

Vivez sans temps mort
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The Prague Spring of 1968 marked the beginning of the “normalization” period in Czechoslovakia. The military intervention of the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 ended a short period of political liberalization (1968-1969) in Czechoslovakia. On Jan. 16, 1969, in protest against the continuing clampdown of occupational forces, student Ján Palach committed a suicide by self-immolation in Prague’s Wenceslas Square. His sacrifice was the last event that provoked a mass mobilization of people in Czechoslovakia for a long period to follow. It was not until the Velvet Revolution of November 1989, which resurrected the pacifistic spirit of peoples’ collective resistance against the Soviet-led occupation and brought the stifling Communist regime in Czechoslovakia to its end.

The consolidation was definitively attained in 1971 (the extraordinary XIV. Party Congress and publication of the report “Lessons from the critical development in the party and society”). Václav Havel described the “normalization” as a phase of post-totalitarianism, during which the communist system was through with its heroic deeds and the already stabilized society did not hide its pragmatic goals. It was not necessary for people to truly believe in the socialist ideals anymore. It was enough if they pretended to believe. The system of control was maintained through the practice of individual “self-censorship”. The central control mechanism was transformed through its distribution in space. The “normalization” period was characterized by apathy, asocial behavior, an appropriation of the “state-owned property,” alcoholism, absenteeism, emigration, etc. The era of the Real Socialism seemed to be eternal.

The supervision of socialist culture was also in conformity with the directives of the Communist Party. After the Second Congress of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists (Nov., 1972), the art was expected to respect the socialist realism canon. The communist government created a repressive system that should secure full adherence to these stipulations. The art scene split into an official and unofficial section, with a coexisting “grey zones”. Alternative art only appeared in isolated dissident communities without any institutional support. Due to almost non-existing possibilities to exhibit, Slovak action artists cultivated specific approaches to land art and body art, emphasized ethic as well as procedural qualities, and organized group projects. The opportunities for underground artists were limited to the meetings in private apartments and art studios, and unofficial exhibitions in peripheral places outside of gallery and museum space. Immaterial action that made use of text (the utopian society of Argillia by Alex Mlynárčik), and even life itself conceptualized as art project gained prominence (i.e., Július Koller played ping-pong and taught art to amateurs conceived as “an immediate creation of cultured life;” Peter Bartoš was crossbreeding pigeons and working on designs of spatial arrangement of animals in the Zoo). “Normalization” context of this kind shaped the specific activities of action artist and other activists in the 1970s.

The creative activities of Ján Budaj (born 1952) originated within the context of “normalization” period of the late 1970s in Czechoslovakia. Most of his actions took place in the exposed public spaces. He drew the audience into absurd situations. Budaj’s action art was constructed as a stratagem for catching an unwary audience’s attention, and thus confronted people with the pressing situations. Similarly to Victor Burgin’s notion of “Situational Aesthetics” (1969), the audience converted into participants through the process of the intense experience of their own being. Frequent participants of Budaj’s actions and his activities in Temporary Society for Intense Experience (DSIP – Dočasná spoločnosť intenzívneho prežívania) were poet Vladimír ‘Rachel’ Archleb (1953-2007), conceptual and action artists’ Ľubomír Ďurček (born 1948) and Igor Kalný (1957-1987), poet and filmmaker Tomáš Petřivý (1953-1986) and others. Budaj described DSIP as “a short-term working teams experimenting in the background of theatre, sociology, and psychology. Our goal was to gain experience that would alter the consciousness of the participants [...]. Means by which we hope to attain those goals were “intense situations” that created ‘a short connection’ between the reality and illusion [...], attempts to go through experiences of piercing situations” (J. Budaj: 3SD, Samizdat publication, 2nd ed., 1988).

The individual actions did not contemplate about, nor produce any original artistic artifacts. They were carried on without any additional fictitious backdrop. The “normalization” reality was the setting in

itself. DSIP was constructed as a “piratical enclave” in the “normalization” space. Most of the activities were, of course, illegal. Budaj and other participants proceeded according to the sophisticated anarchistic methodology. Interventions appeared and then vanished like Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zones (T.A.Z.), which liberated the imagination and then evaporated, so they can materialize somewhere else in a different shape, before the power comes in and eliminates them.

