

DAINEL FISCHER: Retrospection (20th century), 1999 – 2000, black and white xeroxes, 315 x 750 cm, photo: archive of the artist



ANETTA MONA CHIŠA & LUCIA TKÁČOVÁ: Clasi, 2012, installation, porcelain, acrylic paint, variable dimensions, photo: Jens Ziehe



ILONA NEMÉTH (in cooperation with MARTIN PIAČEK): The Fog, 2013, video, 5:20 min., photo: archive of the artist



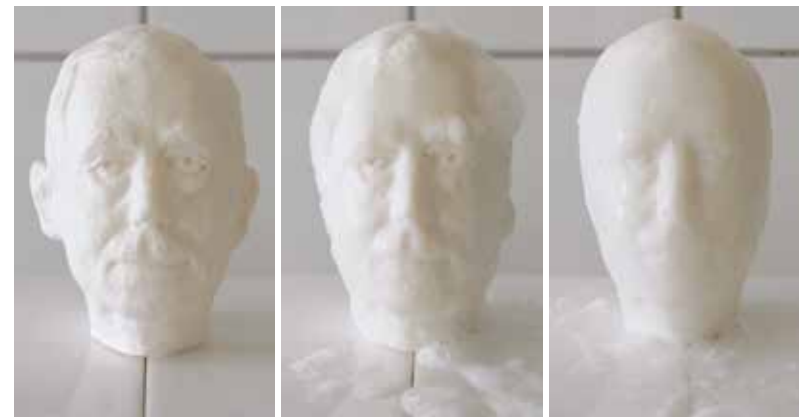
“Artworks presented at the exhibition, urge us towards openness and critical judgment, and at the same time to self-criticism.”

Besides individual initiatives, however, collective action is also extremely important. The art scene, traditionally rather individualist and competitively focused, is coming to recognise this ever more urgent reality. It is evident that if contemporary art wants to have an important standing and not just plead from the “margin”, then it is necessary to have solidarity, collective organisation and the raising of specific demands for spaces, financing or artistic freedom. Some the groupings and the collective initiatives which have emerged on this basis in recent times are represented at the exhibition.

The exhibition also features a critical reflection on the appeal to Havel’s legacy, in Martin Piaček’s *Václav Havel: Washing out* (2014, 2019). There are small Havel busts in the form of soap. The process of washing out may refer to the gradual dissolution of ideals which comes about through manipulation of the legacy and also of the real political activity of prominent figures. Washing the hands with Havel is also, however, a symbolic criticism of opportunistic employment of the legacies of the past. This artwork operates, as do Havel’s plays, with humour and irony, which are frequently the instrument of art with a political message. Piaček’s work, like the other works presented at the exhibition, urge us towards openness and critical judgment, and at the same time to self-criticism.

A walk through the exhibition is (just like the past thirty years) a “walk” along a road that leads from revolutionary ideals, through the notion of the exhaustion of grand narratives and the end of history, to the realisation that democracy is a condition which is not maintained automatically but demands activity by each one of us. These artists remind us that the freedom of expression is not just about freedom but also about personal and collective responsibility for the state of the world.

Translation: John Minahane



MARTIN PIAČEK: Václav Havel: Washing Out, 2014, series of 5 photos, each 400 x 200 cm, photo: archive of the Artwall Gallery

LENKA KUKUROVÁ (*1978, Košice, Slovak Republic) is a curator, art critic and activist. She is engaged in exploring political art and art activism, which was also the theme of her dissertation work (Charles University, 2012). She collaborates with non-profit organisations dealing with human rights and ecology. She has organised several international collective exhibitions focusing on current topics in society, e.g. the refugees, nationalism, feminism, ecology, bicycle transport etc. She is co-curator of the Prague Artwall Gallery located in a public space and specializing in political art. She publishes in Czech and Slovak art, as well as other non-art, periodicals. She lives in Leipzig.

KHB
Kunsthalle
Bratislava

OPEN
Mon: 12 – 7 p.m.
Tue: closed
Wed: 1 – 8 p.m.
Thu – Sun: 12 – 7 p.m.

Free entry

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Exhibiting Artists:

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The exhibition is taking place under the patronage of the president of the Slovak Republic Zuzana Čaputová.

