



CURATING  
IN PRAGUE'S CONTEMPORARY ART CENTERS

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## DECLARATION

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I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are cited and included.

I also hereby acknowledge that my thesis will be made publicly available pursuant to Section 47b of Act No. 552/2005 Coll. and AAU's internal regulations.

*Adéla Prokopová*

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## ABSTRACT

### Curating in Prague's Contemporary Art Centers

by

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This thesis will examine strategies used by curators of contemporary art as stemming from the conceptual practice of “star” curators in the 1960s. This thesis explores the diverse job of curators of contemporary art in the local context of Prague art scene. Based on interviews with curators who are based in Prague's contemporary art centers, this thesis will outline various possible ways of curating that mediate contemporary art discourse to the general public.

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## Introduction

Curators have been taking care of museum's collections since the institution has been first established.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, the prominent exhibition format was the White Cube. However, the conceptual art movement of the late sixties and seventies that occurred internationally, both in Europe and America, brought forth the question of (im)materiality of the artwork and the question of presenting art to public. At this time, curating got a new meaning thanks to many inspirational curatorial figures, among others, Seth Sieglaub and Harald Szeeman. Their experimental curatorial practice (Sieglaub was at that time in New York and Szeeman in Switzerland) introduced new ways of staging exhibitions, understanding art, and understanding the role of art museums and galleries in society. They were bringing attention to their jobs that would otherwise remain hidden behind exhibitions and their catalogues. They were inventing new forms of presenting art to public. They transformed museums into laboratories where interactive exhibitions, lectures, workshops and discussions were taking place. Their practice made gallery visits engaging for both experts and novices in the field of art.

In the mid-1960s, when the Communist control over social and cultural aspects of life in the former Czechoslovakia relaxed, Jindřich Chaloupecký, a Czech art theoretician who was one of the most “informed” about the Western contemporary art in the “isolated” Czechoslovak country, published theoretical books and organized exhibitions. He was the chief curator at the Václav Špála Gallery and understood his role as a “mediator of art” (Lindaurová, 12). However, as Lindaurová writes “(...) the visitors were at times relentlessly opposed to his intriguing projects” (ibid). The period of the so-called Normalization beginning in 1968 forced the Czech contemporary artists underground. The Communist

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<sup>1</sup> The first public museum was the British Museum, established in 1753.

regime did not favor contemporary art; hence art exhibitions and events were situated in cellars and other non-gallery spaces.

The current situation of the Prague art scene is socio-historically determined. The attitudes of Czech people towards contemporary art are in comparison with Western cultural capitals such as Berlin, London or Vienna rather cold. One of the reasons for that was the Communist regime that did not allow official contemporary art discourse. National Gallery did not easily recover from the harsh history and contemporary artists had to find other ways to present their work. As a result, Prague has numerous small and mid-size, independent galleries and art centers where the contemporary artistic discourse shifted after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and to a large extent remains there until now.

The aim of this research is to investigate contemporary curatorial strategies on the Prague art scene and relate them to international trends stemming from the 1960s until today. This research will, based on interviews with curators based in Prague's mid-size independent art centers (Futura, MeetFactory and TranzitDisplay), highlight different curatorial approaches that are significant on the Prague art scene and that follow the international art discourse.

In the first part, I will briefly discuss the historical development of the role of a curator in relation to the first public exhibitions of art and further development of the ways of art exhibiting in relation to the audiences. In the second chapter I will discuss the ways of contemporary curating and the principles that contemporary curators use in their practice. I will argue that the contemporary curatorial practice builds on the legacy of important curatorial figures and their experimental exhibitions in the 1960s. The literature used for this study are publications written by art theoreticians and curators that in form of interviews present important curators and their exhibitions. The third chapter will introduce the Prague art scene, the issues related to the National Gallery and particularly to Veletržní Palác which

houses its collection of modern and contemporary art. In this chapter, I am going to talk about the movement of contemporary art to small and mid-size art galleries and art centers which is characteristic for the Prague art scene. The literature for this part of my study consists of essays and articles written by Czech theoreticians and curators. I will introduce these small and mid-size institutions in categories and provide a more detailed description of the three art centers: Futura, MeetFactory and TranzitDisplay. In the following chapter I am going to introduce two curators who work in these institutions and whom I have interviewed as part of this research. Each interview is followed by a commentary that presents the outcomes of the interview. In the concluding chapter, I will compare the practices of the interviewed curators and try to link them to the practices of some renowned curators as discussed in the second chapter.

In this work, the word *curator* is used to describe a person who organizes *art exhibitions* (presentation of art traditionally in the museum/gallery premises) and other formats such as *workshops, discussions and talks* (interactive, discursive, educative events). This work also discusses various *art institutions* where art is being collected, displayed, created and discussed, including *museums* (institutions that have its own collection), *kunsthalle* (institutions which do not have its own collections but organize temporary exhibits) *commercial galleries* (institutions that represent artists and sell their work), and *contemporary art centers* (institutions with interdisciplinary focus). Another focus of this work are *residency programs* where artists of different nationalities meet and where they have the possibility to do their research and make art.



## 1. Who is a curator

In his *Ways of Curating*, the Swiss-born curator, critic and art historian, Hans Ulrich Obrist states that the profession of curator is new (24). The word “curate” has its roots in Latin, where *curare* means “to take care of” (Obrist, 25). Starting in the late eighteenth century, *curator* became used to describe a person who takes care of a museum's collection. “Different kinds of caretaking have sprung from this root word over the centuries, but the work of the contemporary curator remains surprisingly close to the sense in *curare* of cultivating, growing, pruning and trying to help people and their shared contexts to thrive” (Obrist, 25). Early museum curators were supposed to preserve art, add new pieces of art to the museum’s collection, do research in the field of art history and arrange exhibitions.

Curatorship has undergone an evolution since the opening up of the world of visual arts to the general public in 1737 at the Paris Salon. Until then, art was a privilege of royalty; hence it was not publicly exhibited. In fact, cathedrals and mosques were the only places where ordinary people could encounter art until then. The Salons were state sponsored art exhibitions, open to general public that originated in France and quickly spread across Europe. At Salons, art was exhibited in glamorous frames hung very close together, covering walls from the floor level up to the ceiling. Throughout modernism, spaces between works of art grew larger and soon, art galleries became “White Cubes”. The ideology of the White Cube, as discussed by Brian O’Doherty in the 1970s, dismisses all external influences, presenting the artwork as an object of worship and not allowing any external influences to enter the gallery space. The spectator in the White Cube is left to silent contemplation of the artwork on display. A White Cube gallery generally has covered windows, walls painted in white and ceiling lighting. “In classical modernist galleries, as in churches, one does not speak in a normal voice; one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, or sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love” (McEvelley, 10).

A contemporary spectator is, however, interested in a more interactive and discursive art museum / gallery experience. The discursivity of contemporary curating has been recently discussed in relation to Educational Turn or New Institutionalism. What these theories share in common is that they argue, in one way or another, for art galleries to be open democratic platforms that, unlike White Cubes, engage visitors both mentally and physically. This can be well illuminated by Dave Beech who writes, “Art’s addressee, no longer necessarily even a gallery-goer, is reconfigured as a participant, interlocutor, guest, peer, comrade and so on; the white box institutions in which we encounter art have adapted by mimicking libraries, cafés, laboratories, school rooms and other social spaces“ (54-5). This quote reflects that curators are no longer limited by the gallery walls, canvases and exhibition catalogues. Moreover, as Terry Smith points out, the recent curatorial practice is very much based on discursivity (13). Curators not only organize exhibitions, they also organize and participate in talks and discussions as well as other various formats.

The former parallel discursive activities and interventions accompanying exhibitions have become central to the exhibition practice. Contemporary curatorial work is thus more complex than it was before as it no longer just focuses on the selection and display of works of art, instead, in light of Educational Turn, it rather puts “emphasis upon the framing and mediation of art and the circulation of ideas around art” (O’Neill and Wilson, 19).

Educational role of art institutions has been, for instance, explored by a curator and theoretician Irit Rogoff. She views Educational Turn as an initiative that poses the question “What can we learn from the museum?” She is predominantly interested in what one can learn beyond what is set as the museum’s educational goals. This question was addressed in a project that she was a part of, called “A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.” (2006). She describes the goal of this project as follows: “Our interests were in the possibilities for the museum to open a place for people to engage ideas differently—ideas from outside its own walls. So the museum in our

thinking was the site of possibility, the site of potentiality” (36). Educational Turn, according to Rogoff, consists of “activating” people. The concept of the Academy project is based on an idea of a place where one can encounter principles and activities that can be applied in real life, outside of the Academy’s borders, idea of a place where the unexpected or the un-prescribed happens. Education must be, according to Rogoff, accessible in the sense people are allowed to pose their own questions, ones that are critical and challenging.

