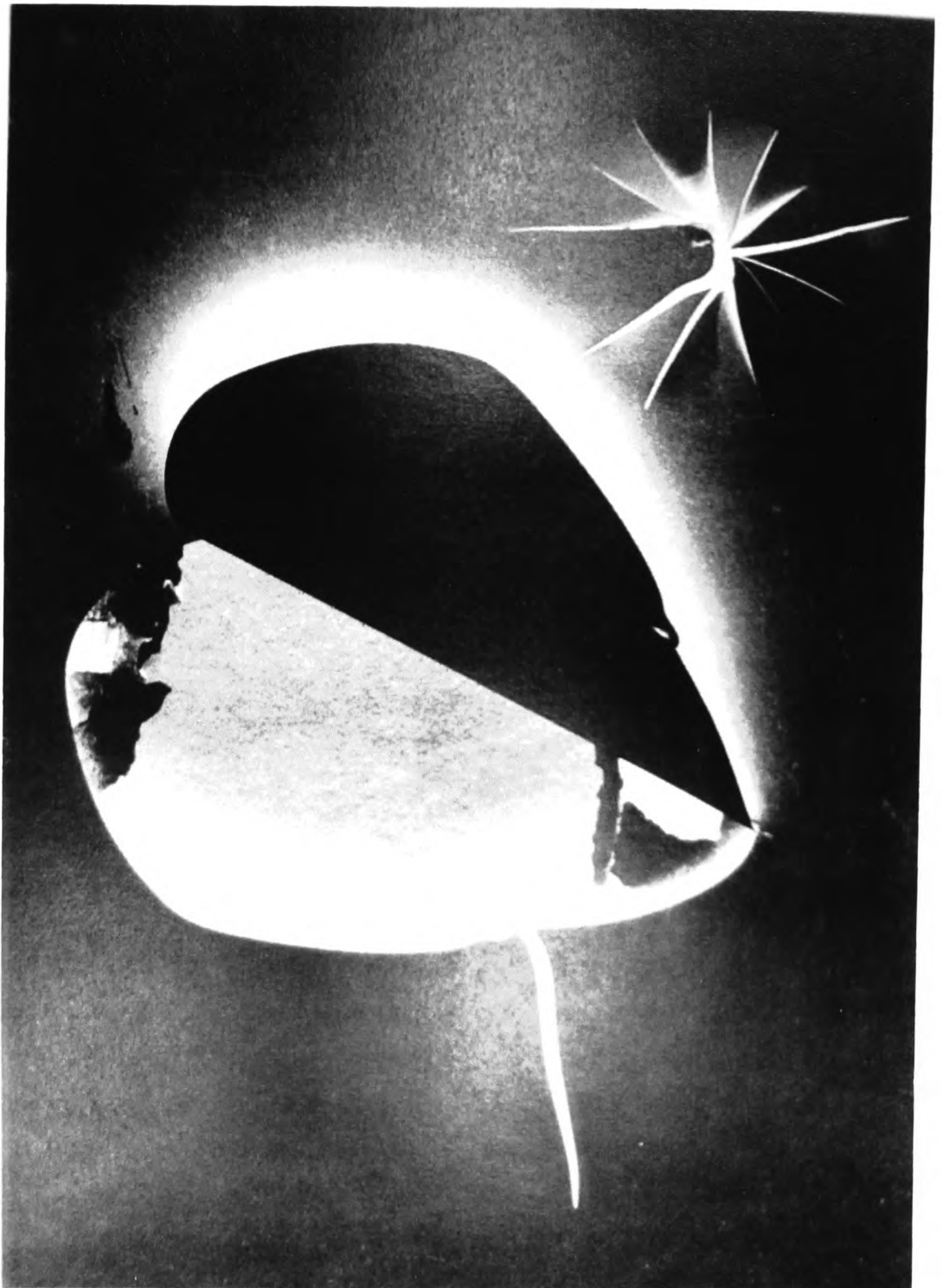
Milan Nápravník / Inversáž



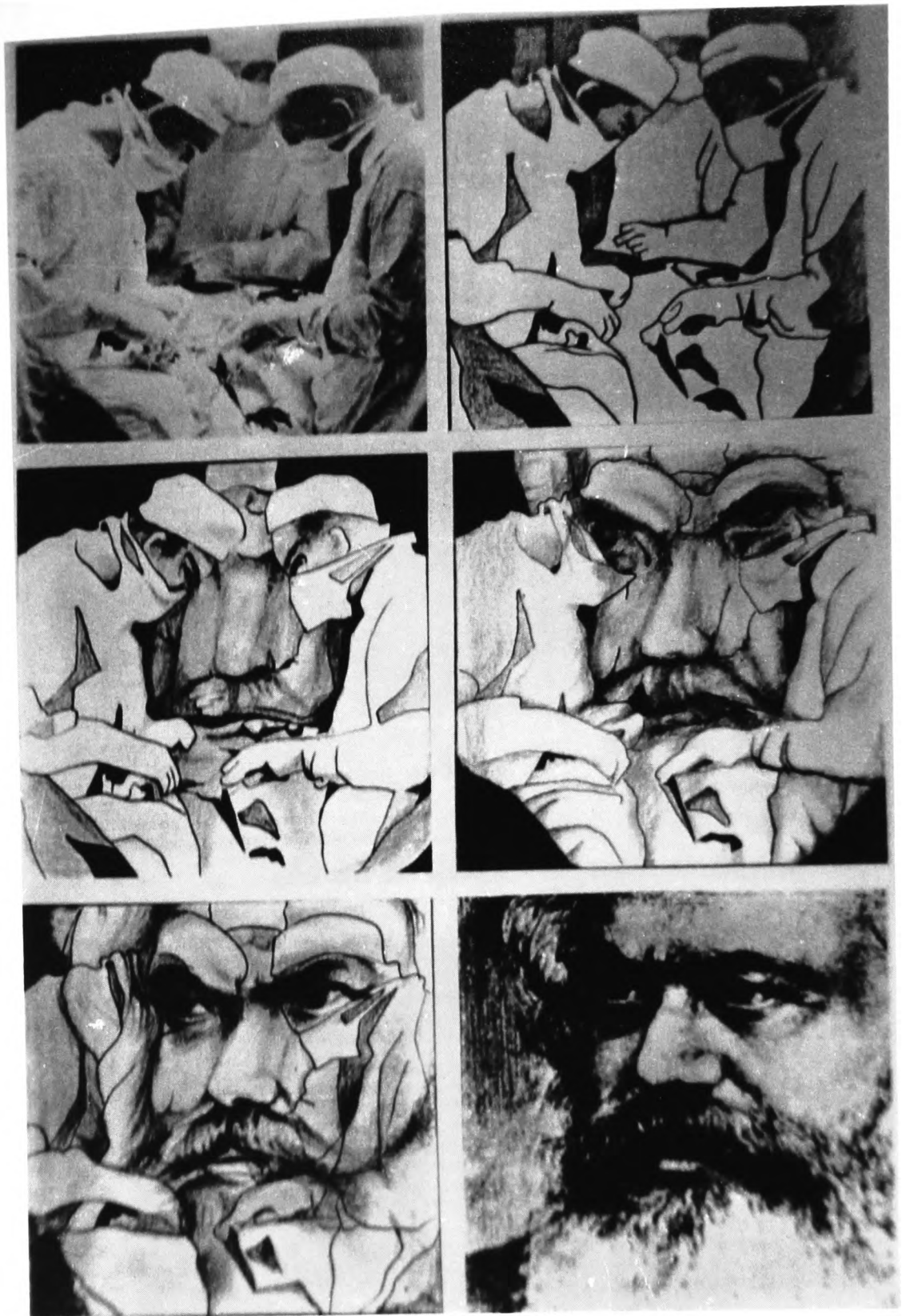
Alois Nozicka: *Photograph*



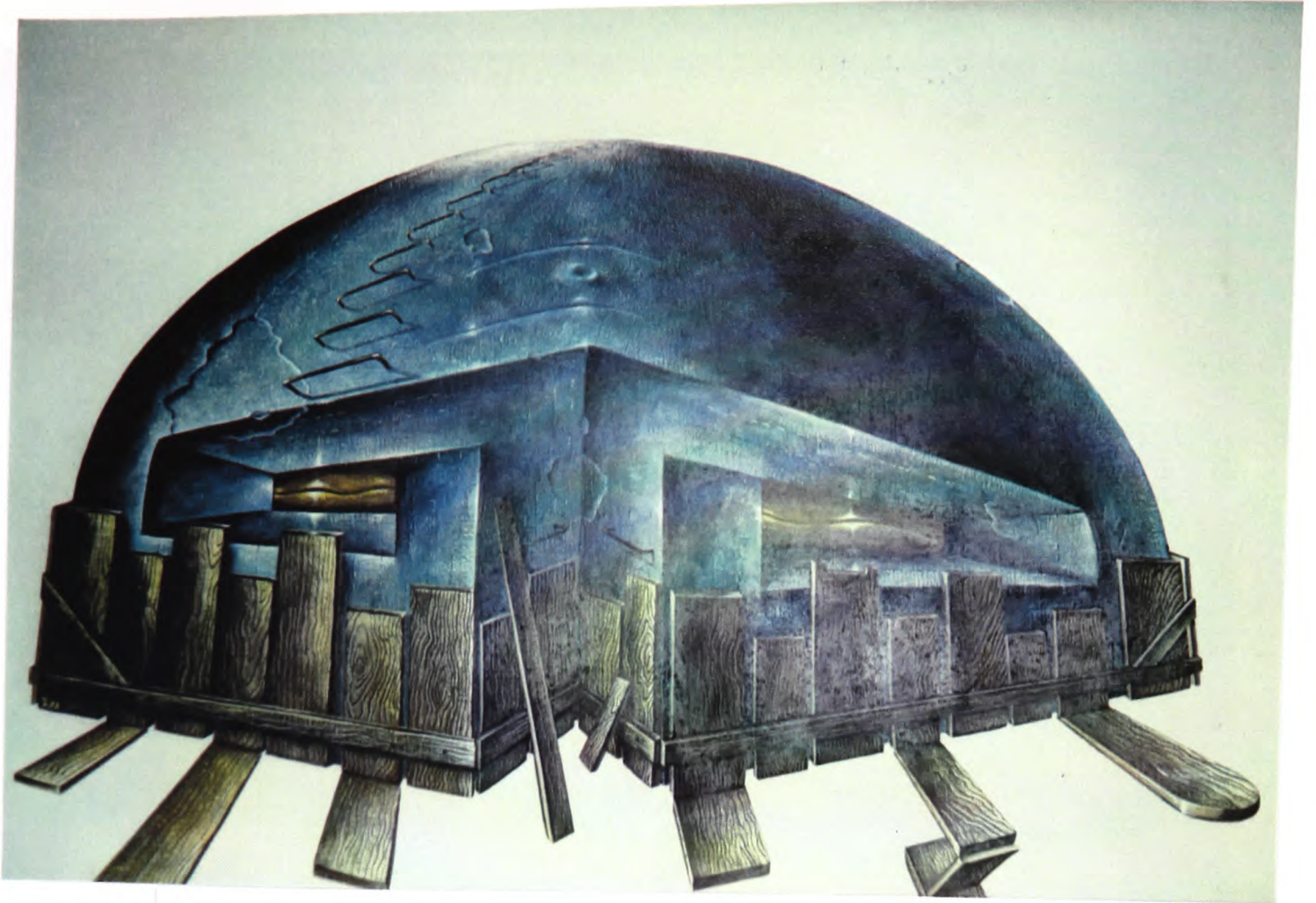
Vilem Reichmann: *Arabesque Ruin* 1949



Vilem Reichmann: *Photograph*



