Visualizing the Nation: Constructing a Czech National Art in the Prague Biennale

Carrie Dedon
Pomona College

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VISUALIZING THE NATION:
CONSTRUCTING A CZECH NATIONAL ART IN THE PRAGUE BIENNALE

By Carrie Dedon

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Requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Thesis Readers:
Frances Pohl
Mary McNaughton

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Carrie Dedon

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Introduction

The nation-state is one of the most powerful and enduring creations of modernity. Since the rise of the nationalistic movements and revolutions in the 19th century, or even earlier in the case of France and the Americas, the establishment, protection, and control of the nation has been one of the foremost concerns of people all over the world. As Benedict Anderson says, “Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”\(^1\)

But despite its power, the nation remains one of the most difficult modern entities to define. After all, a nation is made of more than geographic elements and political borders. It includes a historical narrative, a shared language, a set of cultural traditions that includes music, drama, writing, visual arts, dance, etc. It is a pluralistic body that shifts and adapts according to political events, changing popular values, global interactions, and more. It is this pluralistic nature of nation-building that makes any organic definition of one single national identity impossible.

Although an organically formed sense of nationalism cannot be achieved, however, national leaders have always sought to construct an identity to unite their citizens. Ernest Gellner comments on this phenomenon when he argues that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist.”\(^2\) Gellner suggests here that that nation cannot survive without nationalism. The

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existence and power of a state is based on the support of that state by its citizens who identify with it politically and culturally as their country. A state must also be recognized by other nations as legitimate and autonomous in order to survive, and therefore must define itself as a distinct entity that is justifiably independent. The construction of a national identity is therefore a necessary measure, “a conscious, self-protective policy”\(^3\) employed to ensure the survival of any state. As Anderson argues, “the one persistent feature of this style of nationalism was, and is, that it is official – i.e. something emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost.”\(^4\)

Culture has often played a deciding role in this construction of national identities. Because many nations were originally based on ethnic communities, the shared culture of those communities became the easiest and most tangible identification of legitimate difference.\(^5\) This is true in the pre-World War I Czech lands, where efforts to revive the Czech language evolved into a celebration of Czech culture not only as unique from any other, but as the basis for the justifiable creation of a new nation-state. Anderson contends that the 19\(^{th}\) century European language revivalist movements gave rise to “the conviction that languages (in Europe at least) were, so to speak, the personal property of quite specific groups – their daily speakers and readers – and moreover that these groups, imagined as communities, were entitled to their autonomous place in a fraternity of equals.”\(^6\) Like countless other examples, the leaders of the Czech lands were invested in the formation of nationalism based on a unified cultural identity as the means to construct a sovereign and ethnically-based nation.

\(^4\) Ibid.
These efforts, however, did not end with the 19th century Czech national revival. The present-day Czech Republic and its predecessor, Czechoslovakia, have historically had one of the most malleable national identities in Europe. Politically, it has shifted identities five times since the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918: from the original Czechoslovak Republic to the Czecho-Slovak Republic, reflecting the pre-World War II Slovakian push for autonomy; to the Czech Protectorate under Nazi Germany; to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic under the Communist regime; to the post-Velvet Revolution Czechoslovak Federative Republic; and finally to the post-Velvet Divorce formation of the Czech Republic. With every change in the nation’s political, social, and geographic identity, the leaders of the country were charged with redefining the visual identity that could legitimate these changes and unite the citizens under a new form of nationalism. The concept of a visual national identity in the Czech Republic therefore becomes even more difficult to define than in other modern nation-states as it has been constructed and reconstructed multiple times and by multiple different regimes since the 1918 formation of Czechoslovakia.

The most problematic redefinition of Czech visual identity was associated with the transformation from a Communist Czechoslovakia to a post-1989 democratic Czech Republic. As critic Marcela Pánková argues, “a new and painful phenomenon began to appear more and more often in all spheres of Czech alternative culture, but its greatest impact was in literature and the visual arts…. This phenomenon was a search for a sense of identity.”7 The difficulty in constructing an appropriate visual identity for this new nation was the result of the drastic changes that were occurring after the Velvet

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Revolution: the fall of a 40-year totalitarian regime; the building of an entirely new political system; and the reopening of economic, political, and social interaction with the West. These developments made the new nation-state radically different from that which had existed before, and, as Étienne Balibar notes, this led to a fear of the potential loss of the nation. He argues that “all the conditions [were] therefore present for a sense of identity panic to be produced and maintained. For individuals fear the state – particularly the most deprived and the most removed from power – but they fear still more its disappearance and decomposition.”

The need to clearly define an identity for the new country was therefore keenly felt in the arts institutions of the Czech Republic.

This desire to clarify and maintain the national, however, clashed with the impulse to explore the newly opened international art world. Pánková again illustrates this urge well when she describes the new international possibilities after 1989:

After decades of stagnation, atrophy and inertia, all strata of our society were affected by this iconoclastic movement. All kinds of cultural events, both real and fictitious, were being organized at home and abroad, especially in music and the visual arts…. The chance for Czechoslovakia to become part of the international cultural context became real.

The citizens of the new Czech Republic, notably many artists, were driven to explore and take advantage of this international stage and the opportunities it could offer. At the same time, however, they were being called upon to devote their work to the construction of a new nationalism. Thus a schism soon emerged between the goals of national art institutions and those of an internationally-minded group of artists.

This schism became most obvious with the founding of the Prague Biennale in 2003. Formed as part of a late-20th and 21st century blitz of biennial exhibitions, the

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8 Étienne Balibar, as quoted in Schlesinger, 318.
Prague Biennale is a part of a wider movement after the end of the Cold War to globalize the art world by opening up new forms of cultural trade, international exchange, and a global art market. Julian Stallabrass describes this phenomenon in economic terms, noting that, “Just as business executives circled the earth in search of new markets, so a breed of nomadic global curators began to do the same, shuttling from one biennale or transnational art event to another, from São Paulo to Venice to Kwangju to Sydney to Kassel and Havana.”

While biennials inherently participate in this globalization of contemporary art, however, they also position themselves as distinctly national or regional events. The host city of the biennial is always of central importance to its underlying theme, as local culture is highlighted and defined as a unique and significant entity in an international stage. Biennials therefore have an inherent contradiction in their nationalistic and internationalistic goals, and the Prague Biennale is no exception. While its organizers attempt to construct a Czech identity that legitimizes not only the nation but also the unique artistic practice of the nation, the biennial itself and the artists who participate in it are engaged in a globalized art world where national concerns become unimportant and are often ignored.

The question of defining a visual identity in the Czech Republic therefore appears to have reached a crossroads. On the one hand is the need for arts institutions to construct a national identity to legitimize the nation and its culture, an impulse that finds deep historical roots. On the other hand is the impulse of contemporary artists to explore the newly available international movements and to participate in a newly globalized art world. As Schlesinger astutely prophesized, “culture is therefore going to be one of the
key political battlefields\textsuperscript{11} in a post-1989 Czech Republic. Today, these historical disputes over the creation of Czech nationalism center around the Prague Biennale, and as the debate between the national and international concerns of arts institutions and artists continues, the battle over the construction of a Czech visual identity wages on.

\textsuperscript{11} Schlesinger, 325.
Chapter I: Forging a Nation and a National Artist

Any discussion of a Czech nation must begin with the Czech national revival of the second half of the 19th century. This cultural renaissance originated in an attempt to revive the Czech language, which had been almost entirely eradicated after the Hapsburg Empire’s conquest of Bohemia at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, ultimately remaining solely in peasant culture. The revival was therefore primarily a reaction against the German influence from the Hapsburg Monarchy, and the heavy Germanization of Czech culture that resulted from it. This reactionary effort against the German language, however, evolved into a promotion of the Czech cultural heritage that is associated with language, including music, theatre, and the visual arts.12

The roots for this renaissance date as far back as 1780 with the ascension of Joseph II to the throne and the beginning of the Czech period of Enlightenment. Inspired by the idea of an ‘enlightened monarchy,’ Joseph II sought to achieve the unification and harmonic organization of the Hapsburg Empire. His goal was to improve the ‘general welfare’ of all inhabitants, so that citizens would not only happily and peacefully exist in the state but would also strive to contribute to its power. He therefore initiated a series of reforms during his ten-year reign, including freedom of speech, freedom of religion,13 a relaxation of censorship laws, education reforms, and the abolition of serfdom. By the

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13 The October 1781 Toleration Patent, granting freedom of religion to all inhabitants, was arguably one of the most important reforms of Joseph II’s reign. For the first time since the 1620 Battle of White Mountain, non-Catholic citizens were granted the right to practice their religion, seek employment in administrative offices, and study at universities, a huge development for the predominantly Protestant population of the Czech lands.
time of his death in 1790, Joseph II had “transformed the peasant into a citizen with defined rights, a citizen guided by his own judgment.”

While this period of ‘enlightened monarchy’ inspired a wave of Czech Enlightenment literature, philosophy, and science, all of this work was done in the German language. In order to create access to Enlightenment ideas for the Czech-speaking population (which, by this point, consisted almost entirely of peasants), a Czech-language Enlightenment was initiated by members of the Czech intelligentsia, most notably journalist Václav Matěj Kramerius. Kramerius printed Czech-language brochures containing information about Joseph II’s reforms and other Enlightenment ideas, distributing them to the peasant population. He soon became interested in the distribution of the Czech language itself, and was discouraged by its rapid disappearance in administrative offices and higher education. Inspired to resuscitate his dying native tongue, Kramerius printed a Czech newspaper and opened a Czech bookstore in Prague in 1790, sparking the beginning of a Czech renaissance centered on the revival of a national language.

Kramerius’ actions started a wave of activity amongst the Czech intelligentsia. Soon writers, playwrights, and scientists were actively engaged in the efforts to save the Czech language – and, by association, Czech culture. These scholars were united by a shared concern over the extreme Germanization of Czech culture that had been occurring since the early 17th century. Historian and scientist František Martin Pelcl, who was

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15 Although Czech was only used on a daily basis in the countryside at this point, the urban Czech intelligentsia could still speak, write, and read their native language.
responsible for publishing many Czech grammar and history books during the late 18th century, described his alarm at this phenomenon:

Thus the second generation will already be German, and in fifty years more German than Czech will be spoken in Kouřím and the other cities of Bohemia; yet it will be difficult even to flush out a Czech… One can easily conclude how far the German language must come in a hundred years, and how much Czech in contrast must lose, until it finally dies out altogether.16

Pelcl’s fear, which was shared by all of the scholars of the revival movement, was that the loss of the Czech language would result in the loss of Czech history, culture, and independence. The supporters of the national ‘reawakening’ were therefore charged not only with reviving the Czech language, but with re-identifying a Czech culture that had already begun to go extinct. Due to the extreme influence of Germanization, this task was often in fact the actual invention of an identifiable national culture which could contrast that of their German oppressors.17

The Czech intelligentsia soon gained popular support for the national revival, thanks in large part to leadership amongst ‘commoner intellectuals’ like Josef Jungmann who associated the equalization of Czech language and culture with the social and political liberation of the Czech people. By the mid-1840s, debates on the possibility of an autonomous pan-Slavic state had led to increased tensions between ethnic Czechs and Germans.18 These debates culminated in the 1848 Slavic Congress, which was convened in Prague to discuss the possibility of the political consolidation of all Austrian Slavs. The members of the Congress demanded an end to the oppression of the Slavic people, and officially called for the first time for the establishment of a Pan-Slavic nation based

16 František Martin Pelcl, as quoted in Agnew, 51.
18 Pánek & Tůma, 298-300.
entirely on ethnic and cultural bases. This Congress culminated in a public uprising throughout Prague which was brutally repressed by the Hapsburg military, seemingly destroying the possibility of Slavic independence.

Despite this defeat, however, the efforts to establish an independent Czech nation continued and the 19th century Czech national revival was eventually wildly successful in achieving its goals. The Czech language was ultimately reintroduced into administrative offices and schools. The symbolic end of the revival was signaled by the 1881 completion of the National Theatre [fig. 1.1] and of the National Museum [fig. 1.2] ten years later, establishing institutions that were built specifically to house and protect Czech music, theatre, and cultural heritage. In fact, the National Theatre was funded entirely by common Czech citizens. This fact transforms its construction into a symbol of the dedication of the Czech people to preserving and honoring their national culture, and the completion of the building was therefore a true mark of their success.19

But this wave of nationalism seems strange when one considers that the Czech lands were not, in fact, a nation until the 20th century. Benedict Anderson notes that this is true of many of the nationalistic movements of the 19th century, when “only a minority of existing states were nation states; most nationalist movements were directed against existing monarchical-imperial states, and drew their strength ‘from below.’”20 This analysis is certainly true for the Czech national revival, which was directed against the Hapsburg Empire and not for the benefit of any existing political entity. The understanding of ‘nation’ in this revival was therefore based not on a political or

geographic distinction, but rather a cultural one. The ‘Czech nation’ was understood to be comprised of those who spoke Czech, and who therefore shared a common history and culture. From its very roots, a Czech national identity was thus based on a culture that was defined as distinct from any other.

Institutions

The great success of the Czech national revival in ‘reawakening’ Czech culture as a whole has made this period a popular one to revisit for Czech historians, politicians, and nationalists throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. As historian Hugh LeCaine Agnew notes, “the Czech national renascence of the nineteenth century is one of those historical themes to which Czechs return again and again in their search for meaning in their past.”21 Perhaps more significant is the fact that this meaning is not only sought in the past, but applied into the present. This was certainly the case in the formation of the new Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, as both institutions and artists appropriated the dialogue of the previous national ‘reawakening’ to legitimate their fledgling country.

The reactionary sentiments of the 19th century revival extended into the 20th century and became a large part of the dialogue surrounding the formation of the new nation of Czechoslovakia after the defeat of Germany and the conclusion of World War I. Despite the great successes of the 19th century national revival, Czech and Slovak ethnic groups continued to perceive themselves as subordinate to ethnic Germans in Bohemia. When Czechoslovakia was founded in 1918, this sentiment was again channeled to invent a cultural heritage that was decidedly distinct from any neighboring ethnicities.22

21 Agnew, 3.
22 Ibid, 264.
The stakes of this new nationalist movement, however, were much more politically fraught than those of the 19th century. The founding of Czechoslovakia necessitated the merging of the Czech and Slovak people into both one culture and one territory. Although these two peoples shared some commonalities in their histories and spoke extremely similar languages, the attempt to unite these two distinct cultural and ethnic groups presented a complication that was not addressed before World War I. Maintaining an appearance of national unity was essential to the state institutions in order to position the young country as unique and legitimate within a broader European context. Art historian Maria Filipová notes that “the concept of a Czechoslovak nation and of Czechoslovak art was to a certain extent employed to demonstrate the existence of a cultural unity of the country’s art to a foreign audience.”