The initial starting point for new ways of working with art and presenting it to public was art itself. As the modern artists began to experiment with the limits and forms of art, curators needed to do the same with ways of presenting and discussing art. Terry Smith particularly refers to the importance of conceptual artists who “(...) consciously took over the critical publication of their own work, displaced theoretical accounting for it, and intervened strongly in the ways it was exhibited” (15).

In the twentieth century, curators began to play a crucial role on the art scene. There were several important curatorial figures who changed our understanding of an art exhibition. A lot of them were based in traditional art museums. Not only were they changing the definitions of the institution, they were introducing new concepts and new strategies to the exhibition making that set the ground for many of the contemporary curators which brings us to the next chapter.

## **2. Principles of Contemporary Curating**

In this chapter, I am going to discuss the diverse practice of contemporary curators. I am going to describe the possible ways of contemporary curating. Using the examples of important exhibitions in the twentieth century, curated by “star” curators such as Harald Szeeman, and practice of some of the renowned contemporary curators that continue in their footsteps, I am going to outline principles that the contemporary curators employ in their practice.

### **2.1. Ways of Contemporary Curating**

There is no ultimate or absolute definition of a curator. For the purposes of my discussion we can understand the curator of contemporary art as follows. Contemporary curator is an artist, who, unlike traditional artists, looks at art from a more distant position, being able to manipulate works of art, introducing them in new contexts, giving additional, subjective meanings to them. He or she is a mediator between the artist and the space, between the installation and the viewer. Using his or her intuition and often based on an extensive research, the curator works on curatorial projects which he or she puts into final forms, of various sorts, which, if done well, communicate the desired messages to the viewers and establish discursive platforms for gaining knowledge and exchanging opinions.

The practice of contemporary curators is very broad and diverse. Hence we might ask: What are the possible ways of contemporary curating? Curators are definitely an important part of museums where they are mostly taking care of the collection and via their choice of artworks, they create context for the museum’s collection and try to interpret it to the audiences. At the same time, they can also develop their own curatorial projects. An example from the Prague art scene is Veletržní Palác where its chief curator, Adam Budak, is in charge of the collection as well as he develops his own curatorial projects, for instance, “The Moving

Image Department” that currently presents the seventh chapter of the series that Budak planned for this project.

The distinction between the more traditional and the more creative curatorial work was discussed by Boris Groys. On one hand, the “traditional exhibitions (...) illustrate already established narratives” (Groys in Smith, 61). They present artworks of established artists or Old Masters and thus the final “exhibition is created to afford access to the individual works” (ibid). The space for this exhibition is neutral. On the other hand, exhibitions as installations or as Groys puts it “the installation as *Gesamtkunstwerk*” (62) are individual research projects of the curator and everything in the gallery fulfills the curator’s vision. Often, installations are made site-specifically and thus they only exist in the gallery space for the duration of an exhibition.

Exhibitions as installations and independent, critical curatorial work is connected to a recent theory of New Institutionalism which gained popularity in the artistic milieu. The term “New Institutionalism” was first used by Jonas Ekeberg in 2003. Theoretician, curator and art critic, Nina Möntmann, elaborated on the topic in her article called “The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism, Perspectives on a Possible Future” four years later. Progressive museums that employed New Institutionalism were, according to her, institutions of critique that “employed a criticism of globalized corporate institutionalism and its consumer audience.” Applying New Institutionalism to contemporary institutions could, in Möntmann’s perspective, require them to distance themselves from numerous “structures and standards, and disengage spaces from too many codes and contexts”. The new “institution of critique” is an open platform that expands beyond its institutional borders, establishes its presence outside of the gallery space, and creates discourses on a cross-genre level. The institution creates a base for exchange of opinions both locally and internationally, where multiple events such as

discussions, concerts, interventions, performances, etc., are held and where the audiences are welcomed to participate.

In this context can be mentioned contemporary art centers, as providing another way for contemporary curating. In the local context of Prague, it is for example Futura where its director and chief curator Michal Novotný develops his curatorial projects as well as he prepares retrospective exhibitions of the established Czech artists. The role of the curator in a commercial gallery is again different, as the purpose behind his or her exhibition is usually to sell artworks of a particular artist. Curating residency programs is another way of contemporary curating, as seen in Prague's MeetFactory and until recently done by Zuzana Jakalová. Curating residencies requires a lot of care-taking and focuses more on the artistic processes than on the exhibitions as such.

Residency programs are very international in their character and so are the big international exhibitions such as Biennale and Documenta where curators also play an important role. The head curator of the upcoming fifty-seventh Venice Biennale of 2017 is Christine Marcel, the chief curator at the *Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Pompidou* in Paris. She created the concept for this Biennale called *Viva Arte Viva* where each of the nine Pavilions, or chapters as she says, "mixes artists of all generations and origins" (Marcel).

Curators also prepare educational programs for the audiences. This involves guided tours, workshops, discussions and talks. Contemporary curators also work in the public spaces. This can involve curating artist's interventions and performances in public spaces as well as exhibitions in the outdoor settings, for example on the Artwall gallery in Prague.

## **2.2. "Star" Curators and Exhibitions as Concepts**

Most of the contemporary curating owes its thanks to artists and curators of the 1960s and 1970s. Maria Lind notes this in her interview with Terry Smith when she states that "We

are additionally starting to see that curators were almost as important as artists in precipitating and shaping the aesthetic revolution that erupted in the 1960s and 1970s” (320).

Exhibitions do not have to be only understood in a traditional way, as presenting art objects in a particular space. Exhibitions can now, for example, be books. This approach was pioneered by Seth Sieglau (1941 - 2013) who was a curator, researcher, and collector. Conceptual art of 1960s was very inspirational for him and soon the conceptual way of thinking of artists projected onto his ideas about exhibitions. He pioneered the contemporary belief that art can be exhibited anywhere and in any form. This means that we can organize exhibitions in our kitchens, just as was Hans Ulrich Obrist’s very first exhibition. Exhibition can also happen in a suitcase, which is an idea mentioned by a curator, art theoretician and critic Lucy Lippard in her interview with Obrist (179). Lippard was also experimenting with the format of the exhibition catalogue as she used cards that could be arranged in any way in contrast to a traditional catalogue.

A book, in context of art exhibitions, is usually understood as a catalogue that goes along a particular show, or a book as a work of art. The artist's book, as an individual artistic manifestation, is for example Yoko Ono’s book called *Grapefruit*. It was similar to exhibition projects of Lucy Lippard, based on index cards with instructions for artists’ projects. The index cards “(...) contained poetic directions that made dematerialization seem not terrible but beautiful, the instructions themselves constituting an exquisite poem (...)” (Balzer, 40). In case of Ono’s *Grapefruit* it took, for example, the following form:

Imagine one thousand suns in the sky at the same time. Let them shine for one hour. Then, let them gradually melt into the sky. Make one tunafish sandwich and eat.

(Tunafish Sandwich Piece, 1964)

Seth Sieglau together with a group of conceptual artists, including Lawrence Weiner, came up with an idea of a book that would not just describe and show photographs of artworks as exhibited in the gallery space. This book, *Xerox Book* or *Photocopy Book*, is an exhibition

itself. It is an exhibition and an artwork, made up of numerous artworks by different artists. The curator in this case set boundaries for the artists: standardized page format and he also dedicated a certain number of pages for each artist. All participating artists had the same formal dispositions to work with, almost as if everybody got the same gallery space to work in, and their work then just differed in the content. Irma Boom, who specializes in bookmaking said about the *Xerox Book*: “The exhibition is the book and the book is the exhibition [precisely for...] the works haven’t been enlarged or reduced (...) that was groundbreaking in 1968, when it was made” (in video for exhibition about Seth Siegelau in Stedelijk Museum).

