

*Matter of Words:
Translations in East European Conceptualism*

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‘We reach the threshold of a new and very different Don Quixote and a new Quixotism,’ Václav Černý told his audience in a public lecture which marked the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the death of Miguel de Cervantes.¹ This new Quixotism, with its emphasis on the transhistoric and living, is a metaphor for the situation of Czech intellectuals, writers and artists in the 1960s, it soon becomes clear. It is also meant as an appeal.

For the artist there are two possible perceptions of reality: Don Quixote’s giants versus Sancho Panza’s windmills, madness versus reason, or the unreasonable hero versus the reasonable coward. In a nice twist of the argument, Černý asks who all those characters are in the novel who agree with ‘windmills’ as opposed to ‘giants’, and answers, ‘Practically everybody’, following up on this claim with a long list of criminals, profiteers, frauds and swindlers, people in short who, if measured by the standards of human decency and honesty, are themselves found wanting, deviant in fact. Seen from this angle, Don Quixote’s sublime madness no longer confronts reason but rather another sort of craziness which more often than not turns out to be mean and self-serving.

Truth does not abide by the reality principle. In subscribing to the new Quixotism, the writer or artist puts him/herself on the side of truth against lies, excuses, circumstance and compromise. It is his or her job to wilfully ignore the self-evident and the officially sanctioned. Černý presents ‘the new Don Quixote’ not as a tragic hero but as the unfaltering optimist whose happiness lies in his embodying truth. Being true (to oneself) is contrasted with the knowledge of truth as in ‘knowing the facts’, and art, Černý suggests, has to be true in the former sense. How is this to be achieved? With irony, with humour, with humility, ‘Forgive us our madmen and we forgive you your idiots.’

What can work from Eastern Europe contribute to a contemporary discussion of Conceptual art?² There are two approaches. One is to document conceptual work in Eastern Europe in order to achieve a more complete picture of one of the last movements of the artistic neo-avant-garde. Given the lack of consensus about what constitutes Conceptual art, whether or not it is ongoing, and who should be included among the ranks of conceptual artists, this seems a difficult task even before one comes up against practical problems such as the frequent lack of documentation of 'unofficial' art activity right up to 1989. Personally, I am less and less sure what, precisely, Conceptual art is or was in either East or West. Judging by the recent literature, it seems as if the longer the debate continues, the larger the category becomes.

Another approach selectively uses certain works in order to draw attention to a particular problem; it emphasizes a specific aspect within a plethora of supposedly conceptual practices. This is the path I follow here. My thesis is simple. Even at its most theoretical, non-official art behind the Iron Curtain maintained an important existential dimension. Unlike Socialist Realism and the various forms of neo-Constructivism and Lyrical Abstraction which were eventually sanctioned by the state, and also unlike much post-Duchampian work in the West, 'actions' in East European countries remained largely experiential.³ This is why they were perceived as threatening by the authorities and frequently censored. (In general, I believe this to be the main difference between academic or 'official' art and art that remains contemporary and speaks to us across geographical and cultural borders.)

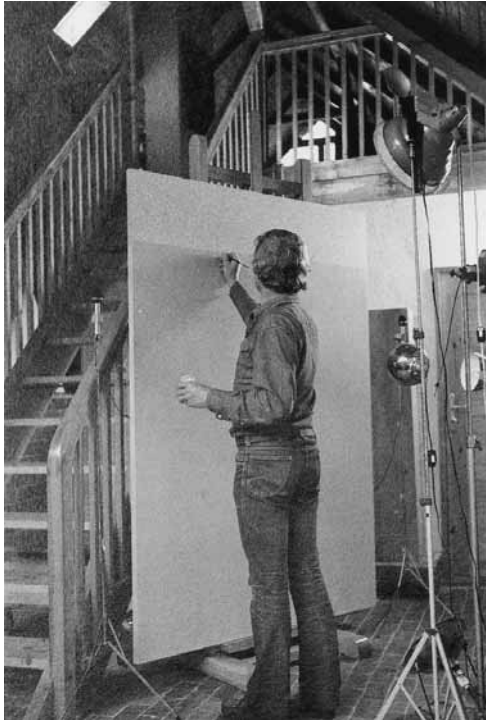
In what follows, I look at different ways in which experience figures in certain works which originated even if they did not always continue on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, and are situated under today's golf-size umbrella of Conceptual art.

In 1965 the Polish artist Roman Opalka embarked on what he had decided would be his life project, *OPALKA 1965/I-∞*.

. . . enfin, après tout ce temps, cette préparation mentale et structurelle de mon projet, j'ai commencé mon premier 'Détail' . . . ma main tremblait devant l'immensité de mon entreprise, ce minuscule un, décision radicale du premier instant du temps irréversible.⁴ [. . . finally, after all this time spent in mental and structural preparation of my project, I started on my first 'Détail' . . . my hand trembled before the hugeness of the task, this little 1, this radical commitment to the first instant of irreversible time.]