In a new post-war Europe, in which nations, identities, and borders were newly or freshly defined, it became politically necessary to establish Czech culture as a unique entity both to encourage national identity and unity within the country and to legitimize the very existence of the nation in global opinion. The institutions of Czechoslovakia, in short, needed to justify and enforce the distinctive Czech culture which had been encouraged in the 19th century in order to survive in the future.

Filipová argues that the solution to this challenge was to invent an entirely new category of specifically Czechoslovak art. She puts it best in saying that:

The idea of Czechoslovakism also appeared in art historical writing after 1918, when a wide range of books, articles and exhibitions used the concept of ‘Czechoslovak art.’ The construct was consciously employed by art historians to give a historical justification and legitimacy to the co-existence of Czechs and Slovaks.

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23 Ibid, 268.
24 Ibid, 264.
The fact that Czechoslovakism was consciously invented to encourage a sense of national identity and unity is crucial in that it directly employed the techniques used in the national revival. Where 19th century writers based their concept of ethnic unity on a language and culture that were threatened almost to the point of extinction, post-World War I writers constructed an entirely new culture around which to rally their nation. In both cases, a Czech national identity was an invented concept, used by the intelligentsia to distinguish one group as unique from any other.

This new concept of Czechoslovakism was fully institutionalized, in both state and art organizations. The university in Brno founded a new Department of Art History shortly after the founding of Czechoslovakia, and the department at Prague University was noticeably more active, marking “a period of constant advancement” until the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939. In the meantime, some of the biggest advocates of the new ‘Czechoslovak art’ were being appointed to high posts in art institutions throughout the country and particularly in Prague, including the State Gallery (today, the National Gallery). The political construct of a distinct national style was promoted, therefore, in both the institutions which housed the country’s art and those in which it was studied.

Artists

The natural question which arises here is what exactly this new Czechoslovak art entailed. Some idea of a specifically Czech art did exist before 1918, although it seems

25 Ibid.
27 Filipová, 264.
mostly rooted in preconceived notions of the Czech people or countryside themselves. Critic Miloš Jiránek noted in a 1900 review of a group of Bohemian artists in the journal *Radikální* [Radical] that “it is the Czech aspects of their work that we like best about them, the softness of form and depth of emotion, the decorative charm and masterly art of drawing,” and in particular the “lovely expression of all that was good about Czech country life.”\(^{28}\) Post-World War I art production, while still placing importance on the ideals of the 19th century, focused more on the position of Czechoslovak artists within a larger avant-garde movement. Jiří Kotalík characterizes this position as “the consciousness of tradition,” arguing that Bohemian art of the 1920s was characterized by an interest in the historical basis which propels future progress. He notes in a 1989 essay that “this consciousness of tradition lay not only in the understanding of the sure foundations of the past, but more importantly characterized the search for a specific identity and authenticity.”\(^{29}\) The incorporation of tradition into the avant-garde – the very characteristic which arguably defines Czechoslovak art – is read as a specific attempt to foster and legitimate the very construction of Czechoslovakism.

Benedict Anderson notes, however, that this integration of the past with the future is not unique to Czechoslovak art but is actually universal to the construction of nation-states. He quotes critic Ian McKay who calls this phenomenon “anti-modern modernism,” and argues that new nations sought to highlight their unique histories which

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distinguished them from other states, while simultaneously positioning themselves in an avant-garde vision of future progress and relevance. Anderson writes that:

On one side, the hunt was on for ‘authenticity,’ ‘roots,’ originality,’ and ‘history,’ as nationalism’s historically new consciousness created a radical break with the past. On the other side, nations were everywhere understood as ‘gliding into a limitless future,’ developing in perfect synchrony with the breakneck speed of Progress.\(^{30}\)

The ‘consciousness of tradition’ that Kotalík highlights as the defining characteristic of a new Czechoslovak art was actually, as Anderson notes, a characteristic of a new general concept of nationalism. The efforts made by artists to integrate Czech history and tradition into an avant-garde art was therefore not only an attempt to foster a specifically Czechoslovak art but also contributed to the institutionalized goal of constructing of national identity for the young country.

Perhaps no artist embodied this fostering of a Czechoslovak identity more than Alfons Mucha, arguably the most famous Czech artist in art history. Mucha produced a huge body of work in Paris around the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century, including some of his most famous pieces like the Sarah Bernhardt posters which made him an overnight sensation [fig. 1.3]. As a result, he is often more associated with Parisian art production than that of Moravia, where he was born and raised. Despite Mucha’s insistence that his designs were based on the traditional art of the Czech lands, most art historians link his graphic work with the \textit{fin-de-siècle} era of French Art Nouveau.\(^{31}\)

Mucha himself, however, was deeply uncomfortable with his own connection to Paris over Moravia. He vocally criticized the Vienna Secession (with which he was thought to be associated) for being too “Germanic,” and vigorously described his own

\(^{30}\) Anderson, “Staging Antimodernism in the Age of High Capitalist Nationalism,” 98.

work as “Slavonic” in nature. He even once asked Bernhardt, his primary patron in Paris, to defend him by writing to the editor of La France and alerting him that Mucha was “a Czech from Moravia not only by birth and origin, but also by feeling, by conviction and by patriotism.”

He once wrote of his distress in gaining notoriety for the Parisian work which he found so meaningless in an undated letter to a friend in Moravia, concluding with a decisive statement:

This was what my time, my precious time, was being spent on, when my nation was left to quench its thirst on ditch water. And in my spirit I saw myself sinfully misappropriating what belonged to my people. It was midnight and, as I stood there looking at all these things, I swore a solemn promise that the remainder of my life would be filled exclusively with work for the nation.

After leaving Paris for the United States in 1904, he continued to express this patriotic sentiment, saying that he hoped that his work in America would provide him with enough financial freedom to support his “work for the nation.”

It was with this attitude and desire to work for his homeland that Mucha began in 1913 to work on his monumental series, the Slav Epic. In an attitude that was derived from the 19th century revivalist goals of elevating Czech culture to a national concern which could unite all Slavs, he sought to create a work that would immortalize and highlight the Slavic people and their history. His dream became a reality with the finances of the American diplomat Charles Richard Crane, who was motivated to fund the project by his close personal friendship with the future Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. Inspired by Bedřich Smetana’s symphonic poem My Fatherland, composed between 1874 and 1879 as a descriptive ode to the history,

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33 Sayer, The Coasts of Bohemia, 19.
34 Ibid.
legends, and landscape of the Czech lands, Mucha decided to create a series of twenty monumental canvases, each measuring at least six by four meters, depicting themes from Czech and Slovak history.\textsuperscript{35}

Mucha’s panels are linked not by a purely chronological series of events as are many historical series, but rather by four interrelated themes Mucha believed to be essential to the Slavic experience: Christianity, or more specifically anti-Catholicism (as in \textit{The Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy in the Great Moravian Empire} [fig. 1.4]); traditional Czech culture (as in \textit{The School of the Bohemian Brothers in Ivančice}\textsuperscript{36} [fig. 1.5]); the destructiveness of battle (as in \textit{After the Battle of Grunwaldu}\textsuperscript{37} [fig. 1.6]); and the fate of important historical figures (as in \textit{Master Jan Hus Preaching at the Bethlehem Chapel}\textsuperscript{38} [fig. 1.7]).\textsuperscript{39} Mucha also diverged from a purely historical narrative by highlighting the mythic nature of the progression of the Slavic People. This is best demonstrated in the stark contrast between the darkly colored first panel, \textit{The Slavs in Their Original Homeland} [fig. 1.8], in which primitive and barbaric figures are overseen by three mythological figures; and the bright last panel, \textit{The Apotheosis of the Slavs} [fig. 1.9], in which a festival of Slavic people, carrying symbols of their abundance and cultural inheritance, are welcomed into the arms of Christ. Mucha suggests with this visual progression, achieved through the march of history, that the salvation and glorification of the Slavic and Czech people is both inevitable and imminent. As art critic


\textsuperscript{36} The Bohemian Brothers are monastic followers of Jan Hus (see following footnote).

\textsuperscript{37} The Battle of Grunwaldu was a 1410 battle in the Polish-Lithuanian-Teutonic War, in which the knights of the Teutonic Order suffered a crushing defeat.

\textsuperscript{38} Jan Hus was a 15th century Protestant reformer, and leader of the Hussites. His writings influenced other reformation movements throughout Europe in the 16th century. He preached at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague.

\textsuperscript{39} Bydžovská and Srp, 58-59.
František Žákavec aptly stated, the cycle is “an idealized view of the Slavs, who rule with the help of the word [of God] and are destined for glory, perhaps even by taking a Messianic, redemptive path.”

The style that Mucha chose for his *Slav Epic* also indicates his goal of elevating Slavic culture. In many of the panels, Mucha works in the tradition of Czech Romantic painting that was most famously championed by Josef Mánes. Mánes was one of the most popular Czech artists of the mid-19th century and his influence extended well into the next century. Although he characteristically worked in a French Rococo style, his paintings always depicted traditional Czech themes. In *The Fatherland* [fig. 1.10], for example, idealized Slavic peasants rest from their labors in a recognizably Czech landscape. Mucha appropriates this use of romanticized national landscapes to root the *Slav Epic* in a historical artistic practice. He modernizes this style, however, by incorporating elements of the Symbolist movement with which he was associated. Characterized by the incorporation of ambiguous mythological or dream-like symbols, Symbolist painters sought to express an allegorical or mystic reality. Mucha’s use of Symbolist elements in panels like *Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy in the Great Moravian Empire*, *The Slavs in Their Original Homeland*, and *The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree* [fig. 1.11] not only modernizes a traditional Czech style, thereby updating it for a newly defined nation-state, but associates Slavic history and legend with a mystic, almost spiritual allegorical past.

40 There is an intentional play on words in this statement, as the Czech words for “glory” (*sláva*), “word” (*slovo*), and “Slav” (*slovan*) all have the same root. Žákavec highlights the connection between these concepts – and thus the inevitable triumph of the Slavic people – by choosing these specific words.
41 Bydžovská and Srp, 62.
42 Jiránek, 56.
44 The Omladina Trial of 1894 convicted 68 Czech Nationalists of radical activities, and essentially placed Czech Nationalism on trial.
Mucha’s original intention in creating the *Slav Epic*, which he began work on before the outbreak of World War I, was embedded in the 19th century national revival reactionary dialogue against the Germanization of Czech culture. His work was based on “the idea that it would be necessary to portray the role of the Slavs vividly within the framework of the history of mankind and to give expression to their efforts at liberating themselves from German and Catholic supremacy.”

This sentiment echoes almost exactly that of 19th century writers who sought to revive the Czech language, literary, theatrical, and artistic traditions. And like these institutional ideals, Mucha’s objective with the *Slav Epic* was appropriated to fit the new need for a national identity after the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The Slavic people in Mucha’s masterpiece now represented not the oppressed fighting to defend their heritage from Germanic influences, but the proud peoples of a new nation with a distinctive and strong culture. The history, religion, figures, and mythology represented in the twenty panels of the *Slav Epic* were newly interpreted as the rightful – and preexistent – heritage of the Czechoslovak Republic. When Mucha ceremoniously presented the finished series to the Czech People and the City of Prague in 1928, on the country’s 10th anniversary, his gift intrinsically included a history and identity for the new nation.

Mucha’s work for Czechoslovakia did not end with the *Slav Epic*. After 1918 his practice took a purely patriotic slant. Supported by the state in part due to his patriot intentions, his indirect connection with President Masaryk through his patron, Charles Richard Crane, and his avant-garde credentials and international reputation, Mucha was repeatedly commissioned to design works specifically for the nation. He designed posters in what was by then known as *le style Mucha* for Czechoslovakia’s Sokol festivals [fig. 45 Bydžovská and Srp, 57.]

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45 Bydžovská and Srp, 57.
1.12], which acted as forums for promoting nationalist pride and ideologies.\textsuperscript{46} He created a stained-glass window for the archbishop’s chapel in St. Vitus’ Cathedral, the crowning architectural jewel of Prague’s palatial Hradčany district [fig. 1.13]. And immediately following Czechoslovakia’s independence from Austria-Hungary, Mucha designed the country’s first postage stamps and paper currency [figs. 1.14-1.15].\textsuperscript{47} Mucha’s work literally came to represent the nation in every respect: in festivals and entertainment; in iconic historical and religious monuments; and in the governmental offices which affect the daily life of every citizen. In other words, \textit{le style Mucha} became synonymous with Czechoslovakism.

Conclusion

This ability to identify a clear Czech style after 1918 is made possible by the unprecedented synchronization of goals between Czechoslovak institutions and artists – or rather, the nation’s most prominent and visible artist, Alfons Mucha. Like the Czechoslovak Republic, Mucha wanted to foster a sense of nationalistic pride and identity in his country. And like the Republic, Mucha sought to achieve this goal by incorporating historical significance into the artwork of the avant-garde. In other words, he employed the “consciousness of tradition” that was thought to have embodied the new Czechoslovak art.

The \textit{Slav Epic} is a clear example of traditional and historical themes being employed in the work of an established avant-garde artist. Mucha’s Parisian work was practically considered the forerunner of several modernist movements, including the Art

\textsuperscript{46} The Sokol organization was a Czech and Slavic youth and gymnastics group founded in 1862 which provided intellectual, moral, and physical training for the nation’s youths.

\textsuperscript{47} Sayer, The Coasts of Bohemia, 20.
Nouveau movement in Paris and the Vienna Secession. The *Slav Epic*, then, could easily be read as an incorporation of Mucha’s modernist slant and his nationalistic interests. It is important to note, however, that internationally the *Slav Epic* was not considered avant-garde at all. Historian Derek Sayer notes bluntly that “with this, to all intents and purposes, [Mucha] dropped out of the history of modern art.” He further discusses this phenomenon, saying that:

The *Epic* has routinely been judged by critics then and since as a throwback to the nineteenth century, a work academic in conception and anachronistic in style. Mucha is not even mentioned, for example, in Steven Mansbach’s recent book *Modern Art in Eastern Europe.*

Despite his clear influence in modernist art history, and despite the fact that the *Slav Epic* was created entirely in the 20th century and incorporates the modern Symbolist movement, the series’ historical roots negated any claim it had in the global avant-garde. The “consciousness of tradition” that was used to define Czechoslovak art was therefore dismissed by critics as academic, traditional, and old-fashioned. Already, a dichotomy was established between the modern possibilities of an international avant-garde and the limiting nature of a national art.