Another example of a conceptual work of a curator, one that is based on a large-scale survey was the exhibition in Bern Kunsthalle called *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information* (1969). The curator of this exhibition, Harald Szeeman (1933-2005), called himself *Austellungsmacher* (the one who makes exhibitions) and called his way of doing exhibitions an “organized chaos” (in Obrist, 80). The process of preparing this exhibition was documented in the exhibition’s diary. The diary described the whole process: Szeeman’s visits in artist’s studios as well as the installation of the exhibition. *When Attitudes Become Form* caused much controversy as already Green and Gardner pointed out, the exhibition “signaled that a wide generational shift amongst artists into utterly nontraditional art forms had taken place” (20). The important question of materiality of the artworks was explored in the catalogue of this exhibition. Green and Gardner continue to say

Szeeman was not yet [in 1970s] the mega-star curator that he was to become by the 1990s, and much about his overwhelming directorial vision was controversial, for he was to now situate art within a wider field of visual culture and iconology, almost relegating artists to secondary importance. (...) His exhibition was a definitive statement, a work of art in itself. It was the precursor to what Maria Lind has called ‘the curatorial’ (ibid).



He made very interactive exhibitions, already the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* featured art pieces such as Walter De Maria's telephone laying on the floor with just one instruction

If this telephone rings, you may answer it. Walter De Maria on the line and would like to talk to you. (Walter De Maria, 1969)

Boris Groys called this a "subjective performative installation" (in Smith, 63) where Szeeman (and other curators) made the spectator a part of the installation, where the spectators were completing the artwork as they were stepping into it.

### **2.3. "Working Curatorially"**

Since Seth Sieglaub, Lucy Lippard, Harald Szeeman and many others started to think in conceptual ways about exhibitions, their work also involved an artistic element. They were thinking about their exhibitions as of their curatorial projects. Maria Lind (1966), the director of Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm, curator, theoretician and educator, refers to this creative, conceptual practice of curators as to "the curatorial". She explained her notion of "the curatorial" in her interview with Terry Smith as a methodology, as "working curatorially" instead of just "curating". She says: " 'Curating' encompasses the technical side of things (...) but 'working curatorially' implies doing these things with a sensibility and urgency as to why they are being done *precisely* this way, *precisely* right now in relation to this and the questions that it raises or proposes" (321). This means to experiment and to create meaning alongside all the technical necessities. It implies a certain level of participation of the curator in the artist's project. The curator can, in a way, manipulate the artist's work.

The manipulation is, however, risky. There are two extremes where the curatorial manipulation can end up. Maria Lind calls them "curatorial pirouettes" (325). The first extreme manipulation occurs when the curator focuses strictly on the theme and makes it the

primary focus of the project. The artworks can in turn become too illustrative and, as Lind points out, the project becomes too self-referential. The other extreme is an intense collaboration of the artist and the curator, where the two roles merge one into another, which results in what Lind calls “an artist or a curator with two heads” (ibid).

Maria Lind bases her work on finding relations between often seemingly distant things and illuminating these interesting relations in her projects. This requires great imagination and intuition. Many curators also talk about their interest in the “peripheral” or even the “under-represented”, in sense of both institutions and artists. That involves small institutions that are overshadowed by the big institutions such as Tate Modern but also artists who are not among the most famous ones.

In order to “fill the empty places”, Okwui Enwezor (1963) a Nigerian-born director of *Haus der Kunst* in Munich, curator and theoretician with a special interest in African art, is for instance talking about “creat(ing) a certain kind of porosity across the usual boundaries, areas of overlap, meshing points through which we filter our rethought genealogies of modernity and contemporary art” (in Smith, 109). That is to confront people with art and artists that they have never seen although they might be well educated in modern and contemporary art. He is stressing the importance of always crossing the boundaries in the sense of time frames and geographical frames, broadening our perspectives. Maria Lind, on the other hand, talks about her initiatives that help smaller institutions to create networks amongst themselves and to be in contact with people who share their “*particular* situation” (in Smith, 331).

## **2.4. Principles**

Curators in the 1960s introduced new ways of thinking about exhibitions of art. They began to think of exhibitions as of concepts and based their projects on extensive researches

which made their work in a way artistic. Contemporary curators build on these strategies and depending on the institution or setting where they work, and also depending on the theme of their project, they use variations of principles in their curatorial practice.

Besides the *conceptual* and *artistic* principle, the contemporary curator's work is based on *internationality*. That implies introducing not only local art but also bringing international art and curators to local galleries. Curators in this sense function as *mediators*, for example, in the context of residency programs, where they introduce work of international artists to the local audience. Contemporary curators also work with a *relational* principle that is tied with the curator's *intuition* and results in projects that present interesting relations and contexts of different works of art. Another important principle of contemporary curating is thus *contextual* which also involves providing a theoretical context for the exhibitions and events.

All of these principles can be seen in practice in different variations and arrangements on the Prague art scene. The following chapter will introduce the Prague art scene and its characteristics.

### 3. Prague Art Scene

The current situation on the Prague art scene is socio-historically determined. It is determined historically due to the Communist regime that was notably suppressing artistic activities until the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Society also plays an important role in the development of the art scene. In comparison to Western countries and we do not have to go too far beyond the Czech borders and compare our situation to the prominent art scene in London, it is sufficient to make a four hour car drive to Berlin or Vienna to see that the attitudes of general public towards art are radically different. People in these cities seem to be more aware about the art scene, they seem to be more interested in art and they tend to spend a lot of their free time in galleries or in the so-called *MuseumsQuartiers*.

MuseumsQuartier in Vienna, a cultural complex that focuses not only on visual arts but also on architecture, theatre, design , etc., is a lively area where numerous cultural events are held. Visual arts are represented in three galleries here: in MUMOK (*Museum Moderner Kunst*), in Leopold Museum and in Kunsthalle Wien. A similar cultural complex focusing on modern and contemporary art is crucially missing on the Prague art scene.

National Gallery houses its collection of modern and contemporary art in Prague's Holešovice quarter in the functionalist building of Veletržní Palác (Trade Fair Palace). Much criticism has been dedicated to the practices of National Gallery as seen in Veletržní Palác. Namely during the era of Milan Knížák's directorship of this institution, that is from 1999 until 2011. His way of leading this important art institution, as already discussed on Artalk, for instance by Václav Magid<sup>2</sup> or Silvie Šeborová<sup>3</sup>, is usually described as authoritative and conservative, absolutely inadequate for a publicly financed state art institution. At that time,

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<sup>2</sup> Magid, Václav. "Pražská scéna současného umění na začátku 21. století"

<sup>3</sup> Šeborová, Silvie. "Národní Galerie: výstavní plán a co dál?"

many artists refused to exhibit their work in the National Gallery as a sign of their disagreement with Knížák. Some were even expelled from the institution by Knížák himself.

The most significant problem of the National Gallery, one that is frequently voiced is that the institution is ossified. In particular, the practices and ways of presentation in Veletržní Palác need to change, they are too rigid. However, currently, Veletržní Palác is facing a better future. That is due to the mindset of the current director of the National Gallery, Jiří Fajt and the chief curator of the institution, Adam Budak. They are both in the institution since 2014 and together they work on the development of the institution, notably focusing on Veletržní Palác.

Jiří Fajt together with Adam Budak could with their efforts change the attitudes and strategies for which Veletržní Palác has been continuously criticized. Some of the criticism regarding the practice as seen in Veletržní Palác was for example written by curator theoretician and art critic, Michal Novotný. He often points to the installation issues, particularly to the ignoring or trying to hide the problematics of the space. The exhibition in 2016 called *Against Nature*, curated by Edith Jeřábková and Chris Sharp, was according to Novotný an exception, where the curators employed the particularity of the space to complement the overall outlook of the exhibit.<sup>4</sup> In other critiques he refers to technical issues such as the video-installation that was not functioning in the exhibition called *Silver Lining* in 2015.<sup>5</sup>

One of the biggest problems is that the building of Veletržní Palác was not originally intended to be a gallery, instead, as the name suggests, it initially served as a trade fair palace. Majority of this functionalist building is made up of glass (windows), which are currently for the most part covered and hidden behind colorful artificial walls on which the artworks can

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<sup>4</sup> Novotný, Michal. "Proti přirozenosti". *Artalk*.

<sup>5</sup> Novotný, Michal. "Máme ho odsoudit?" *Artalk*.

actually hang. This very unfortunate solution of working with the gallery space is hopefully going to be solved with the planned reconstruction that is supposed to start in 2020. Milena Kalinovská, the director of the collection of modern and contemporary art in the National Gallery, in the meantime (3 years is a long period) plans to experiment with the possibilities for Veletržní Palác that could then be applied to its new outlook that should be visitor friendly and should present art in a broader context<sup>6</sup>.

