

Jiří Surůvka

GOTHAM CITY

10 July–8 August 2020

MMC KIBLA / Contemporary art space KiBela

Jiří Surůvka, one of the most important and comprehensive European artists, represented the Czech Republic at the Venice Biennale - the 49th International Art Exhibition in 2001. He first performed in Slovenia in 1998 at the group exhibition *The Body and the East* at the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana. He later was one of the main protagonists of the intercity festival hEXPO in 2000, which connected Maribor, Ljubljana, and Koper with international ensembles of artists. At that time, he walked around the shopping malls of Maribor dressed like Batman and participated in group exhibitions, performances, public and less public debates. In 2001, we invited him to a double, cross-border exhibition *Make this country ... again*, set up in Kibla in Maribor and Pavel's house (Pavlova hiša) in Potrna near Radgona and included in the program of the Styrian Autumn Festival (Festival Štajerska jesen).

I met **Jiří** in 1999 at the public group exhibition and symposium *Public District - Art in Dialogue with the Public*, in the northern Czech border town of Usti nad Labem, a shot from the infamous Teplice, a paradise for German migrants who could observe women in shop windows and buy garden dwarfs from molds in bulk. The curator of the exhibition, to which we invited the artist Borut Popenko from Maribor and Zoran Todorovič from Belgrade, was Michal Koleček, and I participated in the symposium. The event was located in the Emil Filly Gallery and the surrounding area, spread throughout the city's public spaces.

Since then, we have met and collaborated many times. He stopped by in Maribor whenever he traveled further south and upon return. He invited me to Ostrava several times. I lectured to his students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ostrava, where he runs the Video-multimedia-performance studio. We played music in his / our performance at the Ostrava Music Days festival in an abandoned coal mine, presented contemporary art production, and once got to know one of the largest industrial centers in Europe and the most extensive mining and industrial area in Czechoslovakia. It slowly collapsed in ruins with the country's division and remained only an amusement park, now called the Theme Park. It is a tourist attraction and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Ostrava is the third-largest city in the Czech Republic, the second-largest city in Moravia and the largest city in the Czech Republic in Silesia in terms of population and the area it covers. It is located at the confluence of four rivers, the Odra, the Opava, the Ostravica, and the Lučina. It extends to two historical provinces, Moravia and Silesia, and is the Moravian-Silesian region's capital. The population is about 300,000 people; the wider suburban area - with the towns of Bohumín, Doubrava, Havířov, Karviná, Orlová, Petřvald, and Rychvald - populates around 500,000 people, making it the largest urban area in the Czech Republic, right after the capital city of Prague. It is 15 km away from Poland. It applied for the position of European Capital of Culture 2015, but Plzen received the nomination.

(...)

»Where should I write? Did you stay at home?

I am still happy to have escaped them;

what's wrong with you, where did they drive you,

maybe in Silesia you were starved?«

(...)

(Karel Destovnik – Kajuh: Kje si, mati)

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In September 2019, I hosted 'his' *Malamut Performance Meeting*, held biennially since 1994. Under **Jiří's** guidance and curation, it has become one of the most original, most prominent and vital festivals, magazines and performances in the world with an entirely personal note of conductor and orchestra of artists from all over the world in the city, once the *heart of Czechoslovakia*, today an intertwining of (industrial) heritage and contemporary art, 90 km away from the concentration camp and mass slaughterhouse of World War II, Oświęcim (Auschwitz) in Poland, a monument to global memory of crimes against people.

He is still loyal to his region, where he is also involved in artistic operations and productions through various activities. His work, actions, and performances can also be perceived as brutal in their concreteness because by merging multiple layers of living, creating and acting, and connecting different periods, he achieves direct effects that make you think. Be it just a hip or an extended period, some event or a whole story, a comic, a novel or a movie, music, and sound or a show, an intervention in a public space or a gallery installation. In all cases, it primarily addresses social, political, economic, and cultural issues, touches on the neuralgic, painful points of the systems, and directly addresses the viewer's eyes. His socially, politically, economically, culturally engaged irony does not avoid the themes of the environment, Nazism, captures from the past and present, which he expresses in self-reflection and through it calls for us to look within ourselves first.