It is clear that Mucha’s historical series was no longer considered “modern” because of its roots in the 19th century national revival dialogue, and that the “consciousness of tradition” that defined Czechoslovak art was considered passé internationally. In taking this approach in the *Slav Epic*, then, Mucha made a conscious choice to pursue and perpetuate a national style, rather than an international one. Mucha was well aware of the type of art practice that was popularly received internationally,

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48 Ibid, 19.
having experienced wild fame with his work in Paris. His embrace of historical and traditional themes in his later work in Czechoslovakia was therefore a conscious rejection of the work being created in the international avant-garde. He chose instead to foster a purely national identity in his work, and in doing so he attempted to create a pure Czechoslovak art.

The perfect synchronization of the goals of Mucha and the state in encouraging a Czech national identity can also be seen in the support given to the artist by the existing art institutions. Mucha presented the *Slav Epic* for the first time at the 1928 inauguration of Veletržní Palace [Trade Fair Palace], which today is the home of the National Gallery’s modern and contemporary collection [fig. 1.16]. It is ironic that Mucha’s anti-modernist work should be seen for the first time in this cathedral to modernism. The design of Veletržní is flat, angular, and functionalist in every sense, and even had plans for neon advertisements across the front façade. It was originally intended to exhibit not only the *Slav Epic*, but also examples of modern industry.\(^5^0\) In combining the inauguration of the *Slav Epic* with that of Veletržní, the Czechoslovak government not only gives a clear indication of its support of Mucha’s work but also associates it with the direction of modernity taken by the state. Indeed, this association of Mucha’s work with this modern architecture was celebrated by a 1928 anticipatory review in the newspaper *Nová Praha* [New Prague], which wrote:

>The monumental hall of Veletržní Palace will be transformed into a splendid cathedral of the Slav spirit, love, and ardor, in which the individual pictures will be like symbolic stations in the historical pilgrimage of Slavdom toward the final victory of the Slavic race.\(^5^1\)

\(^{50}\) Ibid, 94-95.

\(^{51}\) *Nová Praha*, September 6, 1928, as quoted in Sayer, “Surrealities,” 96.
Juxtaposing Mucha’s historical series with a modernist palace sends a clear message that, although such artwork is not internationally avant-garde, it is the new national art. The artist and le style Mucha support the goals of the institutions, the institutions support the efforts of the artist, and both progress together to define (and in some ways invent) a clear and distinctive Czech national identity.
Chapter II: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Art of Dissent

Czechoslovakia had only two decades to enjoy its newfound independence. Adolf Hitler’s aggressive designs on the country were already made clear by early 1938 in his demand that Czechoslovakia secede the territory of Sudetenland, occupied primarily by the so-called Sudeten German minority group, to Germany.52 In March Hitler absorbed Austria, securing German control of the borders of the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, as well as a shared border with Slovakia. The fate of the young nation already seemed sealed.

On September 29, 1938, Hitler, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier, and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini signed the Munich Agreement, annexing the Sudetenland to Germany in an attempt to appease and pacify Nazi aggression. The Czechoslovak government was not represented in this meeting. Having been abandoned by his Western allies, Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš had no choice but to allow Hitler’s troops to occupy the Sudetenland on October 1, 1938.53

What remained of independent Czechoslovakia quickly fell apart following the Munich Agreement. Poland seized the territory of Těšín, while Hungary seized the Subcarpathian Ruthenia on its shared border with Slovakia. Beneš resigned under

52 Sudetenland is a crescent shaped territory surrounding Bohemia and Moravia along the shared border with Germany. While the Sudeten Germans were initially hostile to the new Czechoslovak state, they had been mostly appeased by the 1930s. Hitler’s dialogue of ultranationalism, however, encouraged an anti-Czechoslovak sentiment in the Sudeten Germans which Hitler used as justification for his invasion of Sudetenland itself as well as the rest of the country.
pressure from Hitler, and fled the country. Slovak nationalists under the right-wing Slovak People’s Party pushed for autonomy from their Czech counterparts, leading to the creation of a new confederative association republic, called ‘Czecho-Slovakia.’ Soon after this development, Slovakia seceded entirely and allied itself with Germany. The following day, on March 15, 1939, Hitler’s army invaded Bohemia and Moravia, establishing a protectorate over the Czech lands. Despite resistance movements early in World War II, the Czech people again found themselves under severe German oppression only twenty years after their independence from Austria-Hungary.54

While in exile from his country, Beneš sought to gain foreign support for the post-war rebuilding of Czechoslovakia. Having been abandoned by his French Allies, Beneš turned to the Soviet Union. He traveled to Moscow in 1943 to sign a new treaty of alliance with Josef Stalin, and to discuss political strategy with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) leader Klement Gottwald, who had also fled the country at the outbreak of World War II. When Soviet troops entered Prague in 1945, they were therefore greeted not only as liberators from German occupation but as the loyal allies of the Czech people. Interestingly, Beneš had also received promises of support from American President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and American troops had also entered the Czech lands but stopped sixty miles outside of Prague. Historian David W. Paul argues that, although the arrival of Soviet instead of American troops in Prague was a pre-determined Allied strategy, “the political implication was clear: among the Allied powers, the Soviet Union had the greater interest in Czechoslovakia and would play the greater role in its postwar development.”55

54 Ibid, 28.
The CPCz therefore enjoyed initial widespread popularity after World War II. Beneš’s vision under the newly reunited Czechoslovakia was of the country acting as a bridge between East and West, informed by both its American and Soviet allies to create “a blend of liberal democracy with moderate social revolution.” As the newly reinstated President, Beneš was to share power with a freely elected parliament which would consist of four Czech and two Slovak parties. Wanting to acknowledge the liberation by the Soviet army, Beneš granted the CPCz a greater share of power in the government than was warranted by its size. This political favor, combined with a ban on far Right parties introduced as a reaction to the Slovak People’s Party’s pro-Nazi sentiments during the war, led to a considerable leftist lean in the new Czechoslovak government. The parties that were non-Communist were badly organized, and the popularity of the Soviet allies immediately following the war led to a mass increase in Communist Party members throughout the country. The CPCz therefore was able to win 114 out of 300 seats in the free parliamentary elections of 1947.

This victory was decisive, but disappointing to the leaders of the CPCz. In January 1947, Gottwald announced that his party intended to win the upcoming 1948 election decisively enough to govern the country alone. In February 1948 the CPCz attempted to extend its power to the National Police, causing twelve non-Communist leaders to resign in protest after Gottwald refused to reinstate eight non-Party police officers who had been dismissed. The ministers assumed that their resignations would not be accepted but rather would force the President to solve the crisis. But Beneš, fearing a

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56 After World War II, only the territory of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which had been ceded to the Soviet Union during the war, was not reclaimed by Czechoslovakia.  
57 Paul, 30.  
Red Army invasion to restore order, remained neutral on the issue. Meanwhile, taking advantage of the President’s failure to react, the Communist Party mobilized to stage a government coup. Gottwald called for his followers throughout the nation to initiate ‘purges’ of all ‘reactionaries’ from official offices. Huge Communist demonstrations were held in support of the CPCz, and panic and political chaos raged. The non-Communist parties cracked under the pressure and agreed to join Gottwald’s coalition government. On February 25, 1948, Beneš was forced to appoint Gottwald the leader of a new – and fully constitutional – Communist government. 59 This wildly successful coup was surprisingly nonviolent: “The army remained neutral, the police was hardly used…. Czechoslovak democracy was destroyed solely by organised street demonstrations and panic that followed.” 60 Under this peaceful coup d’état and without any form of physical resistance, Czechoslovakia entered an era of Soviet-controlled Communist totalitarianism which would last for forty years.

Institutions

The official art movement under Communist Czechoslovakia was Socialist Realism. The concept of Socialist Realism was born out of V.I. Lenin’s discussion of the role of Bolshevik Party literature in social revolution. In his 1905 essay “Party Organization and Party Literature,” written during his exile from Russia, Lenin argues that all literature must become Party (i.e. Bolshevik) literature in order for the revolution to finally defeat tsarism. He calls to his comrades in Russia:

Down with non-partisan writers! Down with the literary supermen! Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, “a

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60 Ibid, 25.
cog and screw” of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class.\textsuperscript{61}

Lenin describes literature as an essential tool of the social revolution, an inseparable part of the “mechanism” which will overthrow the tsarist regime and free the proletariat from its bourgeois oppressor.

More significantly, Lenin argues that all literature must work towards this party goal. He concludes “Party Organization and Party Literature” by stating this belief quite explicitly:

Every newspaper, journal, publishing house, etc., must immediately set about reorganizing its work, leading up to a situation in which it will, in one form or another, be integrated into one Party organization or another…. Only then will it be able to fulfill its duty and, even within the framework of bourgeois society, break out of bourgeois slavery and merge with the movement of the really advanced and thoroughly revolutionary class.\textsuperscript{62}

If the proletariat revolution can only succeed if all literature is integrated with the Party, then an obvious implication is that the creation of any non-partisan literature is working against the goals of the revolutionaries. According to Lenin, the writers and advocates of non-Party literature are therefore enemies of the people and of the State which protects the interests of the proletariat.

This concept of the importance of Party literature – and the threat of its non-partisan counterpart – was soon extended to the visual arts. Gyorgii Plekhanov, another founder of Russian Marxism, discusses the role of art within the framework established by Lenin for literature in his essay “On Art for Art’s Sake,” included in his 1912 work \textit{Art and Society}. Plekhanov argues that the tendency towards realism died out in the

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 59.
European avant-garde as a contradiction arose between artists’ social class and the bourgeois class which provided their livelihood. Artists first relied on and then valued the bourgeois order, and so the ideological content of their realist work became increasingly contradictory and offensive. Realism was thus abandoned for abstraction, giving rise to the concept of “art for art’s sake.” Like writers of non-partisan literature, therefore, “the advocates of the theory of art for art’s sake have become conscious defenders of a social order based on the exploitation of one class by another.”63 Art in a classless communist society must therefore be in the realist style of the proletariat, rather than the bourgeois abstract.

The term “Socialist Realism” was adopted by Maxim Gorky and Josef Stalin to describe this aesthetic ideology at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.64 This style is best recognized for its realist depictions of Soviet workers and revolutionaries, toiling happily in the service of a future classless, post-revolution communist society. The work of Geli Korzhev provides an excellent example of this distinct style, as one of the most celebrated artists of the Russian Socialist Realist movement. His paintings, such as the famous *Picking up the Banner* [fig. 2.1] from the triptych *Communists*, celebrate the Soviet laborer as a powerful and unstoppable revolutionary. As Soviet critic Vladislav Zimenko notes of *Picking up the Banner*, “the picture is striking… for the rare strength of concentration and compression of thought, feeling and will, conveying the real power and grandeur of the new hero of the age, the revolutionary proletariat.”65 Arkady Plastov, on the other hand, depicts the contented life of laborers in a post-revolutionary utopian

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society. In his famous *Tractor Drivers at Supper* [fig. 2.2], for example, Plastov represents a moment of rest from the daily work. The lifestyle depicted is not one of backbreaking labor, but of serenity, peaceful communion, and “hard, but enjoyable work.” The message here is clear: the proletariat has been freed from its oppressors, and can now exist in peace.

A common critique of Socialist Realism is its obvious employment as a propaganda tool for the Soviet Union. Plastov provides another important example of this practice with his 1937 *Portrait of Stalin* [fig. 2.3] in which young children celebrate and play under the smiling face of the leader of the Soviet Union. Andrei Zhdanov, the Soviet Republic’s cultural dictator, acknowledges this criticism and states: “Yes, our Soviet literature [and art] is biased, and we are proud of that fact, for our bias is that we want to free workers and men of the yoke of capitalist slavery.” Socialist Realist art was touted therefore as the ideologically, morally, and aesthetically superior style, and its “bias” was to be employed in the success of all communist societies.

It was in this spirit that Socialist Realism was adopted (or imposed) as the official artistic style of Czechoslovakia after 1948. Art critic Marcela Pánková colorfully describes the introduction of this Soviet style to the newly named Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, saying that “the communist ideology, imposed after the Second World War, reached all layers of culture, growing through them like a fungus, covering them with mould,” until it resulted in “the sterile art of ideologically-permitted socialist realism.” She notes that all unofficial art – that which deviated from the Soviet-approved Socialist Realism – was labeled ‘formalistic’ and its production or public exhibition was illegal.

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66 Ibid. 146.
67 Andrei Zhadnov, as quoted in Arvon, 86.
However, these restrictions on so-called ‘dissident’ art were relaxed somewhat in the Khrushchev Thaw of the 1950s, and artists were finally granted to right to produce artwork outside the restrictions of Socialist Realism in 1956. This right to creative freedom continued to exist leading up to 1968 with Alexander Dubček’s attempts to introduce a program of liberalizing reforms and to create “socialism with a human face,” popularly known as the Prague Spring.

The fallout from Dubček’s reform efforts, however, resulted in even more strongly enforced censorship in the arts than existed in the earliest days of Czech Communism. Interpreting the Prague Spring as “a retreat from Communism,” Soviet troops were ordered to invade Czechoslovakia under the Warsaw Pact to reinforce socialist control. The ensuing period of ‘normalization’ plunged the arts into an even darker era, with tighter restrictions on the creation and exhibition of unofficial art. Pánková again describes this crisis in artistic freedom eloquently when she says that the era “following the Prague Spring of 1968 was marked by a political pressure on the arts which proved stifling and deadly.”

The official language of the cultural policy of Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring may have been less colorful than that of Pánková, but it was no less clear about the strictly socialist intentions of the new regime. In a 1986 revision of a 1970 policy, the goals of the development of Czech and Slovak cultures are clearly summarized:

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69 After the death of Stalin in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev was appointed General Secretary and initiated a period of de-Stalinization popularly known as the Khrushchev Thaw. This period was marked by a relaxation of censorship, policies of peaceful coexistence with other nations, and the release of millions of political prisoners from the Soviet Gulag labor camps.