Martin Stejskal: *Marx's Smile* 1972



Martin Stejskal: *Perpetuum Debile*



Martin Stejskal: *Painting*

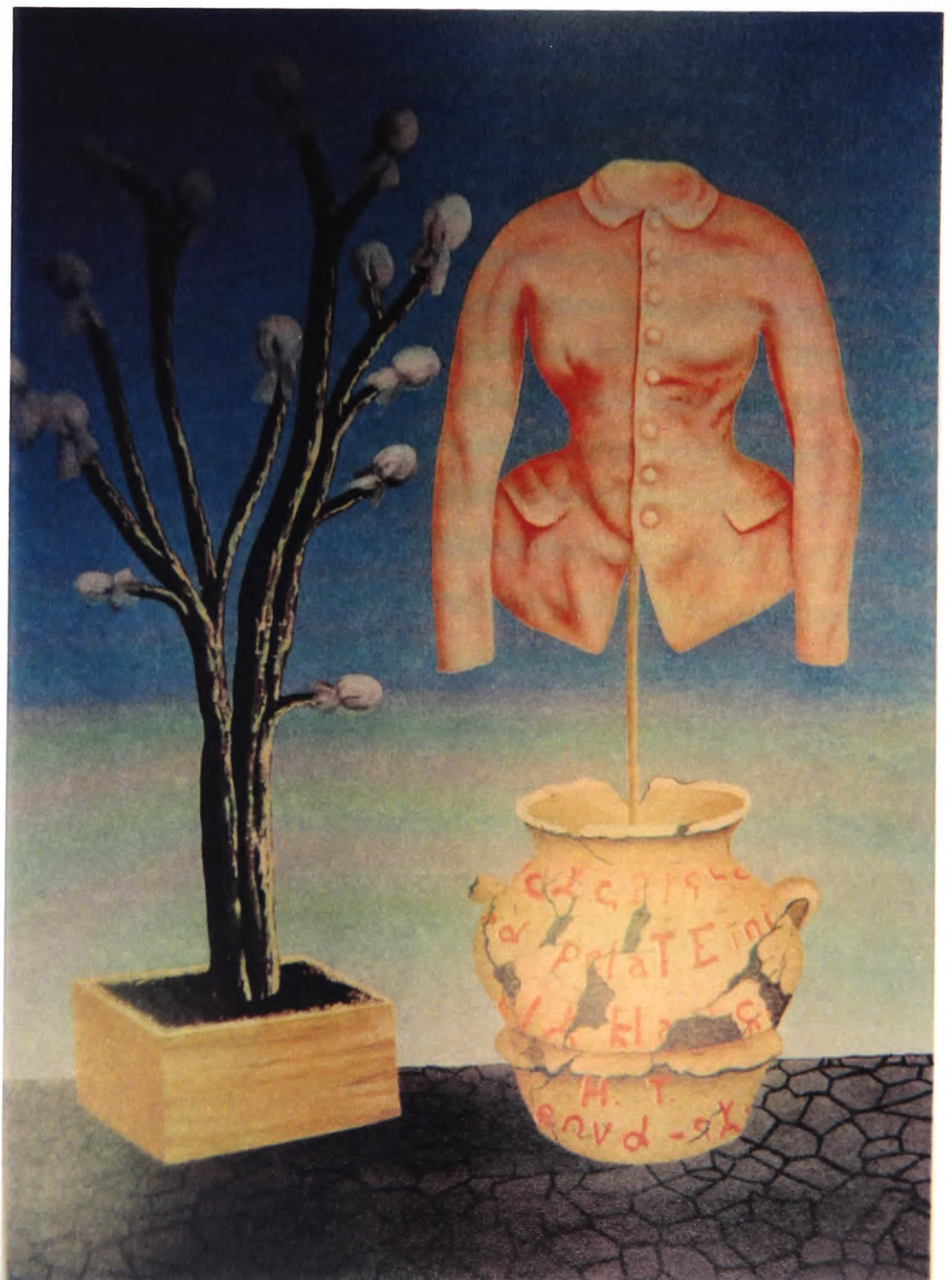


Martin Stejskal: *Painting*



Jindrich Styrsky:

Dream of a Snake



Jindrich Styrsky: *Melencholia*