After a short period of experimenting with different colours and formats, Opalka settled on what was to become the standard format of the paintings he refers to as *Détails*.⁵ Starting with 1, the progression of numbers is inscribed in white acrylic paint on a grey background. The *Détails* measure 196 x 135 cm, a size determined by practical rather than aesthetic considerations, and the numbers are painted with the smallest standard paintbrush. They are 13 mm high, just large enough to allow the artist to work on the painting for hours at a stretch, while clearly registering the self-imposed discipline by emphasizing the slowness of the process.⁶ To the extent that the *Détails* are a record, they record the process of their making, the inscription of irreversible time. The repetition which underlies this counting figures in two ways: in the $n + 1$ gesture of counting itself and in the visual rhythm created by using the paintbrush like a fountain pen which is refilled only when the ink, or in this instance the paint, has been used up. This way of working emphasizes the manual and physical aspect of the activity. When Opalka had passed 1 million in 1972, he extended and modified the project: henceforth, the grey background of every new *Détail* would be a degree lighter than the previous one. At the same time, he began to record the counting on tape and after each session he now takes a photograph of himself, always a frontal head-and-shoulder portrait in black and white. These days, an installation of his work typically includes all three components of the project. The photographs are placed alongside the paintings and the spectator hears a quiet but insistent voice counting in Polish. The recording of his voice will also serve a practical purpose once the written numbers can no longer be read on the canvas. As the background of the paintings becomes lighter, the moment will be reached when the artist paints white on white and has to rely on his recorded voice to guarantee the accuracy of the inscription. *OPALKA 1965/1-∞* ends with the artist's death. The last *Détail* will remain unfinished and, by virtue of its incompleteness, render complete all the others.

Where Jasper Johns used numbers as a visual repertoire of shapes to stage an irreconcilable tension between cliché – the identical and reproducible – and expressive gesture in the number paintings of the late 1950s, Opalka turned painting into a process of counting. And where in the 1970s his compatriot Zbigniew Gostomski used counting to determine the distribution of colours on the canvas, with each number representing a different colour, Opalka's counting began to move towards invisibility. Ultimately independent of visibility, this process derives its significance and signification from its ceaseless realization. The numbers appear in



Roman Opalka at work in his studio in Mansuria,
where he passed the first million in 1972.

sequence, and their meaning is determined in that sequence without external referent. To the extent that the process of counting is considered to be objective and independent of history, culture and agency, it can be thought to go on for ever. In mathematics the unimaginable – infinity – is easily and unproblematically representable because recursion allows us to understand numbers as objects prior to their enumeration. Yet the whole point of Opalka's project is to create a material trace of finite, lived time. In that sense, the work is the opposite of an abstract proposition. Determined, literally down to the last *Détail* by its concept, the concept also demands its continuous materialization.

Opalka's work transforms mathematical infinity from an ideal object into a potentiality, into something that is never reached but always moved towards, an irreducible and mobile limit, like a horizon, that can only be approached but not attained or transgressed. As evidence of the duration of the artist's labours, the *Détails* draw attention to human finitude as that which gives meaning to the infinite and ideal. In order for this to hap-

pen, representation has to be evoked although, strictly speaking, the paintings do not represent anything. In the instance of Opalka's project, the representational gesture is narrative. All the narrative trappings are present: the overdetermined beginning and conclusion, and important moments along the way. The right format is found, the project is extended, another million is reached, the numbers become invisible . . .

While the paintings cannot tell us anything about any particular life, they provide a model of how a set of unique moments becomes a project; more precisely, how an abstract sequence becomes a form we recognize – a biography. This form is both the possibility and the tyranny of *OPALKA 1965/1-∞*.

While his preoccupation with the formalization of time has much in common with the work of artists such as Hanne Darboven and On Kawara, Opalka's project emerged from a different context. In 1960s Poland, opposition to Socialist Realism usually meant enthusiastic support for anything associated with artistic modernism. The latter was available either as a neo-Constructivism developed from the work of artists associated with the group Blok and the Unism of Władysław Strzemiński in particular, or as performance-oriented art often influenced by the work of Tadeusz Kantor, who staged the first happenings anywhere in Eastern Europe in Poland in 1965. These tendencies continued the parallel importance of the Constructivist and Surrealist heritage in Poland and other East European countries. As Mariusz Hermansdorfer put it in a catalogue introduction to an exhibition of contemporary Polish art in 1975, on the one hand, 'art as order, as simple construction calculated with mathematical exactitude', and on the other, 'art as expression, disquiet and posing the question of existence [*Existenzialfrage*]'.⁷ Wary of uncritically embracing either of these tendencies, Opalka none the less formulated and formalized the '*Existenzialfrage*' with all the seriousness and pathos of high Modernism. The limit of the work here becomes the limit of the artist's life.