Activities of the group started with the first joint exhibitions in 1974 (group DG – Degenerated Generation), staged as cabaret performances coupled with readings of absurdist texts and appeals. Their goal was not an actual concrete art production, but as Budaj puts it in his correspondence with the art critic Štrauss, they were created “*through the attempts to disintegrate the showcased performances: by showing a movie during the reading, creating hustle and bustle, and showing indifference. The viewers protest, leave, and do not essentially construct an audience...*” The key point was to create an alternative space and pluralistic environment: “*Their goal was to create a specific atmosphere [...], effects of unauthentic expression, boredom, indifference, and stereotype. Performances were designed to give an impression of disintegration, triviality, dilettantism, failure, and inflict the audience with the feeling of embarrassment, disappointment, and lack of fulfillment. Monotonously projected film loop, multiple screenings of a conventional travel movie, and a few randomly chosen scenes from American movies created a setting for the presentation of the group’s art production.*”

Members of the group delivered their literary recitations in unschooled and hardly comprehensible manner, which went against all rules of declamation. Often, they relied on tapes only, and their activity during the performance was limited to the operation of a tape-recorder and sound reproduction devices. Both methods were combined together, so the audience could not tell apart if they were listening to the live word of the performer or a playback, which was recorded beforehand with disruptive noises such as coughing” (T. Štrauss, Slovenský variant moderny, 1992, p. 198).

The activities of DSIP and Budaj extend the world of art into the civilian “la résistance” within the controlled public space of a communist city. They were not mere provocational gestures. Artists were not interested only in the ways they perceive a particular society, but also in the structures this society generated. They exposed the audience to influences they had to face in their everyday lives.

The totalitarian society was fabricating lies based on partial truths almost pathologically. Partial truth was an effective tool of control because its effects tend to last longer than those of other types of brainwashing strategies. Disorientation can keep the citizens in a passive mode for decades.

In times during which travelling was the most privileged activity, Budaj and DSIP placed the red banner, which said “Airplane transportation is the cheapest,” into the exposed space of downtown Bratislava (Legionárska st., Bratislava, June 1978). Its language, design and arrangement were typical of the communist period. It was difficult for the authorities to decode the undertakings of the so-called “black propaganda,” since their display could not have been explicitly defined by spectacle.

Nobody reacted to the banner even a week from the day of its installation.

Group DSIP installed photographic reproductions of urban movables instead of the original real objects in downtown area (Hviezdoslavovo sq., Bratislava, June 16-18th, 1978). In this way, they created simulations of found waste bins, floors, railings. People who were walking by tried to rip holes in the pictures in places of illusory openings and struggled to throw trash into them. Prints were removed within two days.

Throughout this action, DSIP members also collaborated with the actors from an experimental theatre group named *Labyrinth*, whose main goal was “*to imitate the walk, gestures, and facial expressions of people passing by*” (Budaj, in private correspondence with Štrauss). As Budaj further notes: “*The bus driver opened the back door to a mime, pretending to drag a very heavy suitcase behind him. In the parallel interview to a*

question whether this was art, the answers of random people observing the action varied. They unequivocally agreed that these activities were not illegal. Regardless of their answer, some of them did not count out the possibility that the artists can get imprisoned (...). A rather favorable reaction of the public might have been caused by "the artistic facade" of the action (i.e., stage make-up). A direct intervention into people's lives would have probable triggered a more aggressive response of the people" (Štrauss, 1992, Ibid. p. 200).

Ideology adapted aesthetics to politics. Budaj adapted politics to the aesthetics of action art. His interventions are reminiscent of reality show experiments that operate at the interface of reality and fiction. Unpredictable situations are created by play as serious as a real life. Conceptually, the "Week of Fictitious Culture" (public space of Bratislava, Jan. 22 – Feb. 3, 1979) was based on the communication strategy of an advertisement parody, which promotes a non-existing product.