Jindrich Styrsky: Photograph from: *On the Needles of These Days*



Jindrich Styrsky: Photograph from: *On the Needles of These Days*



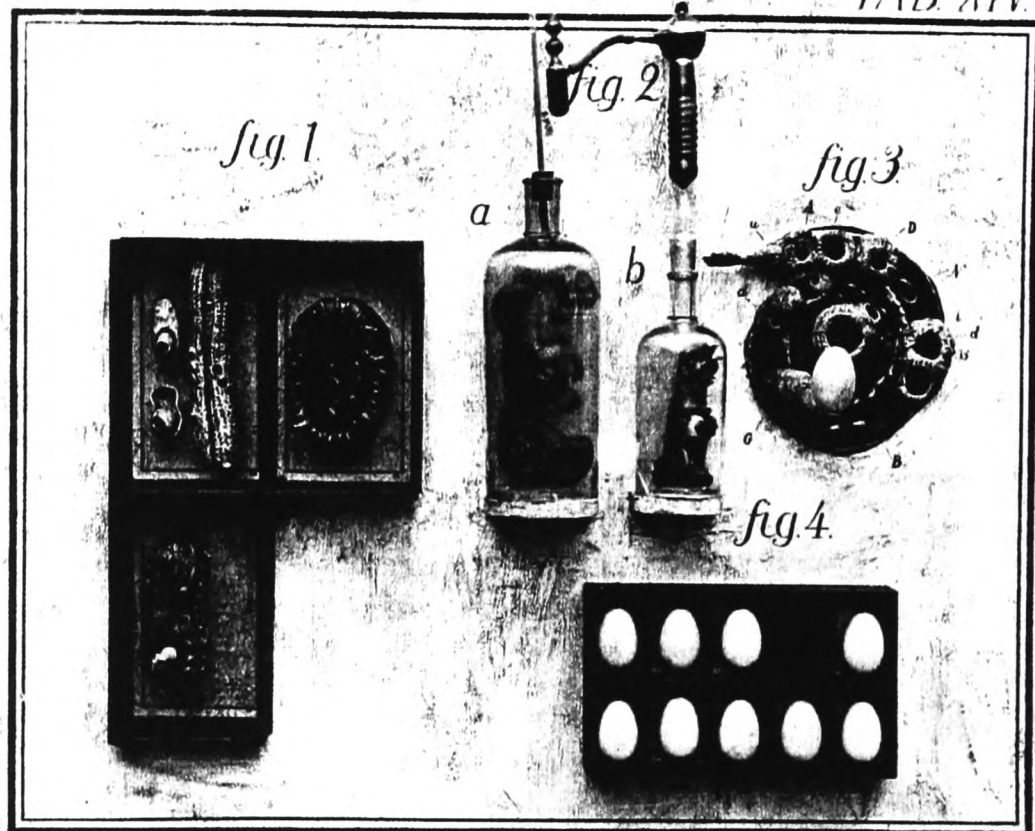
Jan Svankmajer: Natural History Cabinet



Tři hlavy / Three Heads, 1965

36.