Other artists and writers who grappled with a similar historical and artistic predicament chose parody to negotiate individual voices in an environment which systematically denied the importance of individual expression, experience and memory. Bureaucratic and administrative categories were translated into art and literature. In Eastern Europe there is a predominantly literary tradition which predates Communism and addresses the unequal and arbitrary relationship between individuals and institutions of the state. Rarely transparent and never straightforward, in the twentieth century this relationship became a recurrent preoccupation

in the otherwise completely different works of writers such as Franz Kafka and his exact contemporary Jaroslav Hašek. Closer to us in time is the well-known playwright and novelist Pavel Kohout, author of, among many other things, *Bílá kniha o kauze Adam Juráček* (1970) [*White Book Adam Juráček*], which was finally published in Czech in 1991.⁸ This hilariously surreal novel takes its readers through records and documents which detail the tribulations of Adam Juráček, Professor of Drawing and Physical Education at the educational institute in K., who managed to overcome the law of gravity and walk on walls and ceilings. A series of reconstructions, protocols, speeches, testimonies, photographs, letters, and transcripts of party meetings reveals not only the impact of this extraordinary and absurd event but also the almost equally bizarre logic by which an individual's destiny is negotiated through a network of institutional relationships. Yet, unlike the event which triggered the paper flood, the bureaucratic logic *qua* logic is entirely believable, despite its ever more convoluted and grotesque effects. One of the reasons why this fantastic story is both hugely entertaining and strangely convincing has to do with the way it inhabits the mechanisms of official speech, especially the use of a particular sort of naïve speech which suggests a society where everything is entirely transparent, normal and normalized to the enjoyment of every good citizen.

The same kind of naïve speech figures prominently in the artist's book *Il'ja Kabakov, V našem ŽĚKe* [*Ilya Kabakov in our Zhek*].⁹ This work presents the artist as writer, painter and collector. In the Soviet Union, a Zhek (*zhilischtschno-eskpluatazionnaja kontora*) was an office for the administration of apartments in urban neighbourhoods. It usually looked after several buildings and was responsible for repairs and for issuing various kinds of documents to the inhabitants. For Kabakov, the Zhek becomes a micro-environment whose structures the artist both inhabits and uses to reflect on his art. While other artists from the group that became known in the late 1970s as the Moscow Conceptualists, such as Bulatov and Kolmar and Melamid, worked with the emblems of Soviet power, Kabakov's interest lay in the intrusive but banal routines of daily life. The structures of the quotidian form inescapable mentalities, such as the Zhek mentality, 'a consciousness which all members of the Zhek share', parodies fictional Zhek theorist W. Fjodorov.¹⁰

This work by Ilya Kabakov mimics the language and mythology of Soviet life at its most intimate and pervasive. Unlike much dissident art which kept a satirical distance from lived reality in its attempts to connect to an authentic avant-garde of the past, Kabakov confronts the situation



Ilya Kabakov, *Book*, 1980, postcards pasted in an English textbook.

of the artist who is excluded from the official art institutions from within another kind of institutional set-up. As he cannot be an officially recognized artist, he carves out an identity for himself as a hobby artist and Sunday painter of ornaments within the leisure activities of the Zhek. In this context, Kabakov invents all types of categories and activities, for instance the 'Zhek No. 8 section for cultural mass activity, subsection creative art', which allows him to present and describe different series of drawings, just as the 'Circle of Collectors' provides the opportunity to introduce and comment on various collections of postcards glued into old textbooks which are thus turned into albums. The second half of the book consists of texts which complement and theorize the collections. One of the most interesting of these is a short text entitled 'Trash' and signed by Kabakov. The trash in question is the steady flow of paper which accumulates next to the telephone, on one's desk, at work – everywhere. In order to keep this paper flow from turning into an avalanche, it needs to be sorted into useful and garbage. Now what happens, Kabakov asks, when we can no longer distinguish between important and unimportant, between useful and garbage? What happens when we can no longer tell whether one ordering system is better than another, and whether we should keep everything or throw everything away. Kabakov does not transform yesterday's newspapers or old cinema tickets into an aesthetic assemblage à la Schwitters. Piled into boxes and folders instead, scraps of paper supposedly turn into supports of the mind. Personal memories are attached to these items which affirm the unique past of every individual. The bus tickets, paid bills, old letters, invitations and reminders, all those bits and pieces, 'represent the only and real stuff of my life, even if from the outside they appear as trash and nonsense'.¹¹

In order to be recognized as valuable by the collective, papers and objects have to be collected, that is, shown to belong to a coherent category. In this way collecting confers value and meaning on things that would otherwise be regarded as trash – matchboxes, beer mats, old stamps, postcards, Metro tickets, the arbitrary accumulations in one's coat pocket. In a highly regulated society, Kabakov seems to suggest, what accumulates willy-nilly becomes by that very fact a collectable, meaningful and worth preserving, because it testifies to oneself as a person and an individual, even if it does so in the most rudimentary sense: as someone who reads letters, buys tickets to the movies, etc. And each of these experiences, even if they are shared by thousands of others with the same Zhek mentality, in the same cinema, surrounded by the same garbage and listening to the same tired political slogans, will create a unique memory in a unique life.