DSIP created a fictitious campaign for "Entartete Kunst" of socialist normalization. Advertising boards were placed in downtown Bratislava promoting fictitious events: a screening of Ingmar Bergman's movie "Pain," with the subtitle "Problem of Homosexuality in Modern Society;" exhibitions "Salvador Dali in Memoriam" and "René Magritte: Painting;" a performance "Eugène Ionesco: Eye;" and a concert "Bob Dylan – ABBA." Posters advertised the times and places of the events "happening" at official state institutions. The posters were removed in a few days (the one promoting the concert even within 15 hours).

According to Budaj, thousands of people came to participate in the events. Some of them showed up in person at the designated places, others spread the information verbally. As Budaj puts it in his letters: *"The message about each of the events spread with the speed symptomatic of our situation, some rumors (i.e., it really happened, why was it not allowed?) have been circulating until now. Participants of this unreal event really participated in something. They made an effort – not to go to the gallery, but somewhere else; they were put in a real situation and had to face a contradiction. They were forced to react to the controversial situation, talk about it, and reason about its causes, which means they had to take a stance and live through it at least for a moment" (Štrauss, 1992, Ibid. p. 202).*

Theatre group *Labyrinth*, Budaj, and DSIP organized several situational dramatic happenings in the streets of Bratislava called "Week of Street Theatre" (May 1979). As Štrauss recollects, *"Several participants have wrapped each other with white paper, thus creating static "plaster" statues in the middle of a lively street flow. A man with tied arms and legs was lying on a nearby lawn. On another day, a different man was tied to the metal bars at one of the buildings at the crossroad of Sedlárska and Leningradská Street (Ed. Note: today's Laurinská st.), right across from the institute Association of Slovak Writers" (Štrauss, 1992, Ibid. p. 122-3).*

Another confrontational situation sprung up when *"during the busiest afternoon city rush girls and boys in jeans would lie down all the way through the pedestrian crossing between the Square of the 4th of April (ed. note. today's Main Square) and New City Hall (ed. note. today's Primates' Square). After a period of waiting and staring in bewilderment, pedestrians could not do much else except to try and find another crossing or make an attempt to traverse the street with the risk of stepping on the prostrate bodies. Once the pedestrians made certain that the bodies did not belong to some comatose drunkards resting on the street, they tried to determine if it was a pre-arranged situation."* The construction of a surprising incident which disturbs the stereotypical pedestrian behavior and potentially becomes a stimulus to experience everyday reality in a more intense way reminds Guy Debord's research in "psychogeography" and the effects of the environment on the behavior of individual.

Budaj's actions behind the Iron Curtain are conceptually close to French situationists in its goal to activate the ongoing revolution of everyday life by creating playful impulses; the ambition to redefine the role of art; and with its connection to dada, surrealism and anarchism. There are other portentous correlations between the situationists and Budaj's activities. The initiative Situationist International (SI) focuses on theoretical analyses as well as concrete activities in constructing of situations (Internationale Situationniste 1, 1958). The situationists were the theoreticians of civil upheavals and key figures in students' riots in 1968

Paris. Budaj was an ecological activist and an involved publisher of samizdat literature (“Je ne sais pas d’autre bombe, qu’un livre,” a quote from Stéphane Mallarmé). In 1989 Budaj became the leader of the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia, which was the historical mark of the fall of communism in former Czechoslovakia.

In relation to the theories about the center and peripheries, Budaj’s activities cannot be qualified as inspired by the imagined center, since there was no real connection between them, especially not really a causal relation. Czechoslovak culture during the “normalization” period is also called “a glasshouse culture,” and is characterized by isolation and controlled conditions. The thinking about life, though, followed a similar path, despite the latter’s distinctly different informational as well as motivational background than the one found in Bratislava, a totalitarian Central European city, and in Western consumerist society.

Artist Ľubomír Ďurček was one of the participants at DSIP actions. For the “Week of Street Theatre” he created several scripts for the performer’s interaction with the street crowd. In his notes about the concept for the action “Resonance” (1979) he mentions: “A 20-member-group of people in casual everyday clothing will be positioned in the demarcated area of the city. Performers’ activities will be focused on the construction of psycho-social situations and will work in two phases: the first one lies in the performers’ unification with the crowd, and the second one rests in their separation from the crowd and an immediate creation of a particular geometrical shape.”