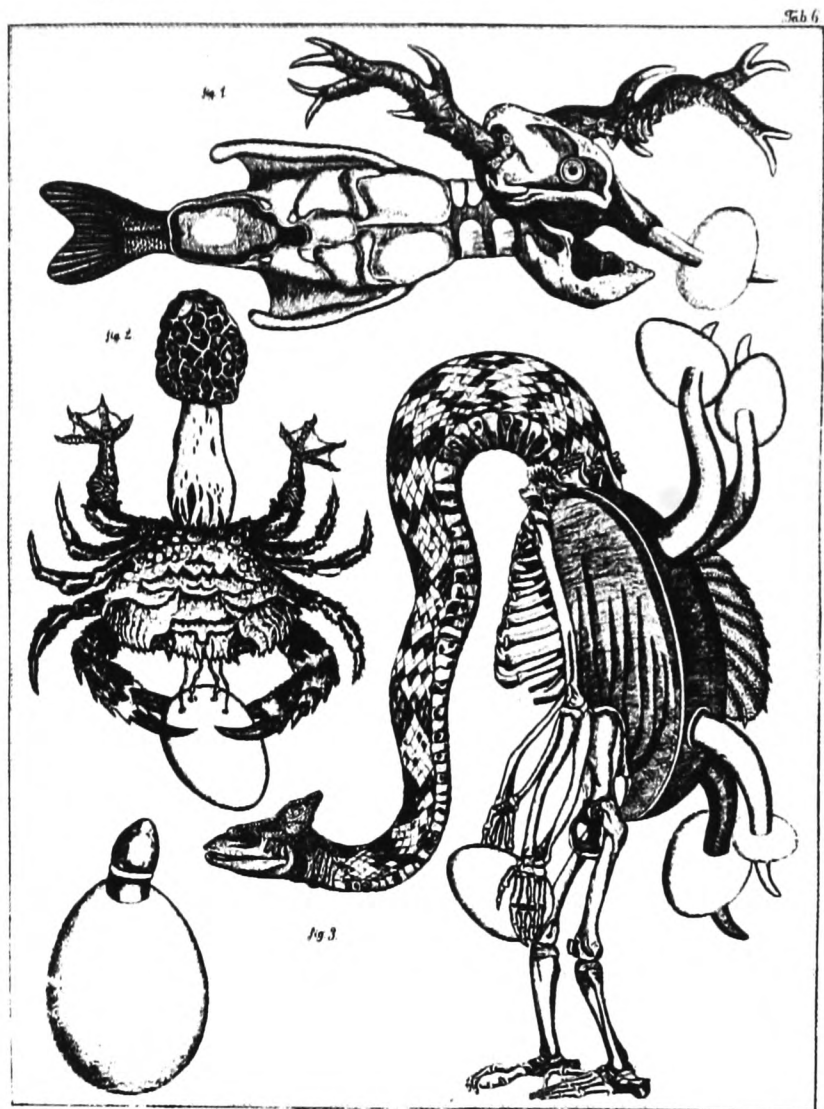
TAB. XIV



Tabule XIV. / Table XIV., 1966

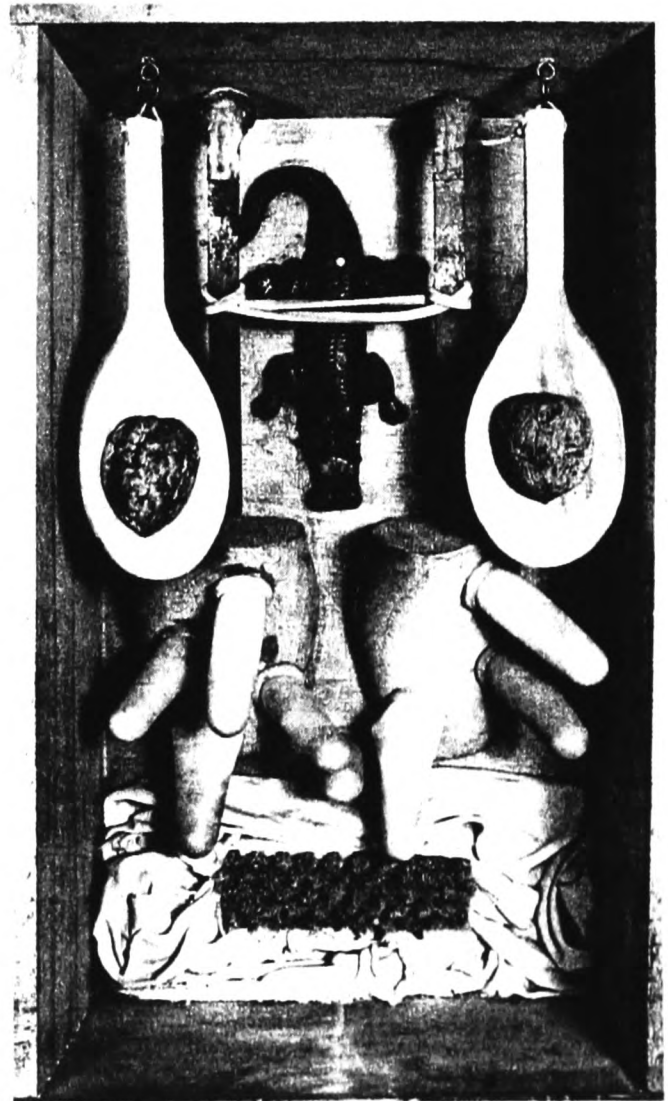
Jan Svankmajer

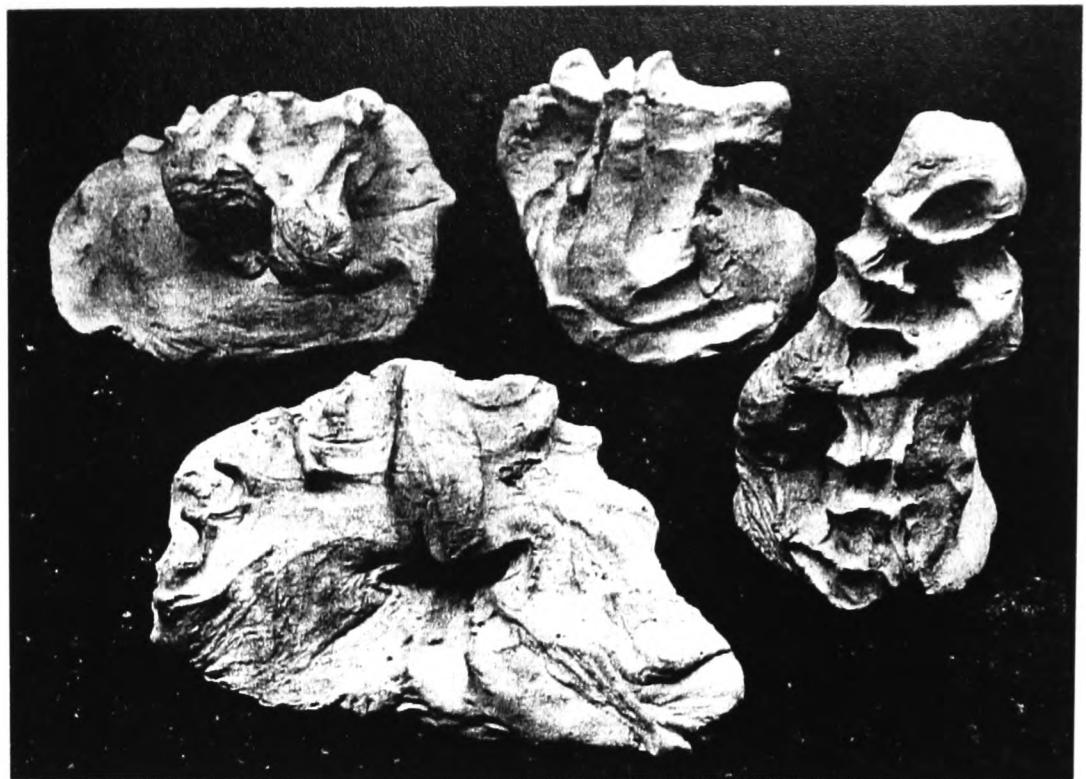
Přírodopis, tab. 6 / Natural Science, Tab. 3, ručně kolorovaný lept / hand-coloured etching, 1973, 76x60 cm



Taktilní portrét Alberta Marenčina / A Tactile Portrait of Albert Marenčin, 1978

Jan Svankmajer





Čtyři erotická gesta / Four Erotic Gestures, 1990

Diluted Touch

A Tactile Poem

Remember winter
cold glue
unbutton roll up your sleeve
sandy path
like dripping
gone cold
greasy
like a razor
sound of jacks
or a piano
fingers divided into white and black
the tactile dream of a tennis racket
like something coarse
which does not give way
perhaps corn scattered from virgin lands
or a kilo of liver
raw
upon a bare palm
have no fear
they'll escort you out
you're barefoot, you see
and there's a trickle of blood on your ankle.

JAN ŠVANKMAJER
1989



E. Š. / PICTURE-PUZZLE — 1972

Rebus (1973)

A rebus is a picture in which it is possible to perceive the visualization of a statement. The statement is cast in images which, however, do not resemble the statement, in spite of the fact that they resemble it with mischievous accuracy. The statement is broken up into images, visions, actions which do not illustrate the meaning of the statement but which express themselves independently. Thus a new vision arises, a different story which by means of confused logic draws on the statement for its very existence — defenceless, abused, insignificant, the statement undergoes a thorough description. It is abused into a new existence, the creation of something new which does not confirm the statement but ruins and destroys it. The rebus becomes the proof of the statement's potential. Proof of the devaluation of words. The rebus is a dry virtuoso performance of the impossibility of a statement, the absurdity of information, the superfluity of announcement. The rebus re-evaluates understanding which should exist between two beings who are in communication with one another. The rebus points out the infinite futility of words.