70 Alexander Dubček, quoted in Paul, 54.

71 Bradley, 50.

The whole [cultural] programme links the solution of the material development with cultural development. It thus contributes to achieving the main objective of the developed socialist society – to bring about the freedom of humanity through many-sided harmonious development. Identification of the objectives of Czechoslovak socialist society in all its aspects enables the cultural policy to focus its attention on synchronizing the social, rational and emotional development of all strata of the population.73

In an argument that directly echoes that of Lenin over eighty years earlier, the leaders of the new Czechoslovak Socialist Republic claim art and culture as tools - “a cog and screw” as Lenin himself said74 – in the great Communist machine. The new cultural policy goes a step further, however, by specifically advocating censorship in the arts. In an attempt to tighten the control over artists who were increasingly breaking free of Communist restrictions in the 1980s, it calls for “the qualitative increase in ideological and artistic values… [through] the joint enforcement of aesthetic criteria.”75 The Soviet-approved aesthetic of Socialist Realism is clearly promoted here – and, more importantly, all other unofficial art is denounced. In this way, it is suggested, the “Czechoslovak cultural policy… guarantees that the targets of the socialist cultural revolution are met.”76

As the official aesthetic policy of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Socialist Realism was promoted in the national art institutions. These institutions included the National Gallery, the National Museum, the Arts and Crafts Museum, the Czech Fund of Fine Arts,77 and the Union of Czechoslovak Artists, in which artists were “associated on the basis of their common ideological [i.e. socialist] and artistic programmes.”78 The artistic opportunities at a national level were therefore restricted to those who participated

74 Lenin, 56.
75 Šimek & Dewetter, 81-82. Emphasis added.
76 Ibid, 29.
77 Ibid, 83-84.
78 Ibid, 53.
in this ‘official’ art. Under this enforced Soviet influence, then, the institutionalized
Czechoslovak ‘national style’ was, de facto, the equivalent of the Soviet style.
‘Czechoslovakism’ became synonymous with Socialist Realism and, as far as ‘official’
art was concerned, a unique national style did not – and could not – exist.

Artists

The Czechoslovak artists who were suddenly told to adhere to the Soviet-imposed
style of Socialist Realism reacted very differently than their institutional counterparts.
While national museums and unions had no choice but to accept these new regulations,
controlled as they were by the Communist government, individual artists could afford to
be more critical of the nation’s new Soviet identity. Their criticisms were, however,
severely limited by the threat of persecution for producing or exhibiting ‘unofficial’ art.
What resulted was an interesting dilemma, in which some artists chose to toe the line
drawn for them by the CPCz, while far more participated in a rapidly growing dissident
art movement.

Many Czechoslovak artists were active supporters of the socialist revolution in
the late 1940s. Jindřich Chalupecký, an influential Czech art historian, describes this
attitude amongst cultural circles in a 1949 essay, “The Intellectual under Socialism.” He
notes that, as in other countries, artists and writers were generally inclined towards the
Left in politics, and that despite misgivings about the apparent pressure the USSR placed
on the arts, Communism was the most appealing political option to Left-leaning citizens.
Artists therefore not only supported the CPCz, but actively participated in its success
immediately after the end of World War II – only to be disillusioned by the realities of
1948. Chalupecký eloquently describes this disillusionment just one year later when he writes:

In place of a diverse and sophisticated culture we were presented with something so incredibly barren, monotonous, and base as to defy reason. How was this possible? How could this have happened? Here we were, ready at all times, and now, instead of socialism they had foisted upon us this.\(^{79}\)

Chalupecký’s disgust is almost tangible as he describes the shocked response of cultural intellectuals to the harsh control of life under a Communist regime. Artists were now faced with the unimaginable choice of either giving up their artistic freedom to serve the State, immigrate and abandon their homeland, or risk persecution by creating ‘dissident’ art which could not be seen by the public. Chalupecký concludes his essay by describing the sense of hopelessness felt by many artists due to this situation, arguing that “one may well ask what he or she is able to accomplish in such a situation. The answer is: nothing…. The result is despair.”\(^{80}\)

Many artists faced with this dilemma did choose to adapt to the new artistic restrictions imposed by the CPCz. A logical explanation of this response was the very real threat of persecution of artists who practiced ‘unofficial’ art. The fact that art institutions all followed the Communist line also played a role in this decision, as there were very few means through which a ‘dissident’ artist could make a living or exhibit his/her work. But Hungarian poet-turned-politician Miklós Haraszti points out that many of the artists who practiced Socialist Realism were not disillusioned but continued to believe in the cause of the Communist regime. Haraszti was himself a ‘dissident’ poet in


\(^{80}\) Ibid, 36-37.
Hungary, and argues that many artists within the Soviet sphere of influence sincerely followed its ideology: “They enthusiastically believed that their status as artists and citizens would greatly contribute to the elimination of exploitation – more of a liberation for them than a sacrifice.” These artists subscribed to the Leninist school of thought which dictated that the arts (and specifically Socialist Realist art) were an integral part of the success of the proletariat revolution, and embraced their newfound role in the Communist regime. The same phenomenon held true in Czechoslovakia as in Hungary – although the harsh realities of the Communist regime may have created some disillusionment within intellectual groups, many artists maintained their ideological beliefs, which were reflected in their work.82

One such artist was Lev Šimák. His realist style of painting took on a decidedly pro-Soviet iconography after the 1945 liberation, as he depicted Czechoslovak citizens celebrating the rise of Communism. Even after the Communist coup Šimák continued to incorporate socialist ideals into his work, such as his *Plowing Limits* [fig. 2.4] in which a laborer proudly carries the red flag of Communism. Šimák even directly associates Socialist Realism with Czechoslovak history and with the city of Prague itself in *CPCz Congress* [fig. 2.5]. Crowded into the Old Town Square of Prague, recognizable by the central statue of Jan Hus and the gothic towers of the Church of Our Lady Before Týn, the proletariat stands in solidarity, raising the flags of the USSR and of Czechoslovakia. Šimák’s message with this painting could not be any clearer: the Communist regime was welcome in Czechoslovakia, and its citizens – artists included – would work to further the socialist revolution.

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82 Paul, 162.
On the other hand, however, many artists rejected the Communist restrictions and continued to pursue their artistic freedom, despite the risk of persecution and lack of public spaces in which they could exhibit their work. As Pánková succinctly states, “a painter who is not allowed to exhibit his work does not stop painting.”

Instead, ‘dissident’ artists exhibited in private, unannounced, and unofficial spaces, such as apartments, cellars, etc. Though the artists who worked in this way suffered financially because of their inability to exhibit publicly, they began to foster an underground community, united by their opposition to the oppressive state. Much like the 19th century national revival’s reactionary efforts against the Germanization of Czech culture, artists of the post-Communist coup reacted against the Sovietization of their culture to create a new ‘unofficial’ national identity.

An excellent example of an artist working within this underground movement is Mikuláš Medek. Born into an anti-Communist household, Medek was not drawn to the socialist ideology of the regime which actively persecuted him and his family. He therefore automatically rejected the ‘official’ art of Socialist Realism, and pursued instead a Surrealist figural style in works such as *Big Meal* of 1951-1956 [fig. 2.6]. This work depicts a family of three fighting over a small amount of apparently poor-quality meat. The ironic title *Big Meal* points to the actual dismal nature of the meal, which is clearly insufficient for the family. The pointed nature of this title goes farther than this, however, in that it reminds the viewer of contemporaneous Socialist Realist paintings of a similar subject. Plastov’s *Tractor Drivers at Supper*, for example, depicts a similar family of three who are content with their evening meal. It sends the message that the Socialist society is one of plenty, and that the proletariat are no longer wanting of any material

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goods. Medek, however, makes a drastically different statement. He says through his work that the proletariat is still unsatisfied, and that their meals are not ‘big’ but are (like the fulfillment of their other needs) entirely inadequate – something he himself must have experienced due to his inability to exhibit and sell his paintings under the Communist regime.\(^{84}\) His imagery is one of ironic dissent, and makes a conscious effort to oppose the official work that supposedly represents the reality of Czechoslovakia. He therefore presents an alternative and oppositional imagery, reality, and identity for his nation.

As was discussed previously, the fall-out from the 1968 Prague Spring put even tighter restrictions on the creation of unofficial art. Under the strict presidency of Gustáv Husák, appointed after Dubček’s removal from office, the “lenient” policies of the previous decade were considered to have shown weaknesses in the CPCz regime and were quickly revised. The resulting era of ‘normalization’ was disastrous for the artists who had managed to scrape by in the 1960s. Many dissident artists like Medek immigrated to work abroad, were exiled, or were even arrested.\(^{85}\) The future seemed bleak, and the prospects for artists unwilling to yield to Communist censorship were dim.\(^{86}\)

But artists continued to create ‘dissident’ art even during the ‘normalization,’ despite the increased political and personal risks. This continuation of the work of the 1960s was largely due to inspiration from fellow artist and future president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. Havel was an outspoken and politically active poet, and co-

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\(^{85}\) Medek continued to live and work in Czechoslovakia until his death in 1977. He died without ever seeing his works publicly exhibited. These same works now hang in the National Gallery in Prague and sell internationally for millions of dollars.

\(^{86}\) Paul, 167.
author of Charter 77, a text written in 1977 which criticized the government for failing to recognize basic human rights in the 1960 Constitution of Czechoslovakia. His work, though it was officially banned and had to be printed abroad, was widely circulated amongst underground groups. His essays were often cited as inspirations to these groups to continue their activist work despite pressures from the state.

One such essay was Havel’s 1978 “The Power of the Powerless.” Havel introduces this essay by warning that “a spectre is haunting Eastern Europe: the spectre of what in the West is called ‘dissent’.” He argues that, despite a feeling of powerlessness and sense of futility in challenging the oppressive totalitarian state, social and artistic ‘dissident’ groups have a very real power to challenge the government. Every dissident action, regardless of how minute, chips away at the regime which relies so much on conformity and the censorship of such actions. Interestingly, Havel highlights the importance of the reactionary nature of such dissident movements. He notes that “most people who are too bound to the traditional political way of thinking see the weaknesses of the ‘dissident’ movements in their purely defensive character. In contrast, I see that as their greatest strength.” This statement specifically identifies an aggressively reactionary spirit within the ‘dissident’ groups, and refers to this spirit as one of the primary means through which to defend and restore the human and civil rights which had been stripped away by the 1960 Constitution.

Havel’s words were taken to heart by ‘dissident’ artists, and their ‘unofficial’ activities not only continued despite Husák’s ‘normalization’ policies, but began to

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88 Ibid, 69.
89 Havel was arrested shortly after the publication of “The Power of the Powerless” and remained in prison until 1984, his longest of many imprisonments.
expand in the 1980s. Artists began to reject the pressures imposed on them and to take
more risks in exhibiting their art, restless from decades of seclusion in cellars and
apartment rooms. Exhibitions grew in number, expanded their locations, spread outside
the cities, and provided information about the artistic practice of ‘dissident’ groups in
other regions. These exhibitions were unannounced and only lasted until the police
arrived to shut them down, sometimes only a few hours. But the activity and dissent
accelerated regardless of official interventions, reaching its apex in the late 1980s. British
art critic Ian McKay captured this environment well in an article written in early 1989, in
which he notes that there “is at last a Renaissance in Czech painting…. To the outsider
the feeling is one of excitement; something is happening.”

The imagery of the artwork in this ‘Renaissance,’ born out of decades of
oppression and inspired by Havel’s description of the defensive ‘dissident,’ is one of
opposition, dissent, and hostile criticism of the state. The wooden sculpture of Jiří
Beránek is a fitting example of this imagery. His *Outcry* of 1988 [fig. 2.7] depicts a
wingless bird-like figure, its body halfway inside a cage structure and its mouth open in a
silent anguished scream. The painted bands entwined across its body heighten the sense
of bondage and imprisonment. The figure of the caged bird seems to represent the plight
of dissident artist on two levels: the struggle to remain physically free, escaping the fate
of the many artists who were imprisoned by the Communist police; and the struggle to
maintain some form of artistic freedom in a society which banned all but one style of art.
The bird is trapped within its seemingly inescapable confines, yet continues with its
struggle for freedom, crying out for the rights denied it.

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The work of the Válová sisters, Květa and Jitka, also reflect this oppositional imagery. Both artists became extremely popular and well-known beginning in the 1960s, and based their later reputations after the Velvet Revolution on the reactionary work they had created under the Communist regime.92 Jitka Válová’s paintings are rarely explicitly figurative, but rather feature corporeal abstractions, emblems of the human body. Her early work *The Conflagration* [fig. 2.8] depicts a group of chaotically clustered figures, apparently struggling (against each other, or in solidarity against an outside force?) within a grey, colorless environment. This work differs drastically from Korzhev’s almost contemporaneous *Picking Up the Banner*, which represents the artwork officially supported by the state. While Korzhev’s soldier engages in a struggle for the glory of the Communist regime, the battle within Jitka’s canvas appears to be one of basic survival. Her figures twist and writhe within the inferno implied by the title; Jitka seems to imply that the true struggle that occurs under the Communist regime is not one for the state, but rather for the very will to survive in the hell-like society imposed by it.

Jitka’s later work *All Our Deeds are Being Recorded* [fig. 2.9] expresses this disillusionment with the realities of the Communist era in a more direct way. The title refers to the police’s widespread practice (especially after 1968) of bugging telephones, tampering with mail, and trailing suspected dissidents. Life in general, as well as art making and exhibiting, was now being censored and monitored. Jitka expresses the horror of this situation in a diptych canvas. The image on the smaller bottom panel echoes one of the corporeal figures painted above; it copies down, repeats, and reanalyzes the actions above it. This new figure, however, is not an exact copy of the other three but is painted in a higher contrast of light and dark. Jitka’s imagery implies that deeds are not

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only recorded, but reinterpreted in a distinct ‘black or white’ mentality which labeled a citizen either ‘pro-Communist’ or ‘enemy of the people.’ The eavesdropping policies of the police were therefore not only an infringement on the basic right to privacy, Jitka suggests, but a potential danger for the artists who belonged to what Pánková calls the “grey zone” of alternative culture.93

Jitka’s sister Květa also reacts against this culture of oppressive supervision in her 1969 work Wonder and Surprise [fig. 2.10]. This painting confronts the viewer with a series of flesh-colored figures, marching into the foreground of the canvas, their multiple eyes staring straight ahead. Květa employs her oft-used technique of repetition to give the work a sense of extended time, hinting at the seeming eternity of the Communist regime and the endurance of the people living within it.94 In Wonder and Surprise, the resulting effect is haunting as the viewer senses the culture of constant observation, and the inability to escape the gaze or punishing hand of the state. Art historian Michael Nixon notes that “Květa Válová’s work looks squarely at the reality of existence;”95 in this case, reality looks right back, forcing the viewer to contend with it.