Political Aspects in Slovak and Czech Art After 1989

THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS

Curator: Lenka Kukurová

DURATION
November 22nd 2019 – February 23rd 2020

KHB
Kunsthalle
Bratislava

The Power of the Powerless

Curator: Lenka Kukurová

November 1989 is an important political turning-point in the Slovak modern history, which has also essentially influenced the status of the art in society. The newly-acquired freedom of expression enabled artists not only to present their works in public but also to express critical opinions. On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the November events Kunsthalle Bratislava has prepared *The Power of the Powerless*, an exhibition focused on the art that critically reflects on social problems in the Slovak and Czech context. The exhibition maps how various political issues have been reflected in the work of artists in both countries during the past thirty years.

The range of themes revealed in the exhibited works is extremely wide, from targeted criticism aimed at specific political figures to society-wide problems, including the social position of women, consumerism and racism. Particular historical individuals are featured more as episodic figures in the social atmosphere: they call attention to political mechanisms. An issue on which, post-1989, we as a society have absolutely failed – the solution of environmental problems – is an important theme in the exhibition. As far back as the 1970s, Rudolf Sikora and many others were actively drawing attention to

“(…) the power of “powerless” art resides in gradually disturbing and changing the social atmosphere and highlighting the moral dimension of politics.”



RUDOLF SIKORA: *The Exclamation Mark*, 1974 – 2014, object, mixed media, 500 x 120 cm, photo: Richard Köhler



MARIE LUKAČOVÁ: *Odder's Eco Trip*, 2018, video, 3:00 min., photo: archive of the artist

the need to stop the pollution of the environment. Ever since, this theme has been constantly linked with a symbolic exclamation mark.

Brief texts help to set the individual works in their time of origin, illuminating the problems which Slovak and Czech society lived with in the given period. The Czecho-Slovak dimension of the exhibition is important because of the connectedness and mutual influence of the Czech and Slovak art scenes and also in terms of a shared political past which is formative of the social atmosphere to this day. Some of the artworks are statements about their time, but in large part they have a timeless validity. While individual artists may clash with one another in their political orientation, the message of their works tends towards an assertion of the principles of freedom, human rights and democracy. The criticism contained in the works is by their author's free decision; it is not linked with specific political parties and is directed “from the bottom up”. Having said that, the possibilities of artistic freedom are an indicator of the state of society.

The Power of the Powerless refers in its title to the internationally famous essay by Václav Havel, written in 1978. Havel's text describes the possibilities of revolt in an unfree society. Despite the change of political regime, this essay still has its universal validity. It points to the fact that each person is not only a victim of the system but simultaneously by his/her participation becomes its instrument and support. Emphasis is placed on the stance of each individual and on the individual's option to revolt against injustice. Despite the seeming futility of the attempt, which often involves rejection on the part

KATEŘINA ŠEDÁ: *No Light*, 2009 – 2019, installation, mixed media, variable dimension, photo: Michal Hladák



ZDENA KOLEČKOVÁ: *Old Recipe*, 2001, photograph, 40 x 45 cm, photo: archive of the artist

of the public, every political gesture of protest contributes toward a gradual rectification and a social change.

In association with the art exhibition, Havel's naming of *The Power of the Powerless* becomes a metaphor of the influence that art has on society. The Critical art, which on principle does not share directly in political power, is often on the margins of public interest and political representatives' concerns, or

alternatively it is a target of power-holder's attacks. Current Slovak and Czech reality correspond to that pattern. Contemporary art often emerges “in spite of” rather than thanks to the powers that be. *The Power of the Powerless* has been produced for the state institution Kunsthalle Bratislava, but it is being held in conditions where the future status of this institution has been unclear and under a long-term threat.

During the past thirty years the censorship has only rarely made direct interventions in our milieu. However, censorship takes on less immediately obvious forms: discontinuance of grant aid or cooperation, deprivation of space, “unexpected” technical problems, and so on. Some of the artists who are exhibiting have actually suffered direct financial or legal damage on account of expressing their critical opinions.

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KRISTOF KINTERA: *Revolution*, 2005, object, electromechanical system, microchip controller, metal construction, polyurethane, clothes, 95 x 45 x 35 cm, photo: archive of the artist