Eva Svankmajerova

Pobreži s milenci,
1975



Sekce, 1976



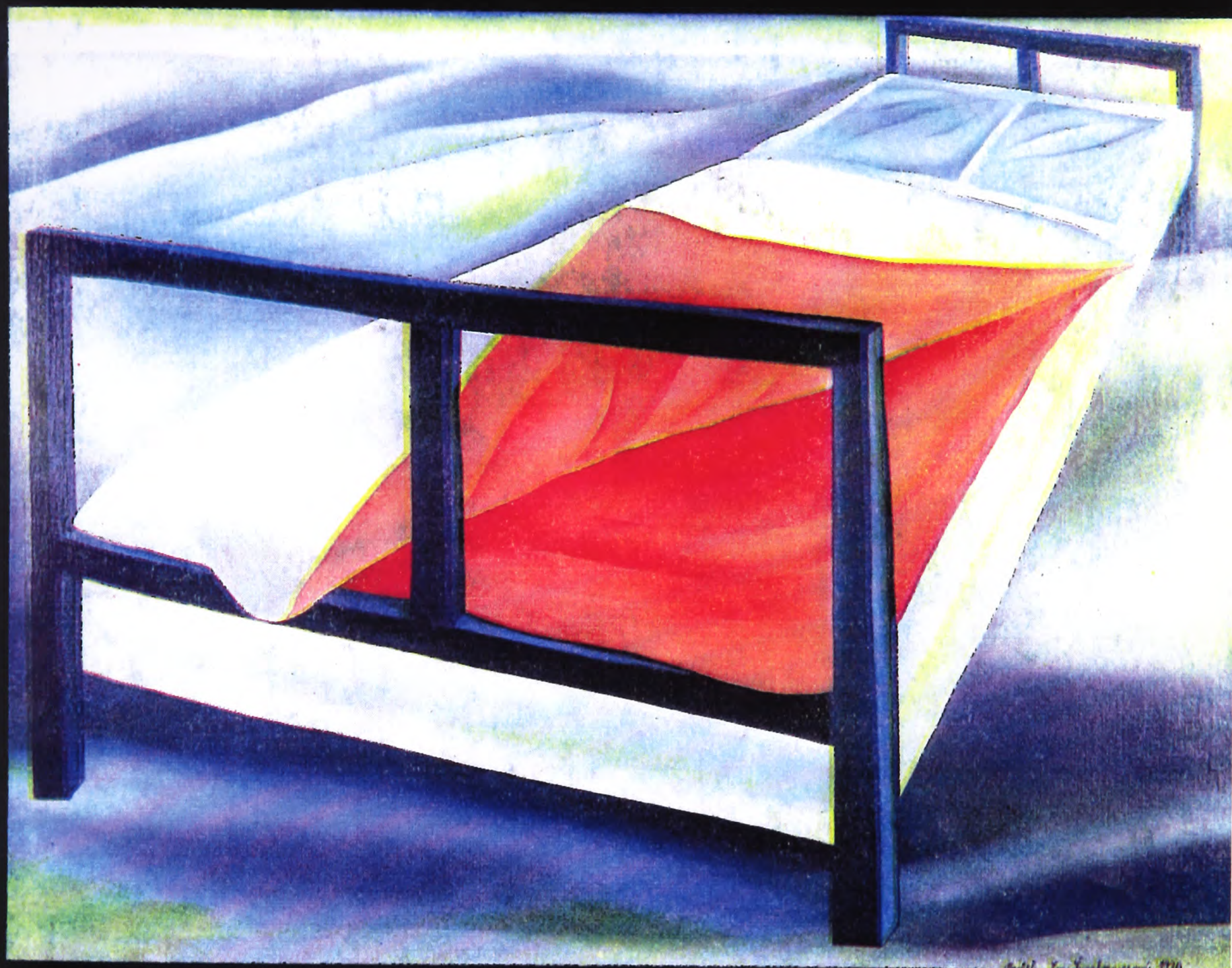
Eva Svankmajerova



Aktivní odpočinek, 1981

Eva Svankmajerová

CÍSAŘSKÝ ŘEZ



Eva Švankmajerová

Galérie Václava Špály, Praha
prosinec 1991 - leden 1992



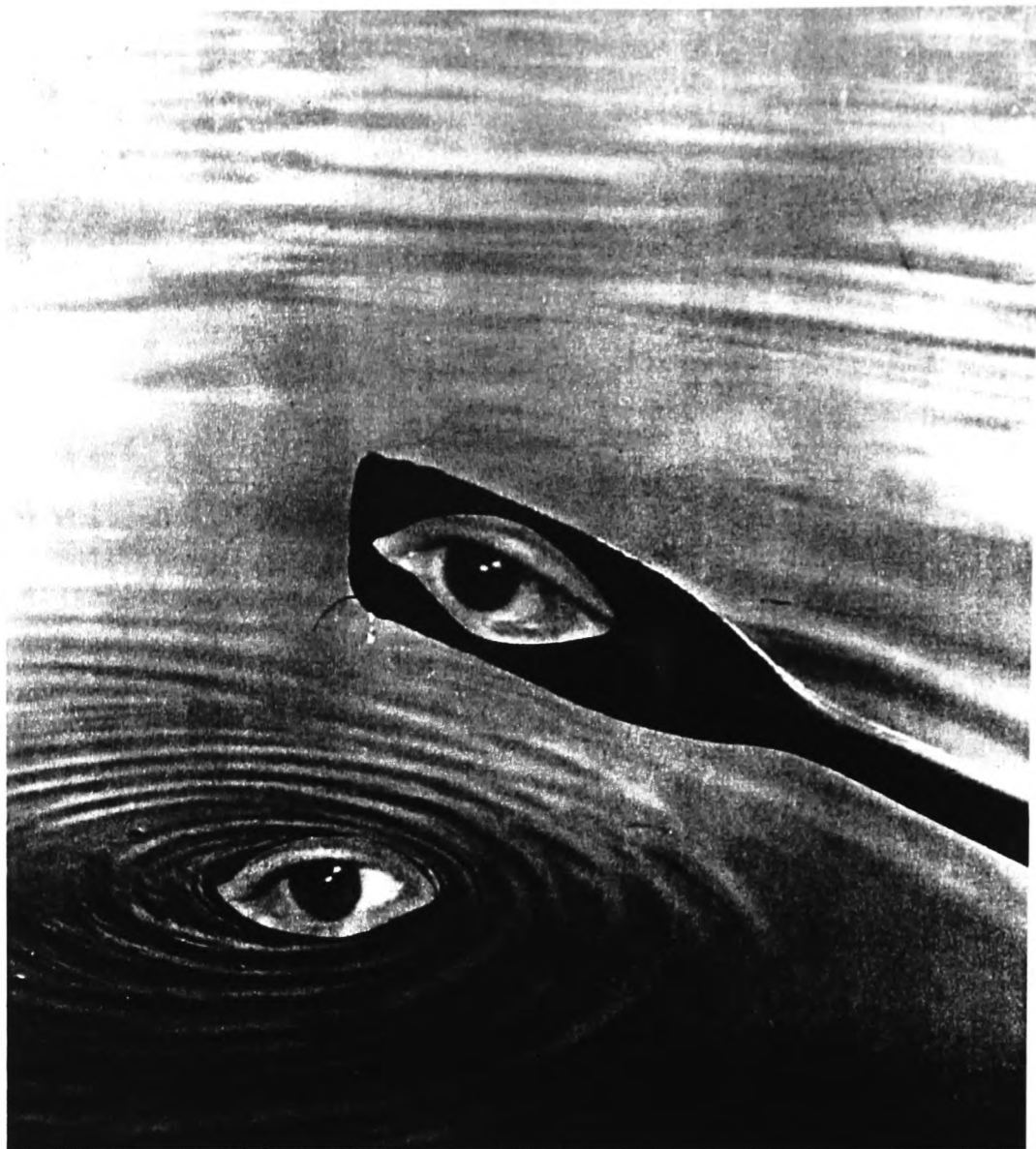
Karel Teige

Koláž č. 84 / Collage no. 84, 1939, papír / paper,
439x300 mm, PNP 77/72-261



Karel Teige

Koláž č. 286 / Collage no. 286, 1943, papír / paper,
398x291 mm, PNP 77/72-417



Karel Teige

Koláž č. 295 / Collage no. 295, 1944, papír / paper,
196x178 mm, PNP 77/72-426



Teyssie: Po představení, 1943



Toyen: *At a Certain Hour* 1961

ANALOGON 1

SURREALISMUS - PSYCHOANALYSA - STRUKTURALISMUS / PRAHA ČERVEN 1969



Krise vědomí

ANALOGON 2

SURREALISMUS - PSYCHOANALYSA - STRUKTURALISMUS - ANTROPOLOGIE - PŘÍČNÉ VĚDY
/ PRAHA ZÁŘÍ 1990



Tvorba jako rozvinutí protestu

ANALOGON: the first two issues
published twenty years apart.