The potential viewers became an active part of the composition. For instance, “*In the dynamic shape ‘Aureole’ 20 performers surrounded one pedestrian in a circle, while respecting the direction of the pedestrian’s walking path. The moment the pedestrian started to show signs of fear from the threatening situation, the group of performers broke loose instantly, as if in an movie cut. The goal was to achieve the catharsis, when the pedestrians realized it was only a game. In other instances, the group formed a corridor made of bodies, through which pedestrians had to walk, a wall that would block one of the busy streets, or an underpass on one end*” (Rusinová (ed.), 2001, p. 141, *The Art of Action 1965-1989*).

In a totalitarian city, without the freedom of assembly, even an ordinary action can take the form of a significant protest (i.e. such case is also Taiwan performance during the period of martial law). A so-called “Baton Law” assured the prohibition of gatherings in Czechoslovakia after the events of Prague Spring in 1968. Employment of all citizens was strictly enforced; everybody had to have a stamp from an employer in their identity documents. Idling around during the work hours also automatically meant breaking the law about “parasitizing” and police raids aimed at capturing such “slackers” was a common practice. An arrest for loitering was usually followed by several hours of interrogation by the secret police called “Štátna Bezpečnosť” (ŠtB) (transl. State Security), and possibly even imprisonment.

As Foucault discusses it in his *Madness and Civilization* the boundaries of the “virtuous society” are defined by work and idleness. Power relations in the society become apparent through “normalization” practices and disciplinarian mechanisms, which define certain types of behavior as normal or not normal, acceptable or unacceptable. According to Budaj, the performers were expecting the police reaction. They were able to determine the time the police would need to get mobilized and spring into action. In this case, the authorities took 20 minutes before detecting the performers’ action. By that time, the activists had managed to disappear successfully from the “scene of the crime.”

“Normalization” period was characterized by the loss of vitality due to the exhausted ideology, bureaucratic practices, and empty formulaic slogans. Artistic endeavors of DSIP tried to change the individual through an intense experience. As Claire Bishop (*Installation Art – A Critical History*, 2005, p. 24) puts in relation, the philosopher John Dewey, which inspired e.g. Kaprow’s theory about the transformative potential of aesthetic experience, mentions that we can develop as human beings only if we can actively cooperate as well as interact with our environment and let it shape us. If we find ourselves in a new situation, we have to reorganise our repertoire of responses and reactions always. In this way, we expand our own ‘capacity for experience’. Dewey defined it as a ‘heightened vitality’ (J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934).

The constructed situations created a new type of experiences for the viewers, whose active participation was analogous to their potential real life experiences. In the bulletin *Info DSIP - for the Insider’s Need* (1981) Budaj formulated the idea of *Temporary Society for the Intense Experience* as an attempt “to

create for ourselves, our friends, and the strangers the situation of an intense experience with a concrete positive aspiration [...] it is impossible to construct something like this without prior contemplation, or without being personally connected to these constructed situations."

"Lunch I." (Main sq., Bratislava, Nov. 12, 1978) and "Lunch II." (Housing development Kútiky in Karlova Ves, Bratislava, Dec. 16, 1979) could be described as the situations of transmission of the mutual delight and desire from one participant to another. These civilian feasts took place in the city center and in the parking lot of the housing development. Lunches took place in front of the observing audience, during which performers nonchalantly conversed while enjoying eating their food.

Budaj continued to work on absurdist dramatic actions and kept documenting them in pictures. Some of them resembled stories by Daniil Kharmis: a chicken was let loose in Bratislava city center and a photographer kept following its runaway travel in the middle of the city, creating commotion until it entered a buffet called Pipi-Gril; a man and a woman sat together on a park bench wrapped around by a wire thus imitating a sculpture (The Allegory of Love).

Budaj talks about the preparation of action "Three Sunny Days (3SD)" in his samizdat from 1981 called "3SD". At first, the government officially approved this action, but shortly before the beginning of the event they prohibited it. The action was supposed to take place in May 29-31, 1980 in Bratislava's Medical Garden (Medická záhrada). According to Budaj, 3SD *"followed other events of this kind [...] that took place in Bratislava in years 1978 and 1979. They could be characterized as attempts for street theatre forms and were "roofed" by the pantomime theatre Labyrinth"* (3SD, 1988, 2nd ed.)