Except that all these collections, classifications, folders, containers, categories and catalogues suggest that the individual's memory itself has become entirely bureaucratized. A telling gap opens between the detailed attention paid to the classificatory process and the intellectual and material poverty that results from it. Where everything can be turned into a collectable and equally becomes a repository of memory, memory itself turns into trash – arbitrary, unreliable, formless.

Kabakov's acute insight in the Zhek piece is the equation of too much = too little, a paradox which may be understood in a number of ways: as a symptom of totalitarianism (any kind of totalitarian tendency – political, economic, technological), leading to forms of more or less compulsive compensation. Collecting rubbish would be one of those compensatory activities, whether the debris is quotidian socialist garbage (Kabakov) or Western consumer trash (Arman). A more metaphysical way of looking at trash (or the discarded, if you prefer) focuses on the relationship between remembering and forgetting. Here the artist's collections turn into archives where memories are as much buried as they are unearthed, and Kabakov joins Boltanski in an artistic arena where the line between retrieval and invention has become blurred.

The particular kind of loss (and waste) that has shaped so much of unofficial art in the East found one of its most intelligent and funny expressions in Bohumil Hrabal's 1976 novel *Prilis hlucná samota* (*Too Loud a Solitude*).¹² Hant'a, the hero of that tale, has been compacting waste paper and censored books in a hydraulic press for 35 years. His thoughts are fuelled by the books he rescues and the enormous quantities of beer he consumes. Hant'a considers himself an artist, and the artwork he produces in the form of compacted waste paper is the art made when

the foundations of a culture, its continuity and artistic aspirations, have been relegated to the pulping and recycling plant. Illustrations of Old Master paintings, poetry, philosophy books and the classics tumble into his cellar through a chute in the ceiling, forming huge heaps of paper for mice to temporarily build their nests in, until the paper mountain – reproductions of paintings by Van Gogh, rodents, Immanuel Kant and all – end up as yet another bale of waste paper.

Last month they delivered nearly fifteen hundred pounds of ‘Old Masters’ reproductions, dropped nearly fifteen hundred pounds of sopping-wet Rembrandts, Halses, Monets, Manets, Klimts, Cézannes, and other big guns of European art into my cellar, so now I frame each of my bales with reproductions, and when evening comes and the bales stand one next to the other waiting in all their splendor for the service elevator, I can’t take my eyes off them: now the *Night Watch*, now *Saskia*, here the *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* . . . Besides, I’m the only one on earth who knows that deep in the heart of each bale there’s a wide open *Faust* or *Don Carlos* . . . I am the only one on earth who knows which bale has Goethe, which Schiller, which Hölderlin, which Nietzsche. In a sense, I am both artist and audience, but the daily pressure does me in, tires me out . . .

Another situation of too much = too little: endless reading material persisting in the mind with only the most tenuous connections to the outside world is both a blessing and a curse. Again the question of value and re-evaluation arises, but in this instance the paper flood seems to encompass all of culture. Whole libraries fall victim to recycling, the transformation of the written page into matter (pulp). Except that this destruction of art and writing cannot but produce more art, not only because ‘inquisitors burn books in vain’ but because a certain madness becomes a form of survival and vice versa.

Like Kabakov, Hrabal suggests that there is no escaping the totalitarian mentality. The recycling does not stop at books. Instead, ‘I look on my brain as a mass of hydraulically compacted thoughts, a bale of ideas’ and ‘I have a physical sense of myself as a bale of compacted books,’ his hero tells us. Neither will the recycling end with the retirement of Hant’a, because his plan is to buy the press and continue with the books he has rescued over the years: ‘I’ll make only one bale a day, but what a bale, a bale to end all bales, a statue, an artifact and when a year is up – an exhibition, I’ll hold an exhibition in the garden’ But this is not to be, because, after 35 years, the hero gets booted out from his cellar, which leaves him only one option: ‘I will follow Seneca, I will follow Socrates, and here, in my press, in my cellar, choose my own fall, which is ascension’.