The thematic repetition of Wonder and Surprise is echoed in Květa’s Trapped Dog [fig. 2.11], creating a similar effect. This work features the repeated imagery of eyes, hands, and other unidentifiable animal and human-like forms, between and seemingly behind horizontal bars. Like in Beránek’s Outcry, the theme of imprisonment and the soulful desire to break free from the restrictions of Communism is clear. An interesting facet of Květa’s painting, however, is the connection between its title and an important

95 Ibid.
argument in Havel’s “The Power of the Powerless.” Havel contends in his essay that the dissident movements “exist to defend human beings and the genuine aims of life against the aims of the system.”96 If the ‘unofficial’ movements act in the defense of humanity, then the implication is that the ‘official’ regime acts in the destruction of humanity, and that the citizens who live under it become inhuman – become, in Květa’s terminology, trapped dogs. It is important to note here that *Trapped Dog* predates “The Power of the Powerless” by eleven years. While Havel’s work certainly inspired the dissident movements after they were threatened by naturalization, visual artists were already engaging with the issue of the defense of humanity. This identity as the defenders of freedom, which became so crucial to the dissident groups which ultimately brought about the Velvet Revolution, was born in the ‘unofficial’ art of Czechoslovak artists.

Květa’s depiction of imprisoned creatures is not simply a depressing depiction of reality, but a call for change. Květa, just like Jitka and Beránek, depicts the imagery of oppression in order to forcibly confront her viewers with an aspect of the Communist regime, denied in the images of Social Realism. In doing so all three demand a revolution, a return to social, political, and artistic freedom, and the reinstitution of human rights in Czechoslovakia.

**Conclusion**

The official artistic identity of Czechoslovakia during the 40-year Communist regime was simplified into the single style of Socialist Realism. And for the first few decades of its rule, this was the art movement that outsiders associated with the country. For some artists like Šimák, this imagery of Socialist Realism accurately represented

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their own goals as supportive citizens of the Communist regime. To them, the identification with Soviet-sponsored imagery was an appropriate representation of the country. But this ‘official’ movement was technically a Soviet, not a Czechoslovak, identity. Imposed upon Czechoslovak artists from an exterior force hoping to extend its sphere of influence, Socialist Realism represented more the nation’s identification as one of many socialist countries than its unique character. Institutionally, a distinctive and specifically Czechoslovak visual identity ceased to exist as the government – and the artists who supported it – actively sought a shared identity with the countries of the Warsaw Pact.

The artists of this era who did not support Socialist Realism, however, constructed their own unique identity in the ‘unofficial’ dissident movements. In describing the years following 1968, Beránek contends that “the specific quality of Czech art is, I believe, its constant battle for survival.”97 This quality was visualized in an abstracted imagery of oppression and opposition which became the identifying feature of Czechoslovak art before the Velvet Revolution of 1989. It is significant to note that the styles employed by the ‘dissident’ artists were pluralistic and modernist, operating within a broader international understanding of the avant-garde. But their iconography specifically referred to a Czechoslovak experience, linking avant-garde styles with a Czechoslovak past and present in a ‘consciousness of tradition’ that was rooted in the construction of Czechoslovakism decades earlier. The unification of this iconography of dissent with a modernist style allowed these artists to construct an identity that could operate in opposition to the official art of the Communist regime. When Havel, the inspired voice behind the dissident movement, was elected president in December 1989, this ‘unofficial’

97 Jiří Beránek, as quoted in Nixon, 17.
alternative identity seemed to become the unquestionable national identity of a
Communist-free Czechoslovakia.

Although ‘unofficial’ art was technically banned from public exhibitions before
the Velvet Revolution and Havel’s presidency, the acceleration of activity in the late
1980s was already allowing for a wider range of recognition, even from Western
outsiders. This foreign audience expressed great interest in the ‘unofficial’ identity that
Czechoslovakism was constructing – after all, it was the British born McKay who
described this period as a “Renaissance in Czech painting.” Art historian Philip Vann
also travelled to Czechoslovakia in 1989 just months before the Velvet Revolution where
he celebrated the work of Jaroslav Róna, known for his ominous paintings such as
_Crucified_ [fig. 2.12] and _Watchmen_ [fig. 2.13]. Vann even identified what he saw as the
great progression made by this artist with the most active period of the dissident
movements, commenting that “it’s really only in the last eighteen months that Róna’s
work has become so mature and powerful.” This wave of foreign interest even
culminated in an exhibition entitled “Dialogue: Prague/Los Angeles,” held just months
before the Velvet Revolution, in which twelve artists from each city exhibited together
in their respective countries. The organization of this show was extremely difficult, as the
curators, “during two years of maneuvering back channels for bureaucratic rubber
stamps, gathered 12 Czech artists willing to risk official reprisal to take part in an open

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99 Philip Vann, as quoted in McKay, “View from Route 65: Prague to Bratislava,” 10.
100 The Los Angeles artists travelled to Prague to exhibit their work in July 1989. By the time the Prague
artists were scheduled to travel to Los Angeles, the Berlin Wall had fallen, the Velvet Revolution had
occurred, and Havel had been elected president. The Czech artists exhibited their work free from the
restrictions of the Communist regime for the first time, not in their own country, but in the United States.
artist exchange with 12 LA counterparts.”101 This active Western desire for a cultural
exchange with contemporary Czechoslovak artists expresses the growing international
interest that was fostered by the dissident groups. Their movement was no longer
‘unofficial,’ nor did it exist solely within the cellars and apartment buildings of Prague; it
had now become a national identity that was in demand and presented on an international
art stage.

This identity, however, was a purely reactionary one, paralleling the 19th century
national revival. When the intelligentsia fostered and encouraged a distinct Czechoslovak
culture in the 19th century, it was in response to the fear that the oppressive German
culture would soon obliterate it. The artists of the Communist era created a new
Czechoslovak identity because the enforced Soviet culture had already threatened to
obliterate the artistic freedom and individuality of the nation. In both cases, once the
threat dissolved, so did the movements which were born to react against them. After the
success of the 19th century revival, artists began to pursue the international avant-garde
movements such as *le style Mucha*, Surrealism, or Czech Cubism. The same was true
after 1989; after the reactionary movement which united contemporary artists was
dissolved, they began to pursue their own directions in an increasingly globalized and
pluralistic contemporary art world.

Květa Válová’s poignant 1990 painting, *They Are Leaving at Last* [fig. 2.14], is
among the last examples of the identifiable Czechoslovak imagery of the 1970s-80s.
Painted as a response to the removal of Soviet troops after the Velvet Revolution,102

102 Pánková, “Report from Bohemia,” 98.
Květa’s earlier themes of surveillance and imprisonment are replaced by a sense of solemn liberation, a relief at finally seeing the backs of the Communists. The national identity fabricated around the concept of ‘dissent’ that was fostered in times of oppression was already disappearing, and just as Květa was eager to see the Soviet troops ‘leave at last,’ she and her fellow artists were also eager to pursue their own directions, finally freed from the burden of defending humanity. By the time the Czechoslovak government and its art institutions would attempt just a few years later to capture this brief moment of a visualized national identity of ‘dissent,’ the support of the artists who created it would already be gone.
Chapter III: Post-Communist Art and the Prague Biennale

In the 1989 Velvet Revolution, so-called because of its peaceful and relatively smooth break from Communism, Czechoslovakia finally regained the independence that it had lost with the Munich Agreement of 1938. After over fifty years of totalitarian rule, the Czechoslovak people demanded their right to a democratic process, and to the freedom of expression that this process allowed. This dramatic event, considered one of the most important of the 1989 European revolutions, was achieved primarily through the non-violent demonstrations of the ‘dissidents.’

The political unrest within both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in the 1980s paved the way for the events of 1989. When Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, he introduced two important policy changes: perestroika, or a plan for political and economic reform; and glasnost, a policy which encouraged openness and transparency in the activities of all government institutions. The Czechoslovak government was wary of these reforms, knowing that they would encourage the ‘dissident’ movements that were already growing in strength, inspired by expanding opposition movements in Communist Poland. However, the leaders of the Czechoslovak regime had dedicated themselves to following Moscow’s course, so they agreed to initiate their own versions of perestroika – a promise that was never actually carried out. As Czech historians Jaroslav Pánek & Oldřich Tůma point out, this resistance “required an ever greater degree of tightrope walking between words and action.”

103 Bradley, 61.
104 Pánek & Tůma, 580.
There was an equally tense compromise made between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia on the issue of *glasnost*. Gorbachev wanted to distance himself from the turbulent past of the Soviet Union, and therefore condemned the controversial invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Under the new policy of transparency in the government, this denunciation of the crushing of the Prague Spring – and of Husák’s regime which had supported and built upon it – was made public. The Czechoslovak regime, however, did not want to admit that they were wrong to ask for Soviet assistance in 1968, and the Prague Spring became a strictly enforced taboo topic. While the regime tried to follow Moscow’s lead, then, a very publicized contradiction became apparent.\(^{105}\)

The Czechoslovak government’s attempts to substitute words for actions were accompanied by internal leadership changes. Most notably, President Husák was forced to quit the position of General Secretary in December 1987\(^ {106}\) as Gorbachev, who knew of Husák’s resistance to reform and his heavy-handed repression of ‘dissident’ movements, encouraged younger party members to take power. His hope was to bring in ‘fresh blood’ who would be more in sync with Soviet policies and who could be distanced from the controversial 1968 Soviet invasion. Husák was replaced, however, by Miloš Jakeš, who painted himself as a reformer but was in fact negatively associated with the invasion as one of the main instigators of the political purges that followed.\(^ {107}\) Once in power, Jakeš attempted to resolve the contradictions that had arisen due to *glasnost*, and in particular his earlier controversial support of the purges, by firing members of the

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\(^{105}\) Bradley, 61-62.
\(^{106}\) Although he was no longer General Secretary, Husák still maintained his presidency until his resignation in December 1989.
\(^{107}\) Pánek & Tůma, 581.
regime who were known to have supported the 1968 invasion and bringing in the young
blood that was desired by Gorbachev. 108

Gorbachev’s dictates were not, however, the sole cause of unrest in
Czechoslovakia. Domestic popular agitation contributed to this political turmoil as well.
The national economy had been faltering, and the recent relaxation of travel restrictions
made many Czechoslovaks, who could travel for the first time in years, newly aware of
how underdeveloped their economy was compared to those of other Western
industrialized countries. This realization coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the
Prague Spring and, in 1989, with the imprisonment of ‘dissident’ hero and Charter 77 co-
author Václav Havel. 109 The combined power of these factors led to a wave of public
discontent, the expansion of the Charter 77 group, the birth of new opposition initiatives,
the appearance of petitions with tens of thousands of signatories, and an increasing
number of street protests in Prague. 110

Finally, external events in East Germany provided the impetus for a revolution in
Czechoslovakia. On November 9, 1989, Günter Schabowski, an official of the Socialist
Unity Party of Germany, mistakenly announced in a live press conference that travel
restrictions between East and West Germany would be lifted immediately. This
announcement caused a public uproar in East and West Germany, and that night the
Berlin Wall – both the physical and symbolic barrier between Communist and
Democratic societies – was literally torn down by the German people. 111

108 Bradley, 62.
110 Small-scale street protests had been occurring since the mid-1980s, but beginning on August 21, 1988
(the anniversary of the Soviet invasion) they began not only to be much larger but also became more
spontaneous. These demonstrations were not the organizing efforts of opposition initiatives, but the
response of a public that was independently crying for change.
111 Bradley, 64.
The entire world watched these momentous events in shocked disbelief, and the people of Czechoslovakia were the next to take up the banner of liberation inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall. On November 17, Prague university students organized a peaceful protest to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death of Jan Opletal, a Czech student murdered by the German occupiers. It is estimated that 50,000 people convened at Opletal’s grave, and commenced to march towards the city center.\textsuperscript{112} The demonstration was brutally repressed by the police, and one student was rumored to have been killed.\textsuperscript{113}

This event sparked an unstoppable wave of revolutionary activity. The Civic Forum, led by Václav Havel who had been released from prison in September, was created on November 19 to unite all dissident groups and discontented citizens into a strong political force. A strike movement began in all universities and most secondary schools, starting on November 20. Every day, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in protest not only in the Prague’s city center, but in other cities and towns throughout Czechoslovakia. The week culminated in a mass general strike on November 27, forcing the Communist regime to yield to the pressure and to begin to engage in talks with the Civic Forum. Soon Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec resigned, members of the Civic Forum filled key positions in economic and legislative departments, and Husák resigned his presidency on December 10. Finally, on December 28, 1989, Václav Havel was unanimously elected Czechoslovak President by the Federal Assembly. The fast-paced and bloodless Velvet Revolution was successfully concluded, and the forty-year Communist regime was over.\textsuperscript{114}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item[112] Pánek & Tůma, 584.
  \item[113] This rumor was later disproved. In fact, secret police agent Ludvik Zifčák had been lying on the street, posing as dead until the protest dispersed, sparking the rumor. His motives were unclear.
  \item[114] Pánek & Tůma, 589-590.
\end{itemize}
Institutions

After the Velvet Revolution and the removal of the Communist regime from power, the art institutions of Czechoslovakia almost immediately embraced the ‘unofficial’ artwork which had previously been banned from their galleries. Large national institutions like the National Gallery recognized the important social and political role that the ‘dissident’ movements had played in the years leading up to the Velvet Revolution, and sought to capture the visual national identity that had been represented by ‘dissident’ artists. The very institutions which had been forced to reject ‘unofficial’ art now not only exhibited it, but heralded it as representative of the battle against Communism and of the Czechoslovak mentality of opposition. Art historian James Aulich wrote only four years after the Velvet Revolution that “later, these very same [‘dissident’ artworks] entered the museum. They were taken from the street and preserved for posterity, they were assured of their position as a focus of debate and as a call for vigilance.”¹¹⁵ ‘Unofficial’ art became official, the institutionalized artwork of Czechoslovakia as it moved from the street where it was born into the museum. In this institutionalization lies an inherent contradiction, however, for as the ‘dissident’ art left the street and became ‘official,’ it lost its oppositional power and raison d’être. This contradiction would create a major problem in the use of such art as the official representation of the new Czechoslovakia.