Ilustrovaný sen

/INTERPRETAČNÍ HRA/

Námět: Jan Švankmajer

Interpretační předloha: písemný záznam autentického snu J. Š.

Realizace: březen 1982, za účasti: K. B., F. D., V. E., J. K., A. M., E. M., A. N., M. S., L. Š., E. Š., J. Š.

Metoda: interpretační předloha byla v souladu s proměnami snových situací rozčleněna na jedenáct navazujících částí (**interpretačních motivů**), které pak byly — bez uvedení kontextu snu — rozděleny mezi účastníky hry. Úkol zněl: 1. nalézt v záznamech svých snů takový, který by korespondoval s přiděleným interpretačním motivem, 2. vytvořit libovolnou technikou obrázek **ilustrující zároveň** tento vlastní sen i daný interpretační motiv. Interpretační motiv byl potom k ilustraci přiřazen jako slovní doprovod a doplněn prvkem vlastního nalezeného snu.



● Je držen v psychiatrickém ústavu.

● Odpočívám ve veliké obytné místnosti s oknem přes celou zeď — je to zřejmě hodně vysoko — nevidím oknem nic než samé mraky.

EMILA MEDKOVÁ



Jsem příslušníkem paradesantní jednotky, která dostala za úkol vysvobodit Martina Stejskala ze švýcarského zajetí.

JAN ŠVANKMAJER

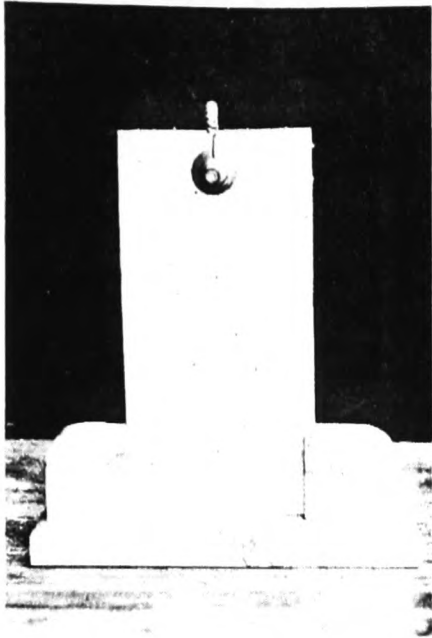


● Letíme nízko nad zemí. Otevírá se poklop v podlaze. Máme vyskočit. Dole pod námi však trčí proti nebi jakési železné traverzy, nebo plechy.

● Letím na Rogallově křídle. Když se vracím, napadá mne, že bych mohl spadnout. Právě v tu chvíli se mnou zamává vzdušný vír, a já padám. Podé mnou je les s ostrými špicemi smrků...

MARTIN STEJSKAL

A page from *Sfera snu* 1984: *Illustrating Dreams*, a collective game of interpretation.

INTERPRETÁCIA

IMAGINÁRNY PORTRÉT NEZNÁMEHO
SURREALISTU, 1986
J. Janda

INTERPRETÁCIA
Milan Nápravnik

INTERPRETOVANÝ DETAIL –
– (RUKY PREČ OD POSVÁTNYCH KRÁV)
Alena Nádvorníková, 1989

INTERPRETÁCIA

MADONY A SYNÁČIKOVIA, 1987
Eva Švankmajerová

REBUS, 1972
Eva Švankmajerová

TATRY, 1989
Albert Marenčin

INTERPRETÁCIA

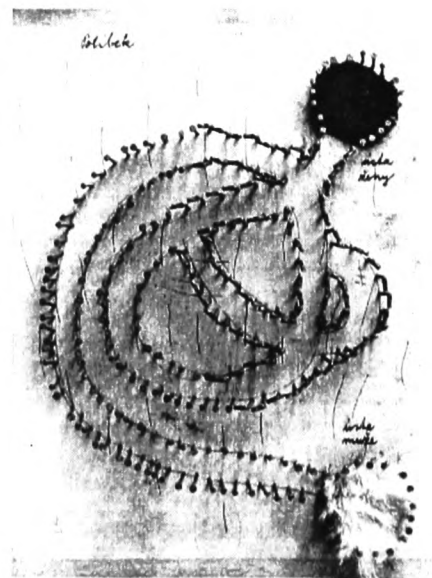
František Dryje

BUDOVAT STLÁT

Chodíme po městě tak jako po skalách
Bílý kůň mění se už v propocenou noc
Marně si vzpomínám na jméno datum
narození bydliště
početi první styk zaměstnání
Takové jakési hledání tápaní
Zuje si střevíce a brouzdá lesem blesk
Na kámen kameni v divoký pokřik žen
zvířené viry pasivní rezistence
Některé věci prostě nelze zasklít ať děláš
co děláš
utečeš neutečeš
Mazlavé přibory k večeři jako hudba
Kdo taky nosí v posteli rukavice?
Tento zvyk vymizel a teď tu máme AIDS
Pozdě si vzpomeneš a budeš holit břicha
Ráno tě poznají a zavolají na hrad
Tak ty prý nemáš žádný pravý zuby
Dáme tě do komise možná tě koupí
Nějaký hodný Američan anebo Portoričan
Čím více letadel vzlétne tím více letadel
spadne
Po špičkách okolo lesa chodíme víno pít

To jsme si nezasloužili říkají někteří lidé
Stejně tak jako ptáci v televizi
Všechno se změní až bude více kanálů
Promluví prezident a jeden řekne: to je ale!
A nic se nestane
Strejcové zasednou už zase na radnici
Rozšafně vyjmu drobnou práci z úst
A zabafají na nás za rohem