With tragicomic hyperbole, we are presented with a parody of the artist as romantic hero – the mad outsider, indubitably male, ravaged by alcohol, who ends up killing himself. Yet this character is portrayed as the very product of totalitarian re-evaluation, the process whereby the boundaries between what's considered valuable and what trash are arbitrarily redrawn.

The work of Opalka, Kabakov, Hrabal and others shows us in a number of different ways that this process cannot simply be reversed. It is not merely a symbolic operation that can be undone in private if not in public. Something remains, something that disturbs the most basic distinctions between inside and outside, between self and other. Right at the beginning of the tale, the protagonist tells us:

My education has been so unwitting I can't quite tell which of my thoughts come from me and which from my books ... Because when I read, I don't really read; I pop a beautiful sentence into my mouth and suck it like a fruit drop, or sip it like a liqueur until the thought dissolves in me like alcohol, infusing brain and heart and coursing on through the veins to the root of each blood vessel.

Thoughts become liquid, words are like things. Texts get broken down into sentences, or even words or letters, floating in a sea of repetition. Symbols turn into stuff, signification into matter – too much becomes too little as one of the ways things 'speak to us'. Pulped paper manifests a stage in a process of destruction and transformation – same but different – of old texts and reproductions into new ones.

This is the principle also of the later work of Jiří Kolář and J. H. Kocman. Both artists work with mass-produced images and texts which they transform into originals. The historical development from the unique, handmade object to its industrially produced copy is thereby reversed, except that mass-produced representations are now the very material from which the unique object is fashioned.

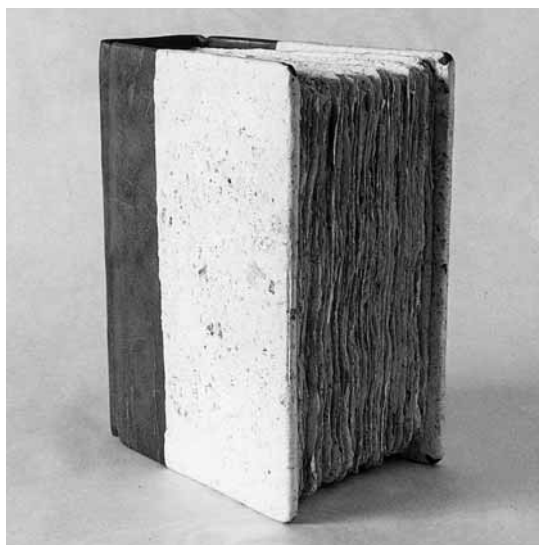
No artist has invented and used more collage techniques than Jiří Kolář. His repertoire includes over 50 techniques.¹³ Most of these share an initial act of destruction (cutting, tearing, creasing, crumpling), which is followed by a recombination of the fragments. The signature of his work from the mid-1960s on is the Chiasmage, torn-up print rearranged as a fragmented, faceted, textual surface which still discloses its generic origin – a map, musical notations, text from a book – but withholds any specific semantic coherence. Kolář mistrusts Realism – that convention which tries to hide its conventionality – the prose text that explains how things really are or the photographic reproduction which habitually takes

the place of the original artwork. In his art, representations of the world in the form of mechanical reproductions are treated as another raw material of the world itself. This suggests that in its very materiality, the world is now made up of the traces of the historical and technological transformations of its representations. For Kolář collage is a form of concrete poetry where meaning is anchored in the materiality and form of whatever he chooses to combine and juxtapose. In the words of fellow poets Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová, the aim is to show ‘not only the image of the world but its schemes’.¹⁴ Despite his belief in what he called the ‘immeasurable unity of reality’, Kolář does not trust the supposed immediacy of symbolic equivalence.¹⁵ Unlike the hero of Hrabal’s novel, who was seduced by isolated beautiful sentences which ended up as a pile of words he could no longer remember or relate to anything else, perhaps because of that danger, Kolář insists on creating extended allegories, often in homage to a previous artist or poet. The images and objects made in this way, usually on a relatively small scale, are visually exquisite. They are not meant to shock. They certainly do not issue statements. Kolář’s work insists on creativity as the invention of a level of continuity and coherence in the arts across time and space, a continuity which is under the technical and technological imperative of reproduction, yet does not simply reproduce.