This eagerness to institutionalize ‘dissident’ art after the fall of Communism was born out of a desire to foster a national identity that distinguished Czechoslovakia from

other former Soviet bloc countries. As discussed in an earlier chapter, official
Czechoslovakism before 1989 was synonymous with Socialist Realism; Czech
institutions did not have a specific contemporary style or movement that was unique to
their country. This was true of all countries under the Warsaw Pact, and national stylistic
distinctiveness was therefore nonexistent in official artwork. After the fall of the Soviet
Union, however, institutions were suddenly able to redefine and distinguish the artwork
of their respective nations from that of their neighbors. Art historian Barbara Barsch
addresses this phenomenon in an essay for the 1999 exhibition *After the Wall: Art and
Culture in post-Communist Europe:*

> It appears as if the world is really out of joint. Everything changes and
positions have to be newly defined; societal and economic hierarchies
alter…. and loss of perspective [creates] the yearning for a new support,
for security. Freedom has been achieved, whatever that means, whoever
profits from it. Now one wants to connect it with what is familiar, with
one’s roots: one’s nationality. Belonging to a nation is a value that cannot
be taken away; it also determines identity.116

Barsch argues that the desire to define national identities in the Eastern bloc was born out
of the drastic political upheavals of 1989. The need to obtain social and political stability
was felt by art institutions which were charged with identifying a national art.
Appropriating pre-1989 ‘dissident’ art, which already enjoyed an international reputation
and was considered to be specifically Czechoslovakian, was the easiest and fastest way to
establish a visual national identity immediately after the Velvet Revolution.

This need to define the national identity of a post-Communist country became
more pronounced after the ‘Velvet Divorce’ of 1993, when Czechoslovakia (since
renamed the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic) split into the two new nations of the

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116 Barbara Barsch, “‘Constancy is our Comfort’ – Between Globalisation and National Separatism: About
Phenomena of our Times,” in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe*, vol. 1, exh. cat.,
Czech Republic and Slovakia. Divided over the question of privatization of the public sector, the Czech and Slovak Prime Ministers agreed to break up the federation. With the support of the Federal Assembly, the Velvet Divorce was completed on January 1, 1993 and the Czech Republic became a new and independent nation.¹¹⁷

The Velvet Divorce was swift, widely supported, and remarkably peaceful compared to similar contemporary events in Yugoslavia. Initially, it seems that the creation of the Czech Republic was a relatively uncomplicated accomplishment. But historians Pánek & Tůma describe the huge repercussions of this division when they note that “with the breakup of Czechoslovakia into an independent Czech Republic and an independent Slovak Republic, there disappeared a state which had survived 74 years in the dramatic conditions of Central Europe.”¹¹⁸ From 1918 to 1992, a Czechoslovak art had persisted underground despite the pressures of first German and then Soviet invaders, and had been staunchly defended since 1989 as the visual representation of a Czechoslovak identity. With the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, however, Czechoslovakism too became void. The national identity which had been so carefully invented, cultivated, and maintained suddenly found itself split between two nations.

At the same time, the new nation of the Czech Republic found itself in need of a new national identity. After the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the intelligentsia strove to justify the unification of the Czech and Slovak peoples in order to “demonstrate the existence of a cultural unity of the country’s art to a foreign audience.”¹¹⁹ Seventy-five years later, the leaders of Czech institutions suddenly had to justify the separation of these two peoples, and therefore had to redefine their national identity as independent

¹¹⁷ Pánek & Tůma, 614.
¹¹⁸ Ibid, 615.
¹¹⁹ Filipová, 268.
from that of their long-time compatriots. Just as the concept of Czechoslovakism was created in order to legitimize the cultural basis of a new nation after World War I, a discourse of a new and specifically Czech art was needed in order to justify the creation of the Czech Republic in 1993.

Conveniently, the construct of Czechoslovakism was historically based more on the art production of Bohemia and Moravia than of Slovakia. Maria Filipová argues that, even before 1918, Bohemia was considered to be the focal point for high culture in the Czech lands, while the eastern regions were more well-known for their folk or ‘ethnic’ art. She argues that, “in the concept of Czechoslovak art, Slovakia was represented through its folk art, partly because for many, as David Crowley has noted, Slovak culture was – for a long time – nothing but a peasant culture.” This perception of a Bohemian centered avant-garde is not that surprising when one considers the fact that Prague, a vibrant cultural center of Europe and the capital of Czechoslovakia, is located in Bohemia. This region therefore was inherently more urban and influenced by the avant-garde movements of other capital cities throughout Europe, while Slovakia was mostly rural and cultivated, as Filipová puts it, a ‘peasant culture.’ While the construct of Czechoslovakism strove to unite these urban and rural cultures with the concept of a ‘consciousness of tradition’ which based future progress on the historical and ethnic traditions of the Czech and Slovak peoples, it was always understood that the avant-garde nature of this cultural marriage came from the Czechs.

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120 The new Czech Republic, as determined in 1993, consists of the regions of Bohemia and Moravia, while the Slovak Republic includes only the Slovak region.
121 Filipová, 268.
122 De Lima Greene, 52.
Since the construct of Czechoslovakism already consisted of two regionally distinct parts, it was therefore easy for the new Czech intelligentsia to appropriate the Bohemian contribution to this national identity – the urban avant-garde and its push for progress – as a uniquely Czech identity. The new Czech art was advertised as an internationally competitive avant-garde style. The new Czech Republic still, however, had to distinguish its avant-garde from that of other European nations. In searching for a unique aspect of a Czech visual identity, the intelligentsia turned to the imagery of opposition that had thrived in the ‘dissident’ movements. The new Czech avant-garde strove not only for artistic progress, but also fought for freedom of expression, openly criticized its social and political climate, and acted in the defense of humanity. It was understood as a politicized, critical, and oppositional avant-garde. The artists of the ‘dissident’ movement were quickly institutionalized to represent this new understanding of a Czech national art. Mikuláš Medek’s work, for example, is now in the permanent collections of City Gallery Prague, the National Gallery, the Czech Museum of Fine Arts in Prague, and the Moravian Gallery in Brno, among others. The height of his success was in fact realized long after his death in his largest solo exhibition, organized in 2002 and held in the Rudolfinum Gallery, Prague’s biggest gallery exhibition space.

Perhaps no artist represents this institutionalization of the ‘dissident’ movement better than Milan Knižák. Knižák was known in the 1960s for his ‘Happenings,’ which often demanded audience participation and always raised police scrutiny under the...
Communist regime. He was able to make contact with members of the international Fluxus movement in Western Europe and the United States through influential art historian Jindřich Chalupecký, and later became the director of Fluxus East. His involvement in the Fluxus group, well-known for crossing and extending over international borders, is an important early indication of his later interest in the internationalization of Czech art.

One of Knížák’s early Happenings in 1966 was entitled *An Event for the Post Office, the Police, and the Occupants of No. 26 Václavkova Street, Prague 6, and for all Their Neighbors, Relatives, and Friends*. Knížák describes this project, by saying that:

Inhabitants of a house selected at random were sent many packages with various things in them; things were left illegally in halls…. The inhabitants of the house also received free tickets to a movie in the mail, so that they were all sitting in reserved seats. Police investigated this for over two months.\(^{127}\)

Knížák’s Happenings usually addressed the culture of surveillance and paranoia that was prevalent during the Communist regime, and as a result he was closely monitored before the Velvet Revolution. After 1989, however, not only was his work institutionalized, but also the man himself. In 1990 Knížák was appointed the Director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, in 1999 he was made the Director of the National Gallery, and in 2003 he co-founded the new Prague Biennale.\(^{128}\)

The Prague Biennale was founded as a part of a growing trend of international biennial exhibitions that emerged in the 20\(^{th}\) and 21\(^{st}\) centuries. The first biennial in 2003 was co-sponsored by Knížák and the editors of the Italian magazine *Flash Art*, Giancarlo

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127 Milan Knížák, as quoted in Hoptman, 120.
128 Hoptman, 120.
Politi and his Czech-born wife, Helena Kontová, and was held in the National Gallery in Prague. Echoing the goals of biennial exhibitions throughout the world, including those of Venice, São Paulo, Johannesburg, Taipei, Havana, and Europe’s Manifesta, Politi and Kontová argued that “the Prague Biennale is a new expression of an idea which has guided us for over thirty years: interpreting the process of understanding contemporary art through the collaboration of many voices and many eyes and through different cultures and sensibilities”. In this sense, they contend, the biennale reflects the mission of *Flash Art* magazine by promoting the globalized artistic practice pursued by international artists rather than the regional art of its host city and country. The percentage of Czech artists represented in the first Prague Biennale, in fact, was surprisingly small, with only one exhibition featuring only three artists focusing exclusively on contemporary Czech art. The initial goals of the Prague Biennale, then, appear to be based on the growth of globalization in a post-1989 Europe and world, rather than on the identification of any specifically Czech art.

This emphasis on the globalized nature of contemporary art is not unusual in younger biennial exhibitions. The need to be internationally relevant, and possibly influential, is strong as rival biennials continue to pop up all over the world. However, the organizers of these events also generally strive to promote the characteristic art and culture of their locations, what art critic Hou Hanru calls the ‘locality.’ He argues:

> Ideally, the concept of locality should be culturally related to the local tradition but innovative and open to international exchanges. The introduction of artworks by international artists is an efficient strategy to

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achieve this end and is often introduced as a catalyst to accelerate this process.\textsuperscript{130}

A successful biennial exhibition, then, should address not only the “different cultures and sensibilities” that are advocated by Politi and Kontová in Prague Biennale 1, but also the issue of a globalized art world from the perspective of the sponsoring city and its culture, advocating for their place on an international stage. After all, “by definition, the location of an international exhibition constructs a map of the world from the perspective of both the city and the country that sponsor it.”\textsuperscript{131}

This attempt to balance the local and the international within the biennial exhibition is directly addressed in Prague Biennale 1 Coordinator Tomas Vlcek’s catalogue essay, “Prague for the Biennale 2003.” He argues that in today’s world any place traditionally on the periphery of mainstream culture has the potential to become the center, and suggests that Prague’s gravitation towards this center is inevitable but fraught with questions. The central questions he identifies are:

Is the importance of Prague hidden in the fact that it is still, more than any other city of the (civilized) Western world, beyond the mainstream? Is it attractive because of the way in which it is different from the standard? ... Is it able to attract interest without being a steady center of politically successful and progressive initiatives, and yet neither random nor unfamiliar enough to be a real periphery?\textsuperscript{132}

Vlcek seems to argue for the distinct individuality of the art of Prague, yet he also grapples with how this city should be considered within a globalized context. At neither the center nor the periphery of Europe, Czech art for Vlcek balances between the realms


\textsuperscript{131} Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, & Sandy Nairne, “Mapping International Exhibitions,” in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, 47.

\textsuperscript{132} Tomas Vlcek, “Prague for the Biennale 2003,” Knížák & Politi, 12.
of the regional and the global, the importance of emphasizing a historical past and an avant-garde future, and the phenomena of national identity formation and internationalization.

These central issues surrounding the nature of the biennial were intensified with the second edition of the Prague Biennale because of a bitter falling-out between Knížák and Politi. After a very public and antagonistic disagreement over finances after Prague Biennale 1, Knížák and Politi split ways and even sponsored rival biennales in 2005. Knížák’s exhibition, the International Biennale of Contemporary Art (IBCA), was held in the National Gallery, while the Flash Art team, having been black-listed from every official arts venue in the city, moved into the post-industrial space of Karlín Hall [fig. 3.2]. The rivalry between the two organizers was aggressive: Knížák attempted to steal Politi’s curators and artists for the IBCA exhibition; banners at Karlín Hall pronounced that the “Prague Biennale is the One and Only Prague Biennale” and staff members handed out postcards addressed to the Ministry of Culture with the inscription “Boycott Milan Knížák & National Gallery Prague.”

This bitter personal dispute between Knížák and Politi also manifested itself in the ideological goals of the opposing biennials. The IBCA was subtitled A Second Sight, and its focus was described as “the Transitional Phenomena of Post Modern Culture.” The majority of its exhibitions contained little emphasis on the specific identities of any one country, and instead addressed the phenomenon of globalization and the European Union (EU), of which the Czech Republic had become a member only one year earlier. A contemporary review described the two largest sections of the IBCA, Paco Barragán’s

134 Ibid.
nEUclear Reactions and Marek Schovánek’s *Globalisation and its Discontents*, by saying that “they examine ‘Europeaness’ from a personal perspective, rather than via the distancing mechanisms of terminologies such as ‘globalisation’ or ‘otherness’.”

Knížák’s biennial clearly leaned more towards a focus on the internationality, rather than the locality, of its artists. In this attitude he was in fact staying consistent with his earlier practice as an artist. As a member of the Fluxus movement, Knížák was and continues to be an advocate of the internationalization of contemporary art. In prescribing this personal artistic ideology to the goals of his biennial, he is representing not only the goals of the National Gallery but of earlier ‘dissident’ artists represented by himself.

Prague Biennale 2, on the other hand, took a drastically different approach in its concept. Subtitled *Expanded Painting/Acción Directa*, it addressed “art as rebellion and political action” in the Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland, Germany, China, and Latin American countries, among others. Unlike Prague Biennale 1, a large section was dedicated exclusively to Czech art and, unlike the IBCA, almost every section focused on a specific nation rather than an assortment of artists from various EU nations. The emphasis of the Karlín Hall biennial was not solely on the internationalization of art, but rather on the separate and distinct identities of various nations united by a common artistic theme. The failure of Knížák’s biennial was arguably, therefore, due to his positive attitude towards the internationalization of art, which he held as both artist and institutional director and which could not compete with the nationalistic urges of the *Flash Art* biennial. Already, we see the power and appeal of the Prague Biennale and Czech institutions in general overtaking the goals of artists, represented here by Knížák.