Experiments about which Kalinovská talks are already visible in the institution, their efforts to change and to develop the institution are noticeable but still everything is very slow. This is also given by the fact that the National Gallery is a state institution that is publicly financed, hence every decision has to be approved, which takes time. On a positive note, the curator Adam Budak managed to develop quite an interesting program in the “Moving Image Department” that is located on the ground floor of Veletržní Palác and which is oriented on video art as well as he initiated a project called “Introducing” where young artists get the opportunity to present their work. Besides that, he began to work with the unexploited functionalist staircase as he introduced the series called “Poetry Passage”.

Despite undeniable efforts, this big art institution still cannot be compared to similar institutions abroad. It still does not resemble a great, progressive institution presenting modern and contemporary art in respect to the new theories and strategies used by international curators. Hence the Czech art scene is characteristic for the movement of contemporary art from the big official institutions to small and independent, often artist-run galleries and art centers. Some even compare the current situation to the times before the 1989 revolution, when the contemporary art could only be created, presented and celebrated underground. This is the time when Czech artists began to invent non-gallery ways of

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<sup>6</sup> “Ta by pak měla odpovídat instituci, jež je především vstřícná k divákovi a nabízí mu širší kontext jednotlivých uměleckých děl”. (Interview for Artalk by Anna Remešová)

presenting their work. Art was exhibited in unusual, truly underground settings. A lot of the contemporary galleries are located in places which resemble this underground culture of the pre-revolutionary era, i.e., in former factories or cellars.

The Czech art scene did not easily recover from the harsh historical situation. This was already discussed by Václav Magid<sup>7</sup> who identified several major reasons why the Czech art scene did not develop quicker after the revolution. He particularly referred to the inadequate or even missing economic, institutional and educational grounds on which people in the arts could build on, also the lack of good private galleries and the missing art maecenas in the former Czechoslovakia.

In the early 2000s artists began to open their own small galleries, also due to their disagreement with the director of the National Gallery at that time, as referred above. These galleries (for example CO14, AM 180 and Etc. gallery) developed their own specific and intensive programs, often based on the close circles of artists (Magid). As a result, the job of the artist, the curator and the art critic began to merge which is even more characteristic for the current times.

The Czech art scene is according to Michal Novotný oscillating between local authenticity and the imitation of Western tendencies (in interview for Artyčok). Curators and artists should definitely follow the trends in the arts and new theories and new styles that are constantly emerging. Those, they should take into account and critically reflect upon them. Yet they should not be afraid to take a more individualistic stance and focus more on the local authenticity, on the local issues that are somehow close to them. They should focus on finding the right balance in bringing inspiration from the Western cultural capitals and applying them in a way that fits our local conditions.

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<sup>7</sup> Magid, Václav. "Pražská scéna současného umění na začátku 21. století". *Artalk*.

As it has been already suggested, currently, a relatively stable ground for visual arts in Prague are rather smaller and independent art galleries that were developed “from below”, usually from the initiatives of artists, curators and art theoreticians. Besides those and the National Gallery, Prague also has Gallery Rudolfinum which is referred to as the local Kunsthalle as well as Prague City Gallery which manages numerous sites including Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace or the Gallery in Municipal Library. Museum Kampa, with its focus on František Kupka is also worth mentioning not only due to owning some of the works of an important, internationally acknowledged Czech artist but also due to its good educational program.

From the smaller institutions, firstly, there are five mid-size institutions, in alphabetical order: Centrum pro současné umění Praha, DOX, FUTURA, MeetFactory, and Tranzitdisplay. These bring a lot of international artists to the Czech Republic as part of their residency programs, exhibitions and/or discussion panels. Futura, MeetFactory and TranzitDisplay will be described below in more detail as part of the interviews with its curators. Futura and MeetFactory are, as already Magid<sup>8</sup> pointed out, more independent in their nature as they do not depend on private or corporate sponsorship which would affect their exhibition programs. However, they are to a large degree financed from the tax-payer’s money which requires their responsibility.

Secondly, Prague has numerous small private galleries that were established and are run by local artists. Among those are: Etc Gallery, Galerie Jelení, and 35m2. Thirdly, there are commercial galleries which take care of artists and promote their work. Some of the good ones are located in Prague’s quarter Žižkov and include Drdova Gallery and Hunt Kastner. There is much more, including the galleries of the two Prague art schools, Gallery AMU of the Academy of Fine Arts and Gallery UM of the Academy of Arts Architecture & Design.

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<sup>8</sup> Magid, Václav. “Pražská scéna současného umění na začátku 21. století”. *Artalk*,



Besides the independent art institutions who host inspiring exhibitions and other events, such as discussions and talks, there are many other initiatives that try to make the art world more accessible to public. One of the helpful initiatives is for example ArtMap, which is, as the name suggests, a map of the art institutions, available for free in galleries and other places, also online. ArtMap informs about galleries and their current programs. Another way people can get a deeper understanding of the art scene is through Artyčok.tv, an online database of videos in the form of reportage from an art event or exhibition or also very interesting interviews with artists, curators, or theoreticians. Similar to this is UMA Audioguide which serves as a platform for making art accessible to people via conversations with artists and/or curators. From the temporal and more interactive initiatives can be mentioned a student competition winning project called “Tranzitdispečink” that got together twelve Czech curators and theoreticians who worked “shifts” for five days, answering questions on a telephone, where anyone who had questions about art and current art shows could call and talk to them. All of the above mentioned initiatives, and there are many more, significantly contribute to the positive development of the Prague (Czech) art scene.

In the following sub-chapters, I am going to introduce three contemporary art centers, Futura, MeetFactory and Tranzitdisplay, to provide a background for my interviews with curators. The first interview is going to be with Michal Novotný, the director of Futura and the second interview is going to be with Zuzana Jakalová who, until recently curated residencies in MeetFactory and currently works as a curator at Tranzitdisplay.

### **3.1. FUTURA Center for Contemporary Art**

Futura, is a contemporary art center situated in Prague’s Smíchov quarter. Futura gallery is located in a three story building with very specific premises. The spaces are definitely not of a typical white cube type, although the two floors above ground somewhat

borrow the usual art gallery customs with their walls painted white and ceiling lighting. The lowest floor, the cellar, which is also used as a gallery space has the original brick walls and many little nooks that make the spectator curious, sometimes maybe even uneasy.

Characteristic to Futura gallery is its non-traditional connection of different rooms, which allows the artists and curators to experiment with the space. The particularity of the gallery's space provides an opportunity for the artist and/or curator to work with some architectural features to liven up the gallery. Some doors or rooms can be enclosed and others opened, offering the spectator numerous different ways of going through the exhibit.

### **3.2. MeetFactory Center for Contemporary Art**

MeetFactory is a contemporary art center, located in a former glass factory near the Smíchov's train station, characteristic for its interdisciplinary focus. Under one roof in Prague's Smíchov quarter, MeetFactory houses three art galleries, fifteen artist studios, a theatre and a music stage.

The main art gallery at MeetFactory usually hosts group exhibitions of Czech and international artists. The second, smaller gallery, called Kostka resembles a cube, as the name already suggest (*kostka* - cube). This gallery is used for solo exhibitions, usually of an artist who is currently in the residency at MeetFactory or based on the open call for both Czech and international artists. The third gallery is not a gallery in a traditional sense as it is actually the facade of one side of the MeetFactory's building. This disposition allows for the three galleries to be interconnected, to mutually refer to each other.

MeetFactory is interesting for its residencies program that was until recently curated by Zuzana Jakalová. Artists are usually invited to the residency program to do their research and to make art. Artists in residence usually participate in the Open Studios where they

present their work. Some also participate in exhibitions in the main gallery or work on an individual project in the Kostka gallery.

### **3.3. TranzitDisplay**

TranzitDisplay is not a gallery in a traditional sense as it rather resembles a discursive project. The premises of TranzitDisplay are located in Prague's New Town. They focus on contemporary topics in both art and human sciences. Their “Manifesto” says: “We are interested in art as a contemporary practice which stimulates the social arena and the relationships that hold therein and produces its own sensitivity towards things and a political dimension”. TranzitDisplay serves as a platform for discourse. They organize exhibitions, talks, discussions, lectures, performances, workshops and they also publish books.