On this territory he is joined by J. H. Kocman, whose work, particularly from the late 1970s on, evolves around the physical and conceptual remaking of printed books.¹⁶ Kocman was one of the ‘classic’ conceptual artists in the former Czechoslovakia. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, his investigations into an extended notion of art included mail art, ‘actions’ such as *Touch Activity* (1971), which explored the relationship between touch and vision, and collaborations with other artists who worked in the interdisciplinary arena of land art, Conceptual art and body art. Early on, Kocman started making artist’s books. Initially, there were the *Prepared Books* of the early 1970s, found books modified by cutting. At the same time, he produced simple paperbacks in the horizontal format of sketchbooks, the *Chromatographic Books*. In these he experimented with the absorption of colour pigments and the change of colour patterns as the paint soaked through the pages. Throughout the 1970s he systematically investigated the different formal and conceptual aspects of books and, in the process, learned to make paper and the skills of bookbinding. In 1979, in the series *Paper as Poetry*, he mixed fragments of maps and texts with pulp to make his own sheets of paper. As in the Chiasmages by Kolář, the source text can no longer be read but there remains enough



J. H. Kocman, from the series *Paper as Poetry*, 1979.



J. H. Kocman, *Paper Re-Making Book No. 72*, 1983.

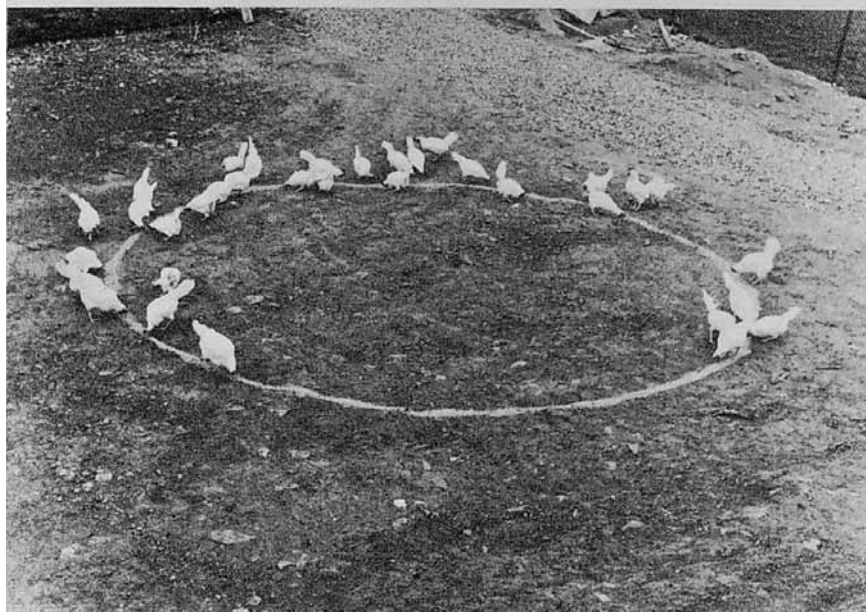
detail to recognize something textural, the particular language of the source text, say, individual letters or the typeface. Emphasis is now placed on the texture of the textual, the handmade quality of paper with its rough, uneven surface that seems to absorb print as something primarily liquid like watercolour, or a cup of tea in *The Book of One Cup of Tea* (1980). The *Paper-Re-Making Books* of the 1980s both incorporate and 'reissue' books. Again there are different series, and because the work is so directly and materially indexed to pre-existing publications, it pays homage not only thematically in the books of/about Josef Váchal, a curious figure in the history of Czech printing, as well as various poets and artists, but also generically as books (as art objects). One of the remarkable things about Kocman's books is the understanding of the book as indebted, as paying homage *qua* art-object book. Many of his books are bound in leather and sport embossed titles as no modern publication would. Here restoration is displayed as a repertoire of techniques which is mastered in order to make something quite different, books which acknowledge history literally as the fabric from which the new is made. At the same time the making of the new is itself always a remaking. In its incorporation of tradition, it is rendered less rather than more intelligible, less rather than more legible. Yet what was pulped was mass-produced in the first place, which means that there is, at least in theory if not always in practice, another copy we can look at in order to think about the difference between, for instance, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* and *E. A. Poe's The Raven Reduced by JHK* (1982).

The work discussed so far interests me because of what I call, for want of a better term, its embeddedness in the world, its existential dimension. This embeddedness produces obscurity, a particular kind of illegibility, a reduction. Lived time, instead of allowing us to gain experience, leads inexorably to a state of blindness. Yet in the process Opalka produces paintings of great intensity and beauty. Collections of objects and papers no longer guarantee order and coherent categories. Kabakov's work suggests that instead of making reality intelligible, the obsessive preoccupation with definitions and types keeps referring us back to our difficulties of understanding or accepting reality in the first place. Finally, the reproductions of artworks and printed matter of all sorts has been art's 'raw material' for some time, but not only in the ready-made way we tend to think about it. The work of Kolář and Kocman shows us how to pay homage without imitating or otherwise reproducing. Instead, its relationship to history in its various technologies of inscription and reduplication implies that indebtedness is intrinsic to creative freedom. The defining