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135 Ibid, 37.
Most significantly, the theme adopted by the new Prague Biennale was the now institutionalized Czech identity of rebellion and opposition. Politi wrote in his brief introduction to the Prague Biennale 2 catalogue:

The artists of Acción Directa, selected by Marco Scotini, are the latest visionaries of art as political action, attempting to fill the voids left behind by politics and civil society…. I believe that art needs great debates and great passion to ensure its survival and to always render it more current. With Prague Biennale 2, we have achieved [this] goal.137

Politi reclaims the rebellious nature of the ‘dissident’ movements, echoing the efforts of art institutions in a post-1989 Czechoslovakia and, later, Czech Republic. He simultaneously identifies this characteristic as integral to contemporary art on an international scale in general, specifies its importance in the Czech Republic in particular, and credits Prague Biennale 2 for being the link between this supposedly crucial Czech identity and a global art world. Unlike Knížák’s biennial, Prague Biennale 2 successfully places the locality of Prague – and the national identity which had been associated with its art since the rise of the ‘dissident’ movements – within a larger international stage, identifying Czech art as unique and globally significant.

Ultimately, Politi’s biennial show won out, and the IBCA did not succeed past its first year. The artists who supported the Prague Biennale did so primarily for financial and personal reasons. Some, like Romanian artist Victor Man, noted that they preferred to work with an independent institution rather than the government-sponsored National Gallery.138 Others criticized Knížák for being more interested in politics than contemporary art.139 But one important factor to note is Václav Havel’s endorsement of

137 Ibid.
138 Neal, 36.
139 Ibid, 37. One of the most famous criticisms of Knížák’s obsession with politics is controversial artist David Černý’s 2003 installation, Brown-noser, in which viewers stick their heads into the rear-end of a
the Prague Biennale. Having ended his term as president two years earlier, Havel was still a wildly popular and influential politician, and was still remembered and celebrated for his anti-Communist essays of the 1970s-80s. In the opening pages of the Prague Biennale 2 catalogue, he writes this brief statement:

I welcome the fact that the Prague Biennale is organized in the Karlín Industrial Hall. The appreciable list of artists and extra-European representation promise an event that will extend beyond our capital in significance. I think that Prague should be the crossroads of many cultures as often as possible. Its history predestines it to do so.140

This endorsement from Havel – the first President of the Czech Republic, the leader of the ‘dissident’ movements, the defender of humanity, and the inspiration for what was by now considered the Czech visual identity – solidified the superiority of Politi’s biennial over that of Knížák. With Havel’s backing, the Prague Biennale could be fully considered the official representative of Czech art, for a local, national, and even international audience.

Prague Biennale 3 further perpetuated this reputation but went a step further in exploring the roles and identities of Czech contemporary art. As the subtitle Glocal and Outsiders: Connecting Cultures in Central Europe suggests, Politi and Kontová dedicated the third edition of their biennial to the examination of Central European contemporary art practice within a wider global context. While still expressing their commitment to socially active and rebellious art, they also sought to “delve into the very heart of the country it [the Prague Biennale] is representing, probe the surrounding areas, and uncover and analyse hidden or little known phenomena about these cultures.”141

monumental figure, where they see a video of Knížák and Czech president Václav Klaus spoon feeding each other porridge [fig. 3.2]. Černý’s disgust with Knížák’s political dealings could not be more clear.

140 Václav Havel, as quoted in Politi, Prague Biennale 2, 6.
Even more so than its previous editions, Prague Biennale 3 was attempting to claim itself as the ultimate representative of contemporary Czech art, and the stage for that art in an international context.

This third Prague Biennale also directly links the contemporary art scene in the Czech Republic with that of the Communist era in an exhibition curated by Kontová and Martin Dostál entitled *Minimalist Tendencies in Bohemia: A Look at the Visual Scene of the ‘60s and ‘70s.* In the curator’s essay for this section, Dostál argues that, while every country feels the need to distinguish itself on an international stage, the Czech artists find their inspiration not from the 19th century awakening that was common in European countries but in its unique post-World War II history of oppression and opposition. He notes that while international influence certainly seeped into Czech artists despite the restrictive efforts of the Communist regime, it was “the collective effort of artists to spread the identity of opposition through the entire artistic community” that truly affected the art production of that time. Citing works like Stanislav Kolíbal’s stark, half-collapsed, grey sculpture *Ironic Monument* (1973) [fig. 3.4] and Petr Štembera’s performance *Cinema* (1976) [fig. 3.5], created at the former concentration camp Terezín as a commentary on repression and torture, Dostál explicitly connects the ‘dissident’ past of Czech artists with their present, international reputation. The very inclusion of this

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142 Note the specific reference to Bohemia – this is identified as a specifically Czech, not Slovak, identity and history.


144 According to Štembera, as quoted in Dostál, 265: “The ‘Cinema’ was the name given to a room in the former Gestapo headquarters in Prague where people under ‘interrogation’ were forced to sit motionless on benches for hours on end and look at a blank wall. They were immediately punished for the slighest [sic] movement. I put myself in the same position in relation to viewer who had come that day for the opening of a one-man sculpture show in the adjacent rooms, or to see the museum exposition of Terezín.”
exhibition in Prague Biennale 3, by now a well-established and respected biennial, solidifies the institutionalization of the ‘dissident’ imagery as a national identity.

The fourth and most recent biennial, held in the summer of 2009, firmly and finally established this understanding of the Prague Biennale’s representation of Czech visual identity as the new ‘official’ Czech art. This feat was accomplished again by a brief endorsement in the opening pages of the catalogue, this time from Václav Jehlička, the Minister of Culture of the Czech Republic. Jehlička writes:

I see the PRAGUE BIENNALE as one of the most progressive projects focused on contemporary art both in the Czech Republic and within Central Europe as a whole. There are few exhibitions that work with contemporary art with such depth and quality as the Prague Biennale. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that the Biennale will be held under the auspice of the Czech Ministry of Culture.\footnote{Giancarlo Politi, ed., \textit{Prague Biennale 4/Prague Biennale Photo 1}, exh. cat. (Prague: Karlin Hall, 2009), 5.}

Only twenty years after ‘dissident’ art was still considered ‘unofficial’ and four years after Knížák black-listed the \textit{Flash Art} biennial, the Prague Biennale and the Czech identity it stood for became the official, government-sponsored representative for Czech art and culture on an international stage. Based on an institutional perspective, it seems that a Czech national identity not only survived the globalizing effects of a post-wall Europe, but thrived within it.

\textbf{Artists}

This united display of a national Czech art on the part of contemporary institutions is based on discourses concerning the position of the local within a global context, on the appropriation of pre-1989 phenomena, and even on the nature of Czech versus Slovak culture in the construct of Czechoslovakism. But one important factor that
is not discussed is the position of contemporary artists themselves within this dialogue of national identity. The reactions of these artists to the ‘locality’ of their work – and to their relationship to the Prague Biennale – are drastically different from those of the leaders and organizers of Prague’s biennial and other art institutions.

As was discussed previously, the pre-1989 ‘dissident’ movements were quickly institutionalized after the Velvet Revolution. These movements, however, were purely reactionary against the confines of a Communist regime. After the momentous events of 1989, the oppressive regime ceased to exist, and ‘dissident’ artists no longer had a common enemy to oppose. In fact, the new regime was entirely in sync with the goals and ideals of the ‘dissident’ movement and was headed by its representatives. Havel, the leader of Charter 77, was now the president of a new Democratic government, and Knížák, a well-known ‘dissident’ artist, was soon the director of the Academy of Fine Arts and even the National Gallery itself. An oppositional movement cannot maintain itself without something against which to react. Indeed, this is true of all avant-garde movements which, by their very definition, exist on the periphery of mainstream culture. Once such a movement becomes institutionalized and moves out of the periphery, it ceases to be a true avant-garde. The ‘dissident’ movement therefore quickly dissolved, even as the Czech government and institutions were attempting to identify with it.

Without the unifying force of the ‘dissident’ movements, many artists began to explore broader options which opened up for the first time after the fall of Communism. Cultural exchange became freely possible for the first time in decades, and Czech artists were able to participate in international movements, exhibitions, and artistic dialogues. This impulse towards a newly available global art world made artists turn away from
concerns of national identity as they pursued their own interests. In this they were more in line with the goals of Knížák, who sought increasing internationalization, both as the director of the failed IBCA and in his work as a fellow artist, than with the nationalistic ambitions of the Prague Biennale.

The appeal of this expansion into the international market is rooted in the globalized nature of the contemporary art world, and particularly of the biennial tradition. Theorist Pascal Gielen argues that the internationally operating artist becomes ‘nomadic’ as s/he or his/her work travels around the world to participate in and take advantage of the modern concepts of free trade and the market of culture. He describes this artist as ‘opportunistic’ in the positive sense of the word, that is, ‘able to grab opportunities.’ In an art world with increased opportunities for marketability, recognition, and publicity, most noticeably staged by biennials, artists are naturally inclined to work in an international, rather than a limited national, context.

Art critics Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne argue, however, that this impulse to the international is, in fact, rooted in a post-World War II modernist ideal of art as a form of international exchange, an idea based on claims of universalism. They contend that “many artists in the twentieth century and especially today have renounced singular national identification. Their ways of working depend increasingly on transnational access and multiple exhibition venues.” Although they argue that artists in Western countries had been leaning towards internationalization for

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146 Knížák’s unpopularity as the Director of the National Gallery may in part be due to the inherent contradiction of his position: on the one hand the leader of a national institution; and on the other hand a leading figure in an artistic movement that focuses on the crossing of national borders.
148 Ferguson, et. al., 51.
149 Ibid, 48.
half a century, it is important to note that this was not possible for Czech artists until after 1989, at which time the process was accelerated. James Aulich describes the period after the Velvet Revolution as “a kind of catching up” in two ways: institutions tried to catch up with the popularity of the ‘dissident’ movements that they had rejected in the Communist years, while artists simultaneously abandoned these movements in order to catch up with the international art world which had been closed to them for so long.150

British art critic Ian McKay, who had hailed the ‘dissident’ movement as “a Renaissance in Czech painting” in early 1989,151 only five years later described the ‘catching up’ period as an unmitigated disaster for Czech art in his poignantly titled essay, “Czech Art Today: On the Death of Czech Culture.” He writes dramatically that “the internationalist trends of a Western art ‘system’ are bringing about a catastrophe for that [Czech] art – far greater perhaps than that which occurred under communism.”152 According to McKay, the unique and provocative nature of Czech art in the 1980s was being destroyed by the new flood of Western influences, and by the incorporation of Czech art into a globalized system of art markets and international exhibitions. Czech contemporary art could not maintain its autonomy in this influx of Western systems and styles. McKay emphasizes that this phenomenon is detrimental not only to the quality of Czech artwork, but to the very possibility of forming a post-1989 national identity. He contends:

[Czech artists] incorporated too much of the internationalist trends of Western art for their own ever to be fully conceived as part of their unique cultural history. The Czech art world is now emerging from the years

150 Aulich, 64.
under communist rule only to embrace a pluralist European aesthetic that is corrupt and bland.\textsuperscript{153}

Czech art, he argues, has in fact become no different from general (and bad) European art. Artists have won their right to freedom of artistic expression after, as Aulich writes, “the heady days of the \textit{velvet revolution} band-wagon-jumping of 1989,”\textsuperscript{154} only to reject their own cultural heritage and individuality. The ‘Renaissance’ of the 1980s has ended in an ever deeper dark age in which the possibility of a national identity is lost entirely.

Many contemporary Czech artists agree with McKay’s argument that there is no longer a unified Czech style of art. However, they are not hostile towards this prospect like McKay is. They do not lament a lost ‘Renaissance’ or a lack of unity amongst their fellow artists. On the contrary, many artists are pleased to be free of nationalistic concerns, and to explore other options in their work.

Jan Merta is an excellent example of an artist with this attitude. Born in 1952, Merta began his artistic career under the influence of the Communist regime but became best known for his post-1989 work. His paintings explore the relationship of everyday objects to their surroundings, forcing viewers to look on banal scenes manipulated with different perspectives, flattened coloration, or a manipulated background. He often works on one theme for years, such as his \textit{Slum} series [fig. 3.6 & 3.7], in order to fully develop the many possibilities of viewing one object or scene. The work that he contributed to Prague Biennale 4, \textit{Echt (Genuine)} [fig. 3.8], plays with this exploration of everyday objects by painting a tool and labeling it ‘genuine,’ or ‘real.’ In the tradition of René Magritte’s \textit{The Treason of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)} [fig. 3.9], Merta challenges his

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid, 32.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 27.
viewers’ perception of images and their relationship to everyday objects. His choice of a German word in this work is significant to his stance on incorporating nationalistic imagery in his paintings. He not only rejects the imagery of a national Czech identity, but rejects the Czech language itself in favor of German. This choice seems to be an ideological reversal of the efforts of the 19th century revival to preserve the Czech language and construct a Czech visual identity in the face of a German cultural onslaught. Merta therefore not only turns away from contemporary symbols of a specifically Czech culture, but also reevaluates historical symbols of a constructed non-German identity.

Visually, Merta obviously distances himself and his work from the imagery of dissent in the pre-1989 era. He also voices strong opinions about the contemporary movement away from nationalistic imagery in favor of an international perspective. His interview with artist and curator Daniel Pitín in the Prague Biennale 4 catalogue is particularly revealing. Merta explains quite simply that “in today’s democracy… an artistic position is never clearly given.” He explains that the pluralistic nature of the global contemporary art world makes it impossible for a nation that participates in that art world to define itself in terms of any one artistic style. Merta elaborates this statement by arguing that post-Communist art contains “more gender, explicit sexuality, social projects, politics. International language, open forms, connecting with the surrounding world, linear and non-committing, along with the desire to once again change the spiritual and social reality…. How am I to have a unifying feeling from that?” This question, printed in the catalogue of a biennial whose mission is precisely to define a unified style amongst Czech artists, suggests a serious disconnect between the attitude of

155 Jan Merta, as quoted in Daniel Pitín, “Common Enemy,” Politi, Prague Biennale 4/Prague Biennale Photo 1, 28.
156 Ibid, 30.
contemporary artists and the nationalistic goals of the Prague Biennale. Merta does not have the hostile reaction towards the pluralism of post-1989 Czech art that is voiced by critics like McKay. Instead, Merta comments:

On the contrary I welcome diversity, openness and insecurity as a highly constructive state…. It would be difficult to offer Europe a national specialty of sorts – or a Prague- or Brno-school one for that matter. And I’m not at all bothered by this. We only have to make sure the art is of high quality.  

Merta not only accepts the loss of a unified national identity, but welcomes it. According to him, this opening up to different options of artistic expression has allowed for a greater diversity in Czech art that makes the nation’s work as a whole more interesting and significant in a global context.