Zuzana Jakalová who recently joined their curatorial team is preparing discursive projects that are connecting contemporary art, culture and everyday life. As TranzitDisplay is quite theoretically oriented, they are challenging many curatorial questions via their projects. They are challenging the purposes of exhibiting art by asking questions such as: “What is an exhibition? What format-related transformation is it undergoing? Is an exhibition a real space? Does it provide the means to transcend itself?” (in TranzitDisplay Manifesto)

## 4. Interviews

In this part I am going to present the outcomes of my interviews with two curators who are based on the Prague art scene, Michal Novotný and Zuzana Jakalová. I have chosen the format of interviews because the work of contemporary curators is very discursive and the best way to explore their practice is to meet with them and together discuss their practice. The choice of Michal Novotný and Zuzana Jakalová is strategic for they both work as curators in the contemporary art centers that are significant on the Prague art scene. At the same time, their practice is different enough and thus the two interviews provide a broader perspective on the contemporary curating in the local context of Prague.

### 4.1. Interview - Michal Novotný

Michal Novotný (1985) is a director of FUTURA Center for Contemporary art, curator and art critic. In 2016 he was listed among twenty most influential young curators in Europe by an online art magazine *Artsy*. His curatorial work is characteristic for its vital element of experimentation. In his work, he doesn't depart from a particular theme or thesis; instead he counts on his intuition. He understands exhibitions as intuitive wholes, as situations that he as a curator creates with the available artworks. Texts that accompany his art exhibitions provide context of the artist's work or they serve as autonomous parts of the show. Besides his exhibitions in Futura, he also works as an independent curator. His latest exhibition that he co-curated is called *Přípravný portrét Mladé dívky* (Preparatory Portrait of a Young Girl) in PLATO Ostrava. Currently he writes profile articles about contemporary artists more than he writes art critiques.

The following interview with Michal Novotný was conducted in FUTURA in April 2017. The interview was conducted and recorded in Czech, edited and translated into English. I was mostly interested in the way Michal Novotný perceives his job of a curator, how his

curatorial practice started and how it keeps developing. I was curious to find his strategies for curating contemporary art exhibitions in relation to the space and to the spectator. I wanted to understand the process he goes through when he creates exhibitions, both solo exhibitions and group exhibitions. I wanted to know how he works with artists and how he selects them, or their artworks for individual exhibitions. We also discussed some of the current tendencies in contemporary curating in relation to his work. I was also interested in his understanding of Futura's role on the Prague art scene and his understanding of the spectators. With that is obviously linked the role of an exhibition text, which we also discussed.

**Since 2011 you work as a director of Futura. How did you get to organizing exhibitions, and which exhibition was your first one?**

I fell in love with a French artist when I was about twenty years old. It was thanks to her that I got to contemporary art. Not that I wasn't aware of it, I studied philosophy so there was always some overlapping. Hence the first exhibition that I was taking part in was her exhibition already in 2006 in Karlin Studios. My first curatorial project was a group exhibition in 2010 in the French Institute in Prague.

**How do you understand your role of a curator?**

It is definitely an artistic, creative activity. It isn't just about the production; it isn't just about the scenography. It is a conceptual, artistic project. At the same time, the curator should be able to cover the technical part as well, he should be able to help artists with any problems they might have. The curator needs to approach artists with the same respect as he has for himself. He shouldn't be using their work if he doesn't agree with it, at least a little bit. In the process of preparing solo exhibitions, it is a role of a partner, it is all about consultations. It is about transforming the initial idea into a specific form that matches the original thought. And that often happens to be a problem in case of both young and established artists. It is a long journey from the initial idea to the exhibition opening. There are many decisions to be made and the curator should be there to help the artist with his decisions, so that the result matches their former intentions.

**Do you feel like an artist? Many artists become curators, is it also the other way round?**

I feel like I have always been an artist. Artists are good curators. It is a familiar sphere for them. Oftentimes they have a better idea about what is happening on the art scene than the curators do. Curators, who don't have their own artistic work, should be capable of having a broader perspective though. Speaking from my own experience, when an artist does an

exhibition, he does it from the perspective of his own work, whilst the curator should be more versatile (I am not saying that this is always the case). This also relates to time periods. I work with both young and established artists. The curator should be able to work with all artists, the selection isn't that important. What is important is to do it well, to make it better than it already is. I think that I could work with anything you would give me and I would always try to make it better. On the other hand, for the artist, the motivation is of a different kind which is absolutely correct.

**In case you work on a solo exhibition, how does the artist — curator dialog look like?**

**And how is curating solo exhibitions different from group exhibitions?**

It is mostly about the artist himself; sometimes he requires a lot of my help. I usually step into the artist's project, creating borders and guiding him. In this perspective, I function as an adviser - I give him advice on how to remove something, how to add something, how to resolve things. I am really good at the scenography of the gallery space. I have a very strong sensitivity towards the space. That is in my opinion very important because exhibitions depend on the way one works with the space. In case of the group exhibitions, I tend to choose people that I already know well or already existing art pieces. When working with multiple artists, I am constructing an argument out of existing art pieces which requires good imagination and memory. That means you need to have a collection in your mind from which you can choose. In case you want new artworks for the exhibition, you have to choose people you already know because there is a risk of it becoming too illustrative.

**How do you create the “collection in your mind”, where do you meet new artists?**

I visit art exhibitions extensively. I believe that it is important to see art in real life. I travel a lot, usually for work and whenever I go somewhere, seeing the current exhibitions is what really matters to me. I have been doing this for ten years. There is a natural filter in your

mind: you will remember something and something you won't. Usually you remember things that influence or excite you somehow. Unfortunately it doesn't happen anymore that things would surprise me for I already know most of the European art galleries and artists that are in the last two years active and favored on the European art scene. It is a difficult activity, you have to visit exhibitions and train your eye and your brain. It is similar to the job of an antique dealer who goes to the markets and searches for pearls. You have to be quick and have a deep understanding; you have to look at art most of your time.

### **How would you describe your recent curatorial work?**

In the recent exhibitions I tend to focus on some current moods. The exhibitions could aspire to stating of tendencies but they are not. I notice something happening, like a new art style coming. But it is important that the exhibition is not uniform, that is why I usually put established artists alongside young ones. I always try to include something that disturbs the unified concept. The exhibition is an intuitive whole. I don't want to simply state tendencies. If we consider something current, like the biological degradation as a tendency discussed throughout the last two years ... I would transform the tendency into something more metaphorical. I would make an exhibition that deals with some story or some atmosphere, not an exhibition that says "everybody here works with decay". That is boring.

### **How about the exhibition *Roy Da Prince*?**

There for sure were some tendencies. There was a cold atmosphere. A lot of things made out of rough iron, some kind of a post-apocalypse that ties with the coldness of iron. It is definitely something that is current but it wasn't there physically present, it was there just within the atmosphere.



**When we look back at some of your first exhibitions in FUTURA from 2011/2012 - *Za pět minut dvanáct* and *Dotek*, these exhibitions were rather thematic than atmospheric...**

I think that these exhibitions were in a way atmospheric but of course there still were some influential thematic tendencies. In case of *Dotek (Touch)* there weren't that many touches. I wanted to choose a topic that is either so unbelievably broad or one that I can completely deny in a way that it disappears. In 2012 I did an exhibition in Školská 28 called *Monochrom*. Monochrome is a canvas painted with one color. But there wasn't anything like that. Instead, the things that were there all had some kind of a "blank". You expect something to be there but what you get is emptiness. *Za pět minut dvanáct* was a more medium-oriented exhibition, *Dotek* was more about feelings, it was sentimental.

**Are there any curatorial figures whose practice inspires you?**

Of course but I am also inspired by artists. In 2012 it was the exhibition of Ola Vasiljeva. Not only in the curatorial sense but also in the artistic sense (she curated it herself). The exhibition featured a theatrical way of presentation, it resembled a stage, it was like an interior. I was also very inspired by the exhibition curated by Milovan Farronato in FUTURA in 2013. I think that it was the very first atmospheric exhibition in the Czech Republic. There were six sound installations and the exhibition as a whole was working with the space of Futura. Not in the sense of site specific sculptural interventions, it was generally working with the cellar and all its gateways. That is something that I now use and actually everybody else does. This way, you create a walk through the gallery where different sounds and things meet. There are different views, there is sequentiality and cinematography. It basically re-creates the way we experience situations in our own lives. Another person who inspires me in a way is Karel Císař.