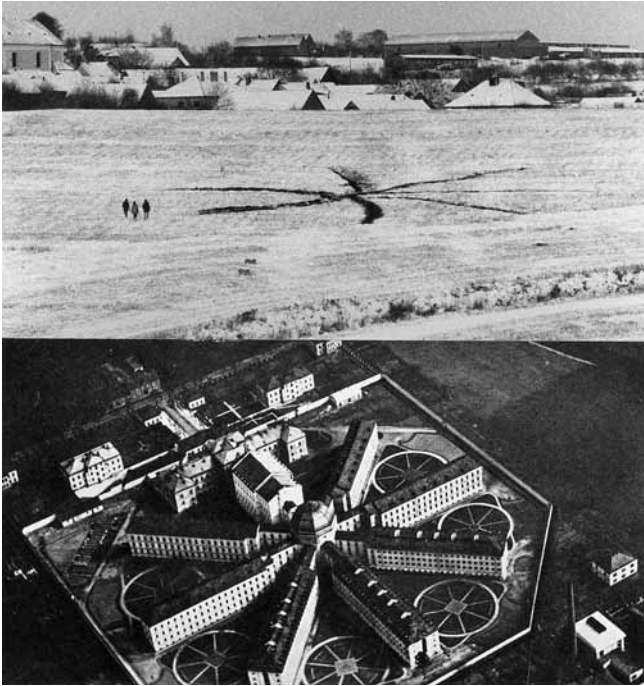
condition of today's original is that it consciously pays homage, their work suggests. Paying homage here means intimacy with rather than distance from the past; however, this does not mean, as all forms of academic art would have us believe, that the past is thereby fully recoverable. On the contrary, intimacy suggests an inevitable partiality and blindness, a single-mindedness and insistence at times bordering on stupidity or madness, as in love, as in passion.

In the early 1970s, the Czech artist Ladislav Novák produced a number of actions in the countryside which involved the 'drawing' and 'erasure' of basic geometric or organic shapes. In one of these pieces, Novák drew a large circle with chicken feed. A series of photographs shows him making the circle, the chickens occupying it and picking until nothing remains of the shape. In another piece, *Pouring and Destroying the Line* (January 1971), near Třebíč, Novák poured the outline of a figure in the snow and invited a group of boys who happened to play nearby to run across the finished drawing and obliterate it. Other artists collaborated on actions in a similar vein, such as Jirí Valoch's *Paper Cross* (1970) or Pavel Büchler's *Landscape Action* (1975). The latter involved six people forming a large circle in a snow-covered field in Konojedy, near Prague. Each started digging a shallow trench towards the approximate centre of the circle. Several hours later, *Landscape Action* was complete. The photographic documentation shows a black star on a white field.

Using the universal language of geometry to stage the desire for expression as itself expressive, these works make speechlessness eloquent by evoking ritual and by falling back on a universal and archaic repertory of forms – the cross, the circle, the star, the human form. But unlike their Western counterparts, emphasis in these instances is on a shared activity and a concrete situation. Where officially there was no audience and no institutional place for symbolic forms to exist in and for themselves – no stone circles were brought back to museums from these excursions – the marks in their abstract autonomy keep referring back to the symbolizing process itself as a fundamental and defining human activity. This situation is made explicit in another piece by Büchler, the photowork *Material Facts* (1979), in which the photograph of the star of *Landscape Action* is combined with a found aerial view of Bory Prison, where Büchler spent the entire year of 1979. The prison also forms a star with a domed building at its centre. The juxtaposition of these two star shapes focuses the stakes in the conflicting claims to universality. In the first instance a symbol is created which is easily recognized, yet it is impossible to attribute any particular meaning to it. In the second instance, geometry is



Ladislav Novák, *Circle*, 1971.



Pavel Büchler, *Material Facts*, 1975–9.

employed to give a particular institutional building type the appearance of a natural and immutable order.

Landscape Action was followed in the late 1970s by a number of solo actions performed for the camera. Collectively titled *Blind Circles (Under Surveillance)*, these pieces involved the artist blindly drawing a circle directly on to the wall for the estimated duration of one hour. The size of the circle was determined by the reach of his arm and the activity of drawing was recorded in a single image with the exposure time fixed at 60 minutes. Once the camera was set up, Büchler had to perform for and conform with its coordinates. If he underestimated the drawing time, as happened on occasion, the negative would be empty. When the experiment was successful, the image recorded the ‘progress’ of the drawing. The hand which held the chalk or charcoal and any part of the body which moved would be invisible or blurred, while the line of the circle (drawn clockwise) grows increasingly blurred towards the end. In some photographs, the silhouette of the artist is clearly visible, indicating that he hardly moved while drawing; in another image only the left hand appears pressed against the wall; in a third, the centre is simply blurred,

suggesting an unidentified human presence. Each photograph allows us to reconstruct in some detail how a particular circle was executed in real time. It does not, however, yield the information we habitually expect from a documentary photograph, namely the identity of the subject thus recorded. The conception of *Blind Circles* and the nature of its documentation suggest that the performer is interchangeable. The circle is understood as an elementary figure in relation to the human body, which could be drawn by anybody – blindly. Emphasis is placed on duration and endurance. The longer one takes to execute the drawing, the harder it gets. In this sense, *Blind Circles* emphasizes perseverance and endurance, less as an identifiable and individual artistic expression than as a generalizable response to a situation where individual and artistic autonomy was often reduced to basic forms of carrying on.