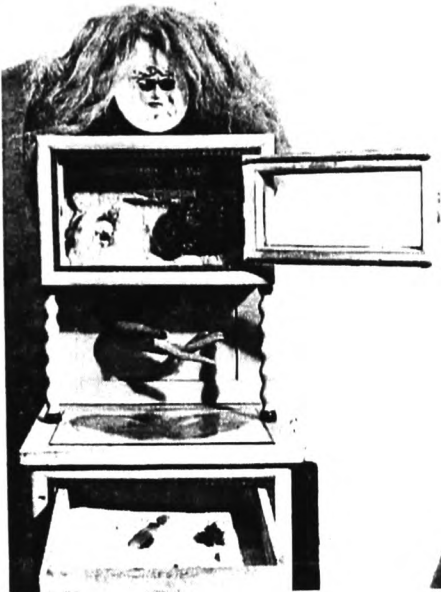
(Z cyklu „Původně jsem“, 1990)



BOZK
Jan Švankmajer

From *Sen Erotismus Interpretacia* 1992

EROTIZMUS



SKUPINOVÝ OBJEKT

NEOKLASICIZMUS (MARIONETA), 1990
Jan Švankmajer

EROTIZMUS

Jan Švankmajer

JAKO DOTEK MRTVÉHO PSTRUHA (taktilní scénář)

Polodetail: Peřina se vzdouvá, převaluje, převrací
Velký detail: Prst přejde po zubech hřebenu
Celek: Peřina se uklidňuje, až zmrtní
Polodetail: Deska stolu. Na stole leží krajíc chleba.
Odlamují se kousky střídy, sezmoulávají se v kuličky a kutálejí se.
Velký detail: Lidský nos z podhledu. Do nosních dírek se kutálejí chlebové kuličky a mizí v nich.
Velký detail: Lidské ucho. Do ušní dírky se kutálejí chlebové kuličky a mizí v ní.

Celek: Hola záda –
chladný
vláčný
kluzký
slizký

Nahý vběhnout do zralého ječmene!
Celek: Holá záda překryje peřina. Pohybuje se jako živočích, který tělo požírá a tráví.

Velký detail: Čištění lidských zubů. Pohyb kartáčku se zrychluje
Lehce lepkavý
proti srsti
příjemně neudržitelný
poddajný

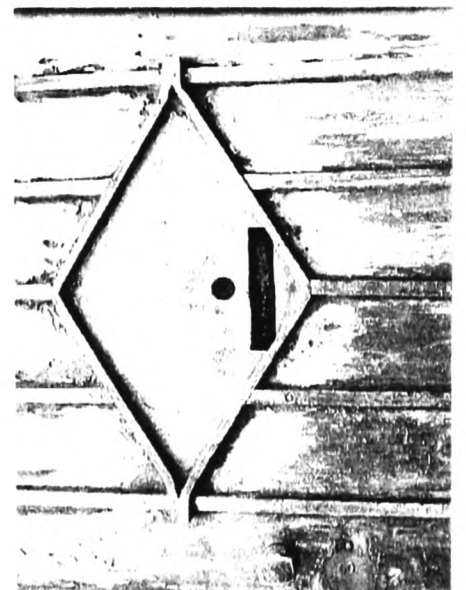
Okousat nechty u obou ukazováčku!
Celek: Hromada šatů a kabátů se tře, leze přes sebe.
Knoflíky se samy zapínají a zase rozpinají.

Montáž detailů.
Detail: Ochmýřené podpaží –
Hrudkovitý
rozpadávající se
zraňující
přežvýkany
Zpotit se mezi prsty nohou!

Celek: Peřina slézá z postele. Odkrývá prostěradlo plné drobečků z bábovky.

1978

EROTIZMUS



ŠTYRI EROTICKÉ GESTA, 1990
Jan Švankmajer

KAŽDÁ VEC MÁ SVOJ HAČIK, 1975
Emila Medková

EROTIZMUS
Emila Medková

From *Sen Erotismus Interpretatacia* 1992



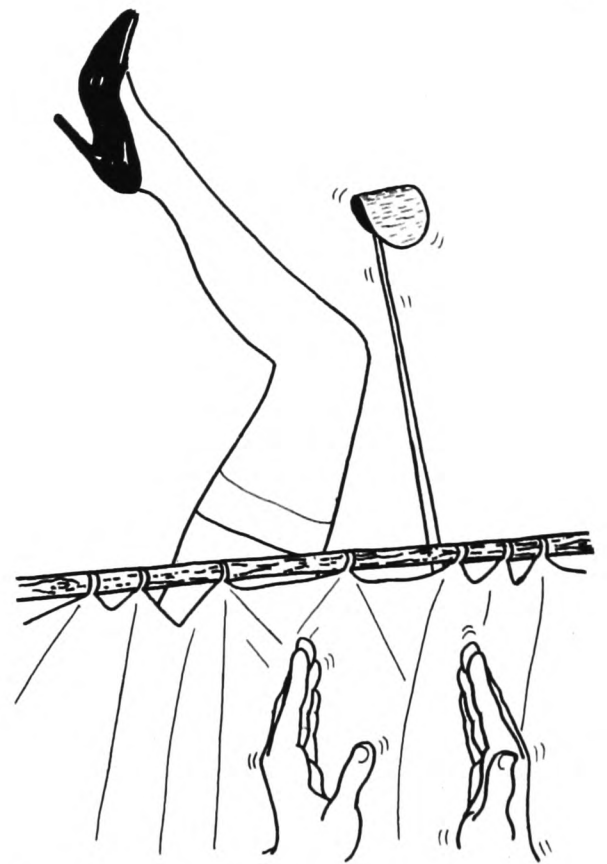
Andrew Lass: Enigma Š + T, 1995

Hra na otázky a odpovědi

je známá surrealistická hra; její jediné a základní pravidlo říká, že odpovídající nezná nahodile položenou otázku, na niž odpovídá. Pro naše účely jsme hru modifikovali: ten, kdo se ptá, činí tak s jistým záměrem, jež ovšem zná jen on.

Kdy se narodil Jindřich Štyrský?
Když se z půdy ztratily dva staré kufry.

Kde to bylo?
Na okraji hořícího lesa.



Bruno Solařík: Enigma Š + T, 1995

Jaké bylo jeho dětství?
Hrubé jako kartáč na boty.

Kdo vlastně byl Jindřich Štyrský?
Zatoulání psi.

Proč byl surrealista?
Protože venku mrzne, až praští.

Jak se jmenuje jeho nejznámější dílo?
Horem dolem.

Kdy zemřel?
Když se na půdě objevily dva staré kufry.
(F. D. + R. T.)