### **What are the strategies used in curating contemporary art?**

Atmospherical strategies currently represent the mainstream of the Western art world. Soon, it is going to have to move somewhere else. Recently, I saw three exhibitions in France and all of them were done this way. Everything eventually becomes a dogma and a mechanism which gets established and then repetitive. In a certain period it was asymmetry. Curators began to install artworks in a non-symmetrical way which soon became symmetrical for it was so common. I am trying to resuscitate the genuinely symmetrical way of installation. However it is not easily manageable in Futura. The problem of atmospherical exhibitions is that they can easily become a romantic sentimentality. It is nice and it works, people accept it but it can easily become empty. We shouldn't be afraid to take a more radical stance to work with it. I still haven't done that though. Also, white cube increasingly disappears. The more special the gallery space is, the better it looks on photographs which is now important. But there is a danger in it. The exhibition and the gallery space can look great on photographs but in fact be totally empty.

### **How does your work as a curator in Futura differ from working in other settings?**

The biggest difference for me lies in the level of responsibility. Here I am responsible for the gallery, we depend on public financing. Therefore I am responsible for the dramaturgy of the space. We try to make exhibitions rich and diverse. We want to support local artists and also to introduce the foreign ones. We are "patching the holes" as we present established artists in form of retrospective exhibitions. On the other hand, when I work as an independent curator in another gallery I have more freedom in my choice of artists. I wasn't curating exhibitions in Futura for a certain period of time because I didn't think it was appropriate to do group exhibitions here. It was more important to do solo exhibitions because not many people did them. But that is changing now. Recently, I did an exhibition in Ostrava that was more experimental, more "radical". However, it is not so easily accessible. Or maybe it can be

accessible, I am actually testing how much accessible it is. I am trying out different new mechanisms.

### **Who is the audience of Futura?**

Fifty percent of our visitors are foreigners. Czechs come more on the weekends, on the workdays it is mostly tourists. Our audience ranges from university students to families with children. It is usually people between twenty and forty-five years old.

### **Is the location of Futura good in your eyes?**

It is not ideal but on the other hand I really like that people have to make a journey to get here. Some people are angry that they have to climb up the hill. But I don't think that everything should be readily available. One must walk up the hill, find the gallery, ring the bell. Then they find something here. It is in a sense a spiritual way as well. It leads them to the cellar; it is about unveiling the space also. If we were situated in Prague 1, we would definitely have more people visiting us. But we wouldn't have such a space. Since I started to work here, the number of visitors raised about 50%. I think it works well, when you do something for a certain period of time, people get used to it and come back.

### **What role does a spectator in a gallery play for you?**

It is all about the local context. In the National Gallery, I would have to care about the audience more. From the perspective of Futura - small, non-governmental, non-profit organization, a place for experiment, I think we can, so to speak, 'neglect' the audience. It also depends on the finances. I would not be against having an educational department here, but we don't have the money for that. In respect to our program and our position on the Prague art scene, I feel like everybody usually finds at least something here. If not, some at least find the premises or David Černý's installations in the garden cool. A lot of people

primarily come here to see those. I think we can afford not to have explanatory texts on the walls, nor people running around, explaining art.

**What role does the exhibition text play for you?**

I am not completely against explaining, yet it has to be done well. That is hard and costs a lot of time and effort. For the solo exhibitions, I like to make an interview with the artist. That is a format which provides context for the work. In case of group exhibitions, the texts function as individual parts of the show. There could be one additional, explanatory text, but that would shift the whole exhibition somewhere else. I wouldn't want to put explanatory labels on the walls though. I feel like people should learn to think for themselves more. The glimpse of 'understanding', which is a word I don't like to use, it is just an illustrative word, when you figure it out for yourself, then you will remember it. If you only read the explanatory labels, you will not be able to remember it and it will not affect you in any way. Most likely, you will forget it. It is comparable to having to walk up the hill to find this gallery here.

**How about the performances, these usually happen at the opening and then "something" remains there for the rest of the exhibition. In case of *Martin Zet: I* exhibition, he did a performance and then there were the remains of the explosion for the rest of the exhibition.**

Everybody now does performances, it is cool, you can see it at Documenta in Athens currently, also at many of the art fairs. It livens things up. To see the remains of the performance is also an experience. In case of Martin Zet, it was just as important to see the remains of the performance as it was important to see the performance itself. But nobody actually saw the whole performance for it took four hours. It started to be interesting only at the end when the kiln exploded. The whole performance had a very strong personal context for the artist. It was his father's kiln and it was the only thing that he had left after his father

died, he did not get any inheritance. He wanted to let go of memories and of his sadness. The result was maybe even more important and absolutely autonomous and it worked in the space just as the performance itself.

#### 4.1.1. Interview Commentary

Michal Novotný finds that curating is an artistic, creative activity. Even though many artists become curators and have a great insight into the art scene, curators as such, have an advantage of seeing art in a broader perspective. Solo exhibitions are in Novotný's practice based on consultations with the artist, where the curator helps the artist on the long journey from the initial idea towards the final outcome — towards an exhibition. The curator functions as an adviser, helping to solve technical difficulties, advising the artist on the creation of a new art piece and its final installation. The curator should have a good sensitivity towards the space as the way of presenting artworks can make the exhibition radically different. In case of group exhibitions, Novotný counts on the “collection of art” in his mind which he has been building for ten years now. Eighty percent of the artworks in Novotný's group exhibitions are already existing art pieces, whereas the new art pieces need to be approached carefully for he perceives the risk of them becoming too illustrative or too distant from his exhibition theme. This relates to Maria Lind's notion of “curatorial pirouettes” as discussed in the previous chapter.

Atmospherical exhibitions have, according to Novotný, become a widely used way of curating. He is also doing atmospherical exhibitions but he realizes that curators should take a more experimental stance on that. His strategy of working with current moods that he notices around in the world is based on selecting art pieces that do not create a unified whole. He selects art pieces in order to create some kind of an atmosphere in the gallery space. As he is creating environments with the artworks, his curatorial role becomes very conceptual and artistic. It is very similar to the way Harald Szeeman was doing his exhibitions.

In case of the recent exhibition *Roy Da Prince*, Novotný was successful at creating the coldness, which he is talking about in the interview, with selected installations and videos in Futura's cellar. The exhibition text for this show was composed out of selected writings by

Roy Da Prince and thus fully functioned as a part of the show and contributed to the whole atmosphere.

Although Novotný is not completely against explaining art, he never uses explanatory labels on the wall. For him art is an experience. This ties with the location of Futura, which one has to find up on the hill, ring the bell, and only then he or she can see the exhibition. He compares this to a mental process where one has to learn to think for himself/herself and to make an effort. In case of individual exhibitions, Novotný usually conducts an interview with the artist for the exhibition text that creates a context for the artist's work. This was also the case for the recent retrospective exhibition of Jiří Surůvka. In the interview, Surůvka by answering the questions offers an insight into his life and the story behind his work. It works well, once you read it, you get a better understanding of what is on display.

If I was to select one particular idea that really captivated me, it was Novotný's notion of the "journey" that people have to make in order to visit the Futura gallery and also every other gallery. He was really stressing the importance of seeing art in real life, not only on photographs, which is something that I must agree with. His exhibitions can be for everybody, as he doesn't consider an ideal spectator and as he doesn't force onto the spectators any particular ways of interpretation. He tries to make the spectators in the gallery think for themselves, guiding them via the scenography of the gallery space, also by the choice of the text that goes with the show but is not necessarily explanatory. Instead, he chooses formats that can stand for individual autonomous parts of the exhibition themselves. This way he works within the Futura's limits, providing people with an art experience that can be enriching.

#### **4.2. Interview - Zuzana Jakalová**

Zuzana Jakalová (1986) is a Slovak curator based on the Prague art scene. Her work is very distanced from the job of a traditional curator. She doesn't curate traditional group exhibitions, although she has curated some previously. Most exhibitions that she has done were solo exhibitions of artists in residencies at MeetFactory where she worked for four and a half year. However, she perceived exhibitions as a very small part of her work. She is dealing with the topic of residencies and curatorial care also in her Ph.D. thesis. She puts a great emphasis on the close cooperation with the artist and she is particularly interested in the limits of the job of a curator. She is trying to bring attention to the hidden work of a curator of the residency programs. Currently she works at TranzitDisplay where she curates projects that are dealing with contemporary art and its connection to other human sciences as well as issues of everyday life.