Paradoxically, there was a certain freedom in a situation where a whole range of art practices simply did not officially exist. Artists were left to their own devices, the only audience being other artists and, perhaps, a small group of like-minded friends. An ideal audience, except that it was the result of necessity rather than choice and in that sense could not help but emphasize the cultural void it tried to displace – another closed circle more or less sealed to the outside. It is interesting how much this situation mimicked the romantic notion of the artist who creates in isolation, ignored or confronted by suspicion if not outright hostility, all the while he is waiting for his genius to be discovered. Except that in post-Stalinist Eastern Europe, this wasn't going to happen, which is one of the reasons why artists found themselves at the threshold of a new Quixotism, with little or no support in the form of an art market, a public and art institutions.

This, of course, has changed now, and for some time. The work which speaks to us today does so because it transcends the conditions under which it was first imagined and made, but also, I want to suggest, because the vicissitudes of the 'new Quixotism' strike a chord in our own present. They do so every time we recognize the totalitarian equation of too much = too little in our own culture, whether it comes in the form of good old propaganda, consumerism, media hype or the compulsion to conform. And I find it significant that artists involved in otherwise very different projects insist on addressing this equation in terms of the ways it limits the representation and knowledge of one's own experiences.

1960s. See, for instance, Oscar Masotta, 'Los medios de información masa y la categoría de "discontinuo" en la estética contemporánea', in his *Happenings*, pp. 52–3; and Marta Traba, *Art of Latin America, 1900–1980* (Baltimore, 1994), p. 134.

9 *Desa Philippi, Matter of Words: Translations in East European Conceptualism*

- 1 Václav Černý, 'Don Quixote and Quixotism', a lecture delivered in Prague on 23 April 1966. In German it was first published in *Individualität*, 24 (1989), trans. Max Rohr. Václav Černý was born in 1905 in Jízvice and died in 1987 in Prague. He was a writer, university professor and influential literary critic who helped pave the way to reform in the 1960s.
- 2 I use Eastern Europe as a convenient general category for those countries with a shared historical predicament of post-Stalinism. While the social and political situation differed somewhat from country to country, the political system in the former Soviet Union and its satellites produced major similarities, especially on the level of state institutions.
- 3 With few exceptions, such as Jaroslaw Kozłowski's work from the early 1970s, Conceptual art rarely existed in the pure form of first-generation Conceptualism in the West. In the 1970s, the categories of Conceptual art, land art and performance were blurred and often collectively referred to as 'actions'.
- 4 'Entretien de Bernard Lamache-Vadel avec Roman Opalka: *OPALKA 1965/1-∞ La Différence*', Centre de Création Contemporaine, Tours (1986), p. 36, my translation.
- 5 Gerhard Storck, *OPALKA 1965/1-∞*, Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld (1977), unpaginated.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Mariusz Hermansdorfer, *Polnische Gegenwartskunst Nationalmuseum Wrocław, 1975*, Kunsthau Hamburg, Kunstverein Hannover (1975), p. 5.
- 8 An English translation from the German has appeared: Pavel Kohout, *White Book Adam Juráček*, trans. Alex Page (New York, 1977).
- 9 I am referring to the artist's book which first appeared as a Samizdat publication, *Il'ja Kabakov, V našem ŽEKe*, in Moscow in 1982. I am using the German edition: Ilja Kabakov, *Shek Nr. 8, Bauman-Bezirk, Stadt Moskau*, trans. and ed. Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders (Leipzig, 1994).
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 12 Bohumil Hrabal, *Too Loud a Solitude*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London, 1993). All quotes are from this edition.
- 13 For a list of techniques, see 'Verzeichnis der Techniken (Auswahl)', in Jiří Kolář *unterwegs ins Paradies*, Gutenberg-Museum Mainz (1980), pp. 63–5.
- 14 Quoted in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. with intro. by Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington and London, 1968), p. 22.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 16 I am grateful to Pavel Büchler for introducing me to J. H. Kocman's work.

10 *Stephen Bann, Giulio Paolini*

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- 1 Although there have been many catalogues devoted to Paolini's work, there is as yet no satisfactory monograph covering its development up to the present decade. The most

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Edited by
Michael Newman *and* Jon Bird



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