In various artistic events, with his charismatic appearance and natural talent as an actor, speaker, set designer, director, he transforms into **Batman's** role, the savior of the world, or at least the area of Ostrava and now also Maribor. The comic book and film superhero is **Jiří's alter ego**, which he embodies in many media appearances, in photographs, graphics, printed canvas computer images, which he composes palimpsestally from various sources, in sculptures, installations, and performances. His symbolic realism or real symbolism, which thematizes different cultural and social stereotypes, makes us wonder if it is not the other way around - that **Jiří** is in fact, **Batman's superego**, who with his set of moral values and beliefs is still aware of reality and strives for artistic perfection, creation, and ethics when it confronts us with a decision: does choice even exist or not? Do we have a choice?

We need to take these contexts into account when confronting **Jiří Surůvka** and the media with which he addresses us. Quotes, allegories, references, connections of the world and local art, history, geography in his works are intertwined with personal, intimate visions in alterations, critical axes, and subtle hints that what is shown is one of the paths and the experiences are our own. Absolutely. As well as his. We can read, hear, feel, smell, feel, or only know them. To know - that is the most boring. **Jiří** opens his world to us in nuances, slowly and suddenly pulls us into whirlpools that go through different periods of his creativity and merge into a single artistic process of multi-dimensional composition of his operetta.

Composition and coding are the basic principles of **Jiří Surůvka's** artistic work. Capturing the past into a tense present fuels the future. It turns on lights that we do not see but may be triggered somewhere near the end of memory, personally conscious, questioning the collective unconscious. It sparks suppressed, forgotten, cleaned up. It reveals the veiled, covers the open, undermines the closed. It opens, connects, folds, and instantly transforms the reality of what is seen into the unreality, the surrealism, the transrealism of the sensual and the sentient. The symbolism of his art can be placed in both the symbolism of the 19th century and the 20th century's realism, scattering the tools and aids he uses to make us feel his presence and self-awareness.

In his works, he combines many media - painting, sculpture, graphics, installation, photography, video, film, performance, theater, literature, music - and materials - wood, plastic, oil canvas, found objects -. It incorporates history into the present, mixes virtuality with reality, metaphysics overflows with the physical, and vice versa. This year, he presents himself independently in Slovenia with a unique overview exhibition for the first time. Its unusual spatial and associative flashes and humorous background are indeed a visual treat and one of the highlights of summer; his first performance will be the icing on the cake. Our old acquaintance **Jiří Surůvka**, the doyen of Czech performance and a holistic artist, makes sure that not only candles burn behind us.

- Peter Tomaž Dobrila

BIOGRAPHY

Doc. Mgr. Jiří Surůvka (b. 1961, Ostrava) has been running the Video, Multimedia and Performance Atelier of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ostrava since 2004, where he works at the Department of Intermedia Studies and the Department of Graphics and Drawing.

He has held numerous international exhibitions and is the recipient of two art awards; he represented the Czech Republic at the 49th Venice Biennale. He has received multiple scholarships, including an annual scholarship in Bad Ems, a two-month stay at the Ateliers Höherweg in Düsseldorf, a Kulturkontakt scholarship in Vienna, a Soros scholarship in San Francisco, a Spaces International scholarship in Cleveland, and a scholarship in Gothenburg, a scholarship at the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Čimelice, etc. He is a participant in many performance festivals in Europe, Asia, and the USA. He is a painter, performer, author of objects and sculptures, installations. He has been working in the field of performance since 1988; is the founder of the performance of the group Vorkapelle Lozinski (with P. Lysacek), the leader and writer of the production of the cabaret *Masters of Fun are returning*, a member of the group František Lozinsky o.p.s. and co-founder of the Přirození (Natural) group. In the 1990s, he and his colleagues ran the theater cabaret *The Return of the Masters of Entertainment*. He is the president of z.s. Galerie Michal, curator, creator of the author's cabaret, occasional reviewer of exhibitions and publicist, initiator and co-organizer of the international and now cult performance festival Malamut in Ostrava since 1994.

»The content of my work is mostly ironic and self-ironic, with black humor, moral messages, and social engagement. I was born in Ostrava in 1961. After graduating from high school, I worked in various occupations, served in the military, and did not complete a variety of schools. Then I graduated from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ostrava, majoring in Czech and Art. I taught at the Secondary School of Applied Arts for two years, and now I am employed part-time at the Art Institute of the University of Ostrava. I am a freelance artist and part-time disabled pensioner.«

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