The following interview with Zuzana Jakalová was conducted in Cafe Neustadt in April 2017. The interview was conducted and recorded in Czech/ Slovak, edited and translated into English. I was mostly interested in the way Zuzana Jakalová perceives her job of a curator, and how her role changed when she left MeetFactory and started working in TranzitDisplay. We were discussing the way she perceived her role as a curator of the residency program in MeetFactory, what her position entailed and how can one curate residencies. I was also interested in how she deals with the topic of residencies and curatorial care theoretically. We were also discussing her plans as she has a new position at TranzitDisplay as well as we spoke about her understanding of texts for her curatorial projects. I was also interested how she perceives the spectator in relation to the residencies and other projects that she organizes in TranzitDisplay.



**How did you get to curating and to art?**

By the end of my bachelor studies in Humanities, Karina Kottová and I initiated a project called “UMakart”. We organized workshops for young people with artists, for example with Jakub Hošek. The idea behind this project was a non-formal education in contemporary art. We wanted to introduce the art world to young people, to provide them hands on experience, to show them that there is much more than an exhibition and its opening. We did workshops, lectures and thanks to that I got to organizing small exhibitions and soon, I took over Karina’s position in Prádelna Bohnice gallery. My first exhibition was the exhibition of Kata Mach in Bratislava in Galerry HIT.

**Recently you started working at TranzitDisplay and thus enclosed an important chapter of your curatorial career at MeetFactory. These two institutions are very different. How did your role of a curator change?**

It is a completely different job to be a curator of residencies at MeetFactory and to be a curator at TranzitDisplay. In MeetFactory my job was mostly about care-taking, about managing the concept of the residencies, inviting the artists and helping them with their projects. In TranzitDisplay I depart from a concept, I try to make sense of that concept and invite other people to complete our understanding of that concept. It is an absolutely different way of curating and working with the artists in these two institutions.

**Curating a residency program is very interesting and very different kind of curating, compared to other, more traditional forms. It is very contemporary. How did you curate residencies?**

When I started to curate the residencies I was no longer interested in curating traditional, group exhibitions. Residency programs require the curator to literally take care of the artists. It is not about the selection of artworks that fit into a particular exhibition theme. I was not

creating an exhibition, a unified whole. Instead, you have people there for three months and throughout all this time you lead a continuous discourse with them. For me, it was interesting to work with the artists and to test the limits of the job of a curator, to see what curating actually entails. For instance, when I accompany the artists on their trip, where they are doing their research, whether I am still a curator or whether I am just joining them on that trip. In MeetFactory I did many exhibitions in Kostka Gallery, mostly with the artists in residence. However, I felt that this was just a very small part to my job. As the main part of my job I understood the research, the choice of artists, the creation of the concept of the residencies... I was doing the management, thinking about what artistic practice we would like to support (research or production, artists who work with objects or artists who don't), where do we want the artists to be from, inviting people of different nationalities and ethnicities. The question of internationality is also a political question; there is a radical difference between inviting people from Indonesia and inviting people from Poland. There were many other questions: How the international exchange looks like, how are the people interconnected. How they cooperate together, what program can we offer to them. If they have individual studios, or if they work together. Whether they should meet, whether they should cooperate. If yes, how should they cooperate. How should the Open Studios look like, should we even organize them or should we organize discussions instead... The problem is that from the outside it looks quite different. That, what I feel is the most important part of my job remains hidden behind the residency programs. I tried to bring attention to this, I tried to bring attention to the difference between curating exhibitions and curating residencies.

**You are currently writing your Ph.D. thesis where you deal with residency programs and curatorial care. How do you approach the topic theoretically?**

I find the phenomenon of residencies really interesting. You don't only get to know the artists in the sense of their work life but also in the sense of their personal life. There is huge a

difference between working with someone for ten days on the installation of an exhibition and working with someone for three months when they're in a residency. You find a flat for them, you help them with technical issues, you know when they're not feeling well... Caring is notably present in the curating of residencies more than in any other kind of this work. I am interested in how this care-taking defines our work of the curators. There are three aspects to this, sociological literature, often feministic, talks about care as of an important category of inequality, not only between women and men but also ethnical inequality. How people perceive this care is also important, whether it is even visible. And finally, how it influences the residencies. My hypothesis is that it is always given by the prestige ascribed to the residency program. The residencies are often understood as a service. People think that artists make art thanks to the residency programs. Yet there is a great amount of curatorial care behind the actual research or work of an artist in residence. That is, however, perceived as a secondary thing, even though it consumes a lot of time. The caring part is not directly visible and it is very poorly paid, nobody talks about it. I would like to bring attention to this caring practice in the residency discourse. I want to analyze what it means. Art that is created as part of the residency program and thus includes all the necessary service - the care of the curator, is in the end usually presented elsewhere. I see it as a post-feministic problem. Also because care was mostly discussed in the feministic literature.

**You have also referred to your role of a curator of the residency program as to a “mediator of a thought”.**

Yes, a lot of my work at MeetFactory was about mediating. I was meeting with artists, talking with them about their work. It was a different kind of the artist-curator relationship. My aim was not to present art but to mediate art to the viewers. I also wanted to create connections between the international artists in residence and the local, Czech artists.

**What is in your view the difference between Open Studios and traditional exhibitions?**

Some artists were unhappy with the Open Studios, instead they wanted to have an exhibition as a more renowned form of presenting their work. The idea behind the Open Studios is to show not the outcome of the artistic work, but the process behind it. It is difficult to deal with because you have to meet with all the artists and coordinate it well.

**What is your current role of a curator at TranzitDisplay?**

TranzitDisplay is a platform for discourse. We do not really focus on the exhibition program as we are more interested in the discursivity. We want to formulate different versions of the present and the future via a broadened sphere of contemporary art. We are searching for ways of formulating different themes. Currently, I am working on a project called *Multilog*. It is an attempt to formulate contemporary issues via contemporary art but also via humanities. We organize many talks and discussions but the attention is usually focused on just one speaker. We want to challenge the hierarchical structure; we are asking: What are the different ways of exchanging opinions of various different people? In this project (*Multilog*), many people with diverse experiences will come together. There will always be an exhibition design which will complement the current topic. The space should be versatile in order to work for different workshops and lectures. The first *Multilog* will deal with Healthcare. Its concern will be how people think about illness, how they perceive ill people and people with disabilities. There will be numerous workshops dealing with body and health at TranzitDisplay as part of this project. Also, as we have many stairs, and the disabled cannot easily get there, another part of this project is to find a way for these people to get there.

**In the interview for Artyčok you spoke about ignoring of formats, can you elaborate on this thought?**

I try to critically analyze various different formats. I am asking myself, what is an exhibition? It can, for example, be a publication. I don't want to make traditional exhibitions, I can't make them. I don't think about the form of an exhibition. I don't think about the layout of the space. Maybe this is given by the fact that I don't have a degree in art. Instead, I focus on a concept, what it entails and I try to make that concept coherent. Sometimes you cannot distinguish a particular form. Our project at TranzitDisplay called *Feminist Takes* was originally a symposium/discussion/analytical workshop which worked in the space and that also made it an exhibition. Now we also have a publication about it.

**You are interested in feminism. In what ways have you curatorially dealt with feministic themes?**

I did an exhibition in Prádelna Bohnice called *Dokonalost (Perfection)* where there were three female artists trying to balance on the edge of something which they were not good at but they wished that they were good at it. There was a thin line between if it worked out for them or not. This exhibition was asking why are we, women, always trying to be perfect. What it means from a woman's perspective to be perfect. We also did a project called *Feminist Takes* in TranzitDisplay. The current project that I am working on, *Multilogy*, is also based on feministic grounds. Feminism is present in both, the first part, called *Health Care Self Care*, and the second part, called *Emotional Labor*, which is based on the emotions that we put into our work, which are not visible but constitute an important part of our job. *Multilogy* emerged from a feministic idea because they are challenging the hierarchy by asking: who is important, who is the speaker, who is right and who has the right for truth. At TranzitDisplay, our team consists of two women and two men, so we try to think similarly for our projects, for there to be equal number of males and females in our program. In the upcoming project *Multilogy* we

are facing an unlikely problem; we only have women included in this project. We need to incorporate some male participants as well. With Zbyněk Baladrán we also work on the magazine A2. In the middle part of this magazine, there is a double page, a “gallery” where we present art. Eighty percent of what we did there was related to feminist issues.