May in communist Czechoslovakia was the month of the most profuse state celebrations and compulsory mass parades to commemorate important communist moments. The composition of the spring spectacle started with the organized celebrations of Victorious February (Feb. 25), followed by International Women's Day (March 8), reached its climax during International Workers' Day (May 1) and Liberation Day (May 9), and ended with International Children's Day (June 1). Nationalization on October 28 and The Great October Socialist Revolution on November 7 were also belonged to the set of most significant Communist celebrations that required mass parades. These parades *"had important ceremonial and symbolic meanings for the regime as rituals of the Party's authority and the masses' controlled subordination"* (Thorne, 2005, p. 65), and the "normalization" practices could slip by as unnoticeable as possible (i.e., the time of the biggest folklore celebrations collided with the period of the mass catholic pilgrimage).

May activities staged by DSIP can be associated with Paul Thek's theory about the public perception of the 'liturgical nature' and spiritual dimension of art during the time of holidays (Bishop, 2005, *ibid.* p. 31). Thek would choose the dates for his installation based on this theory (i.e., at Christmas time). Budaj's DSIP existed in the ideologically constructed society, in which Marxism replaced the role of religion. DSIP, thus, could accentuate the ceremonial character of the system, and its powerful tool, Marxist philosophy and aesthetics, deformed in accordance with Party's needs.

The action *Three Sunny Days* brought together several relatively isolated dissident groups of artists, actors, and ecologists *"to establish contact [...] between the public and artworks of unknown nonconformist artists [...], the contact of the public with itself. It was an attempt to create an authentic public event [...] We will demonstrate that in spite of everything, people are subconsciously still waiting for the moment that would vitalize them, that they need space in which they can come together as one society. Nothing special even need to happen..."* (3SD, 1988, 2nd ed.).

DSIP planned to set up all-day-long presentations and workshops of artists from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland. Even though the organization 3SD was legitimate, it had to be closed down. *"After the action had been stopped, the chronicle of 3SD started. Its true causes have been unknown until today. We could only observe its factual force; all the published copies of Bulletin 3SD were confiscated and destroyed, the activities of the theatre Labyrinth were banned, V-club was closed down and its employees were fired, the members of 3SD were interrogated, etc."* (3SD, 1988, 2nd edition).

The samizdat version of 3SD Bulletin is reminiscent of the contemporary discourse analysis and critical efforts to contextualize art as well as the processes of individual and collective memory. It included

interviews with the participating artists, scripts for the actions in preparation that have never been executed, and stories about the artists, unrealized projects, and above all, the era itself...

The planned workshop turned into an open concept of utopian event.

A performer is running across the park with a scarf fastened around his mouth and nose. When he cannot breathe any more, the performer stops running, pulls down the scarf and starts breathing deeply. His action is not documented.

(Description of the action for 3SD, J. Budaj, 1980)

Budaj indicated that the action "Hello Europe" was "a climax of many years of artistic efforts to explore boundaries between art and real life."

The collective action *Hello Europe* was a result of the joint endeavors of Martin Bútora, Ladislav Snopko and Ján Budaj with revolutionary movement Public Against Violence (Verejnost' proti násiliu) during the first weeks of the so-called Velvet Revolution (December 10th, 1989). The moment of the actual shift of art from its transformational potential towards the borderline with the real life happened when some 150,000 people walked through the state border between Czechoslovakia and Austria, which was reopened after 42 years. The announcement of crossing through the Iron Wall was telecast live to then still official state representatives of the communist regime at a meeting in the Slovak National Theatre. This walk to the small Austrian town Hainburg, about 40 km from Bratislava, was labeled as a "Greetings to Europe," because participants from both banks of the Danube could finally greet each other freely. It was a "Walk of understanding" in the name of the pacifist character of the Velvet Revolution and a conceptual foundation of the revolutionary movement Public against Violence. Ján Budaj became its leader. The idea of revolution happening without employing a physical force.

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