### **What role does the spectator play for you?**

In case of traditional exhibition formats, the spectator comes and sees the exhibition. But in case of the residencies, as well as the Open Studios, it is different. Suddenly you’re not just looking at art but you are facing the artists, unlike at the traditional exhibition. You can communicate with the artists. The whole process is very dialogical. This is also the idea behind the *Multilog* series. We don’t want a static exhibition; we want it to be lively. Yet currently we have a traditional exhibition at TranzitDisplay. Alongside that we organize a lot of talks and discussions that complete the whole project.

### **What role do texts and explaining art play for you?**

In TranzitDisplay, the text plays a big role. The space is not easily accessible, the program is not self-explanatory, it is not easy to understand. It exists within quite a closed circle, it operates within its own jargon. Contrary to MeetFactory, where things are done in a way so that they are approachable by a broad spectrum of people. That means we, curators, were always there, talking to people, organizing numerous guided tours, explaining our projects. MeetFactory is more visitor-friendly compared to TranzitDisplay.

### **Are you planning to make TranzitDisplay more visitor friendly?**

Sure. For me, the way we discuss the issues of our projects is what matters the most. I feel like until now, the issues have been discussed in a very difficult, unapproachable way. It discourages the spectators, it makes them feel uneasy. It is a big curatorial challenge. How to talk about things and with whom to talk about them...

**Even though we have talked about the more experimental forms of curating, you have done several more traditional, group exhibitions. Can you talk about some of those?**

Last group exhibition that I did was with Jaro Varga, an exhibition called *Time after Time* in 2016. It was a result of what we called “Visionaries in Residence”. Those were various different people who worked with some kind of a vision. We wanted to make an exhibition as an outcome of these residencies, to highlight some reoccurring themes in the work of these artists that we have invited. That was the basis of the exhibition in which we explored various ways of understanding and artistically portraying time, the linear time, the 24 hour day. I also did an exhibition with Karina Kottová in Dům umění České Budějovice (House of Art České Budějovice) *Janek Rous and Aleš Čermák- Nikoho nejmenujeme, každý ví, o kom je řeč*. We all were working on it for one year. In my career, I curated only two group exhibitions by myself, for example the exhibition *Mezi Zdmi* at MeetFactory. Every artist in this exhibition did a site specific artwork for the show. We were dealing with the question “How does a wall exist as a barrier?”

#### 4.2.1. Interview Commentary

Zuzana Jakalová started her curatorial practice with non-formal educational programs for young people and developed her own curatorial strategy, approach. Her curating is determined by the fact that she doesn't find traditional group exhibitions to be adequate modes of expressing her curatorial intentions. She is significantly broadening our understanding of the job of a curator as she is challenging the limits of that job. She is interested in feministic theories which projects into her work through which she tries to bring attention to the curatorial care-taking for artists in residency programs as well as she is challenging the hierarchical structures of discussions and workshops by posing questions related to power and truth.

The work of a curator in residencies, an important part of Jakalová's career, is according to her quite underestimated as it remains hidden behind the artworks or research projects that get produced during the residencies. She is bringing attention to the "invisible" job of a curator of a residency program that inseparably includes taking care of the artists. In the residency program, she was functioning more like a cultural manager where she had to decide about the concepts of the residency program. This included the choice of the artists (where nationality and ethnicity really matters), choice of the artistic practice. She was also responsible for the overall coordination of the residencies, having very individual approach to artists, offering them an interesting program, establishing for them ways of cooperation.

In TranzitDisplay, where Jakalová currently works, she is exploring different ways of approaching diverse themes that relate to contemporary art and to our society. Her upcoming project called *Multilog* is based on the discursivity and works with several different forms of discourse. The outcome of this project is not an exhibition, rather it provides a versatile place for discourse that includes workshops, discussions, talks, etc. Organization of such events and searching for people, not necessarily artists, to participate in the workshops and discussions is



another interesting aspect of the job of a curator. Her role of a curator lies in finding new creative ways how to approach contemporary topics and to mediate them to public. She puts a great emphasis on the difference between spectator in a traditional exhibition and the spectator in a more experimental form of presenting art such as Open Studios, talks, discussions and/or workshops.

She stresses the difference between seeing an artwork and being able to communicate with the artists. It is a very dialectical approach, one that is almost necessary in case of contemporary art. Texts that go along projects and also the language of the various projects in TranzitDisplay should, according to her, become more approachable. She perceives the issue of art discourse being too inaccessible for general public as it works within its own jargon and she wants to change that. That is a great intention for in my view many curatorial texts are very difficult to grasp. However, making the texts and overall language of the institution more accessible must not result in banalization. It requires a lot of hard work.

Her mindset relates to what Maria Lind called “working curatorially”. In the residencies as well as in case of her projects at TranzitDisplay, her work involves a lot of technical aspects but she is doing it with great intuition, care and sensibility. Alongside the care-taking in residencies, Jakalová was creating meaning for the residency program in the way she was choosing the artists as well as via the Open Studios, she was mediating the artist’s projects to the visitors. She is notably following the international trend of Educational Turn as she focuses on the audiences and puts a great emphasis on the discourse between artists and audiences in the formats that she organizes.

## Conclusion

Curators play an important role on the art scene. Their job is no longer limited just to taking care of the museum's collections. Experimental curators such as Sieglab and Szeeman introduced new curatorial ways of thinking about exhibitions. Inspired by the conceptual artists in the 1960s they started to think about exhibitions in a conceptual, artistic way. This way they were able to introduce books as exhibitions, exhibitions as books (Sieglab's *Xerox Book*) and exhibitions as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Szeeman's *When Attitudes Become Form*).

Contemporary curators build on their inspirational practice, using variations of principles in their work: conceptual, research-based, artistic, international, mediating, relational, intuitional, and contextual. These can be currently seen in practice on the Prague art scene that has been suppressed during the Communist regime which did not favor contemporary art. National Gallery, Veletržní Palác, is currently slowly adapting to the institutional development whilst most of the contemporary art discourse significantly happens in smaller, independent art centers and galleries.

I have deliberately chosen two curators who work in Prague's mid-size art centers. My aim was to see curatorial strategies as applied on the Prague art scene that are comparable to the international "trends" in contemporary curating.

Michal Novotný's work is mostly characterized by his intuitional approach. However, there are also other principles in his work including conceptual, research-based, relational, and artistic strategies. He is primarily interested in an artwork, in its meanings and in the way it works in a gallery space. His curatorial strategy is that of an experimental curator who, just like Harald Szeeman, thinks of exhibitions as of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He is doing this by creating the exhibition as an environment, using artworks to create an atmosphere.

Zuzana Jakalová's work can, on the other hand, be characterized as mediating, relational, research-based, international and contextual. She represents two diverse practices

that are curatorial, yet they do not stand for traditional exhibitions. Firstly this is curating the residencies and secondly it is curating projects that are not necessarily based around artworks, instead they are dealing with questions of life and contemporaneity. She is, just like Maria Lind, bringing attention to the 'peripheral' practices of art centers. Particularly, she is bringing attention to the job of a curator of residencies whose main part of the work, as Jakalová perceives it after her four and a half year experience, remains mostly invisible.

Both Novotný and Jakalová's practices reflect the contemporary focus on audiences. Novotný's exhibitions are not didactic or explanatory; instead, as he pointed out in the interview, he wants the viewer to experience the exhibition very subjectively. By giving the viewer indirect "explanations", which can be the title of the exhibition, the exhibition text as an interview or as an individual part of the exhibition, the arrangement of the exhibition, the atmosphere of the exhibition, he is creating an exhibition that can be approached by both experts and novices in the field of art. Jakalová's practice, on the other hand, as she curated residencies and organized Open Studios and currently organizes discursive projects, is making art and issues around art even more approachable to people. The main emphasis of Open Studios, discussions and workshops is to allow the general public a direct contact with artists, curators and theoreticians and other people who are related to a particular topic. Most interesting about Jakalová's work is her focus on the hierarchical structures, which she is trying to change. This is particularly important in the art world for art has historically been about hierarchy and power.

These two curators and their practice on the Prague art scene are representing the shift of art from the official art institutions to the small and mid-size art centers. As part of the independent institutions, their practice is substituting for the missing *MuseumsQuartier* where people can encounter different forms of art and events around art that are now considered central to the curatorial practice. Their practice reflects international trends and offers people

new ways of approaching art that have the potential to make Czech people more interested in contemporary art and culture.

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