The artist Josef Bolf has a similar reaction to the post-1989 dissolution of a national visual identity. Bolf is one of the most popular of the younger generation of Czech artists, and enjoys a positive international reputation. His work was featured prominently in Prague Biennale 4, and he frequently exhibits his work internationally through the prominent Hunt Kastner Gallery in Prague. He is quickly becoming recognizable as the representative of a new wave of Czech painting. His work addresses the hidden horrors of childhood, as in *School Entrance* [fig. 3.10], or of comic strip stories, as in *Burning Car* [fig. 3.11]. He typically uses a combination of light pinks and dark grey tones in his paintings, in order to highlight the juxtaposition of and fine line between innocence and deep depression. Bolf argues that his viewers do not tire of the

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157 Brno is the biggest city in Moravia, and the second largest in the Czech Republic.
158 Jan Merta, as quoted in Daniel Pitín, 28-30.
same trauma scenes because they contain a universal fear and memory of the childhood experience.159

Bolf insists upon this universality of his work, and rejects the implication that it is representative of a more general movement in contemporary Czech art. This is a particularly striking assertion coming from an artist who himself has often exhibited outside the Czech Republic as a typical Czech artist,160 and whose work is prominently featured in the Prague Biennale. Indeed, his painting *Playground* [fig. 3.12] which was exhibited in Prague Biennale 4 contains much of the imagery of the ‘dissident’ movements: dark, shadowy, and ambiguous figures; jagged lines cutting through the composition; and the watchful gaze of ominous animals. This work can easily be interpreted in terms of the oppositional imagery of oppression that was common in the ‘unofficial’ art of the 1970s and 1980s, and that contemporary institutions have attempted to harness as a Czech national identity. But Bolf’s insistence that his work is not associated with nationalistic themes but instead explores the universality of human experience contradicts the assertion of institutions like the Prague Biennale that such a national identity in fact exists.

Artist Pavel Šmíd is also vocal about this contradiction, and the misinterpretation of his work by art institutions that wish to define him as a typically Czech artist. Šmíd’s work addresses themes of restlessness, instability, and a disrupted sense of security. He often uses banal subjects or topics but depicts them in a violent or harsh manner, such as his series of three paintings in Prague Biennale 4 with the mundane titles of *In the*
Morning, In the Afternoon, and In the Evening [fig. 3.13]. His work, like that of Bolf, could easily be defined in terms of a national oppositional imagery due to its juxtaposition of harsh violence with everyday actions or activities, a theme that was explored by ‘dissident’ artists. Šmíd’s work is, in fact, appropriated to represent contemporary Czech painting in an exhibition in Prague Biennale 4 entitled Short List 09: 12 Painters from Czech Republic. But Šmíd himself is aggressive about denying his role in forming or participating in a national art, and even denies that such an art exists. He writes angrily:

[What] is called "Western" influence is in fact a return to normalcy…. If an art critic looks for meaning and roots in nationalist art from the 19th century, it is indicative of his lack of ability. We, I think the Czechs, only benefit from links with cultural influences upon which we have always relied... Whether [there is] the emergence of a "Bohemian" art is completely irrelevant.161

Where Ian McKay defined Western influence as the death of a unique Czech art, Šmíd describes it as a reopening to the cultural exchanges and international influence without which Czech art cannot survive. He rejects the efforts of institutions to construct a national identity based on 19th century Czechoslovakism, or even based on the drastic events of 1989. Perhaps most importantly, he describes the very existence of a national art as “irrelevant.” As a practicing artist in the post-Communist Czech Republic, Šmíd negates the importance of preserving a national identity in one brief word. He, like Bolf, Merta, and countless other contemporary artists, not only rejects the inclusion of his own work within this dialogue of nationalism, but also denies the significance of the concept of nationalism itself. While the Prague Biennale and other institutions strive to maintain a national identity that can uniquely represent the Czech Republic, the very artists whom

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161 Pavel Šmíd, e-mail interview, July 31, 2009. Translated from the original Czech by the author.
they represent and define as quintessentially Czech reject this construction of nationalism.

There is clearly no consensus between institutions and artists on the importance of forming a Czech visual identity. The leaders of national institutions and the Prague Biennale want to define a national identity in order to distinguish the art production of the young Czech Republic from that of other countries; meanwhile, artists reject the notion that such a constructed nationalism should even exist. As institutions attempt to appropriate and reinterpret artists’ work in order to define a potentially non-existent national unity, deep tensions between these two forces emerge. This tension becomes more pressing when one considers the important question: for whom is the construction of nationalism being created? In the case of the Prague Biennale, an international biennial exhibition that grapples with the tension between the local and global, it seems reasonable to assume that a Czech national identity is being presented to an international audience. While this is common for such biennial shows, it becomes problematic when we remember that the Prague Biennale is itself organized, sponsored, and promoted by the editors of an Italian art magazine. If this influential exhibition is organized for a foreign audience and by a foreign company, then the question arises: what part of the identity that it promulgates is in fact Czech?

The International Perspective

It has already been noted that the number of international biennials has been, in the words of philosopher Thierry de Duve, “increasing at a crazy pace,” with estimates
ranging between 80 and 140 locations around the world.\textsuperscript{162} The impetus for this widespread growth is generally thought to be modern globalization, in which the borders hampering trade were broken down and culture first began to be freely exported as a marketable good. De Duve explains the impetus for this phenomenon when he argues that “there is no question that the reasons for the proliferation of art biennials are mainly, if not exclusively, economic. Culture sells, attracts tourists, generates economic activity and is an integral part of the entertainment industry.”\textsuperscript{163} An international biennial became the easiest way to ‘sell’ national culture, for, as De Duve contends, “art, identified as contemporary visual art, is the one sector within the culture industry that is the most dynamic and enjoys the greatest freedom.”\textsuperscript{164} As biennials worked to juxtapose the increasingly accessible global with the local, as in the Prague Biennale, the locations of these exhibitions became powerful centers in what De Duve called the \textit{glocal} economy. The wave of biennials became a kind of competition for significance and distinction of the city in the glocal world: inspired by the potential for economic gain, they sought to establish their position in an international art world, while simultaneously promoting the culture of their respective cities and countries.

Although most of these biennials, like the Prague Biennale, have been established in recent years, this tradition of the glocal in international exhibitions has a long history, especially in the Western world. The oldest and largest biennial, the Venice Biennale, was founded in 1895 as a tribute to the marriage anniversary of King Umberto I and Queen Margherita. Originally designed to be a purely national exhibition, the plan for the

\textsuperscript{162} Thierry de Duve, “The Glocal and the Singuniversal: Reflections on Art and Culture in the Global World,” in De Duve & Groys, et. al., 45.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid, 46.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
The goals of the Venice Biennale from the very beginning were therefore threefold: to glorify the Municipality of Venice with a large-scale gift from the city to the king and queen; to honor Italy with a showcase of the nation’s greatest artists; and to position both within an international context by inviting foreigners to partake in the exhibition.

While the inclusion of international artists was an afterthought in the planning of the Venice Biennale, it soon became one of the greatest strengths in its development. The Palazzo dell’Esposizione, the original building for the biennial, was soon supplemented by national pavilions in the Giardini where it is located. Belgium built the first national pavilion in 1907, and within the next five years it was followed by Hungary, Great Britain, Germany, Sweden, and France. These pavilions were the sites for one-man shows of the respective nation’s invited artist – a kind of shrine to the national identity that each country wished to present on an international stage. In fact, it is important to note that Czechoslovakia built its own pavilion in 1926, only eight years after the creation of the country, two years before Mucha completed his Slav Epic, and at the height of a national discourse amongst both artists and institutions about the formation of a Czech national identity. According to Benedict Anderson, the exhibition of national art on such a stage was directly connected to the 19th century European blitz of nation-building and the need to identify each state as unique. He writes:

The internal logic of a world of nations, understood at one level as a world of fundamentally similar, co-operating and rivalrous entities, also meant that nation states were required to display, for one another, their parallel differences…. And, of course, one had to have national handicrafts,

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166 Ibid, 52.
167 Ibid, 111.
literature, arts, dances, etc. for display – in international competitions, Nobel Prize sweepstakes, exhibitions, trade fairs, and the rapidly ballooning struggle for advantage in the world-market of tourism.\footnote{Anderson, “Staging Antimodernism in the Age of High Capitalist Modernism,” 98.}

As the forerunner of such international displays of national artistic identities, the Venice Biennale thus set a precedent for the understanding of the biennial exhibition as a platform for nations to define themselves as culturally unique and significant in an international context.\footnote{International art exhibitions actually have an even longer history, dating back to the World Fair phenomenon of the late 19th century. Like the modern biennial, World Fairs and Exhibitions such as those in London, Chicago, and Philadelphia presented world cultures in terms of their distinct (and often highly stereotyped) identities and characteristics. For more information on this tradition, refer to Robert W. Rydell, All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions, 1876-1916, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).}

The 2003 Prague Biennale followed this long precedent of the biennial as a platform for the definition and promotion of unique national styles to a global audience. But after the falling-out between Politi and Knížák and the failure of Knížák’s government-supported IBCA, the Czech identity that was being promoted at the Flash Art-sponsored Prague Biennale was formed almost entirely by foreigners.\footnote{Although Helena Kontová, Politi’s wife and co-organizer of the Prague Biennale, was born in Prague, she lives and works in Milan where she has been an editor for Flash Art since 1979. While she herself may be Czech-born, she has been removed from Czech society and culture for over thirty years. This separation from her homeland and her work in the internationally-minded magazine implies that she is not as invested in fostering a Czech national identity for herself or for the arts as a current Prague citizen may be.} The official institutions of the Czech Republic lost out to an Italian-based, globally-minded company, and the responsibility to shape a national identity left the hands of the leaders of Czech institutions.

The presence and involvement of Western institutions in the cultural affairs of the so-called “former East” has been strongly criticized, particularly in the context of the biennials which are purported to represent the host nation and city. Critic Rainer Metzger analyzes this phenomenon in his essay Go East – but where exactly? He contends that in
sponsoring exhibitions in or from ‘the former East,’’ Western institutions continue to engage in an ‘us versus them’ binary which is divided not so much by space as by a stretch of time in which the West is considered more advanced than the East. The increasingly common representation of Eastern cities by or in the West, according to Metzger, is based on this perceived divide in which the supposedly advanced institutions in the center reach out to the ‘struggling’ artists of the periphery. Citing a 2003 exhibition in Vienna’s Künstlerhaus entitled New Art from Bratislava, Metzger describes the problematic nature of this interpretation of Central and Eastern Europe:

The Slovak capital is no further from Vienna than is Sankt Pölten, the capital of the province of Lower Austria. Now, if the head of Sankt Pölten’s department of culture put together an exhibition of works by artists from his home town to be shown in the Artothek, and if he used the same words, arguments and strategies to describe the artists at the exhibition’s [New Art from Bratislava] opening, this would be a case of downright provincialism. Instead of, what’s the case here, a good deed.171

The promotion by Western nations of the periphery is not, as is often argued, a good will gesture towards their Eastern neighbors, but an act of condescension which assumes the primitivism and limited capabilities of the existing national institutions.

Metzger places the Prague Biennale specifically within this problematic relationship between institutions of the West and East. He argues that the existence of the Prague Biennale and its promotion of Czech art “doesn’t actually compensate for the exclusion of a long neglected art scene but rather proves how far the tentacles of a global market can reach.”172 According to Metzger, the Prague Biennale is just another example of the West’s attitude of superiority and its attempt to extend its sphere of influence to ‘the former East’. But this issue becomes even more severe as an Eastern nation

172 Ibid., 47.
sacrifices its autonomy to Western intervention, as is the case in the Prague Biennale. In his essay for the *Prague Biennale 1* catalogue, Tomas Vlcek admits that “Prague has tended to experience the fate of a marginal culture within the so-called ‘advanced’ cultures of Europe.”\(^{173}\) The goal of the Prague Biennale, then, is to bring Prague and the rest of the Czech Republic out of the margins and into the ‘advanced’ art world, understood to be centralized in Western Europe. Under the combined efforts of Politi and Knížák this was a joint enterprise between the West and the East, the global and the domestic. But after their parting of ways and the failure of the IBCA, the fate of Czech art rested solely in the hands of a Western institution, intent on ‘rescuing’ Prague and its culture from the periphery and allowing it to become a part of ‘advanced’ society while simultaneously solidifying its peripheral ‘Other’ status.

This shift towards a foreign definition of a national art has also been felt by Czech artists, as is articulated by artist Ivan Mečl. In his 2006 essay *Post-Disaster: A Confession of a Veteran*, he mourns the abandonment in the 21st century of earlier innovations in Czech art. Mečl differs from contemporary scholars, like McKay, in that he heralded the post-1989 years as a time of great growth and improvement in the Czech art scene, when artists, curators, and theorists enthusiastically organized to create an art scene free of the Communist regime. He identifies the reason for the 21st century reversal of these efforts as a lack of the funding needed to continue large-scale initiatives, as well as the filling of top positions in the Ministry of Culture with “bohemians without a clear philosophy of art.”\(^{174}\) He even blames Knížák (albeit obliquely) for the failure to support or identify a strong Czech art scene when he notes that even “the top exhibition and collection

\(^{173}\) Vlcek, 12.

institutions [the National Gallery] is led by an artist emeritus [Knížák] who changes it into a machine of presenting and promoting himself and pushing his own interests."175 The new leaders of Czech culture, according to Mečl, have abandoned the possibility of its revival in order to follow self-interested pursuits, leading to the dissolution of an innovative Czech art.

Mečl also significantly argues that, while domestic art leaders abandon Czech art, international institutions have taken up the cause to the even further detriment of the Czech art scene. He argues that after the turn of the century,

The activity on the “big” independent scene was taken over by foreigners according to the model “I have the money so I can do whatever I want.” Sometimes it works, sometimes not. In most cases it looks like helpless chaos with the assistance of local curators of a weaker character.176

This description aptly describes the Prague Biennale: a large, foreign institution that is able to attract artists and curators – and trump domestic efforts – with its superior financial resources. According to Mečl, such exhibitions destroyed the once-vibrant Czech art scene by making it impossible for national institutions to compete. The result is an insipid, characterless art where an innovative and, most importantly, independent art scene had once existed.

For both artists and arts institutions within the Czech Republic, the redefinition and exhibition of Czech art by a foreign institution is highly problematic. It not only ‘Otherizes’ Czech culture on the whole, comparing it to the more ‘advanced’ West which is supporting it, but also makes it impossible for local entities to construct their own national identity, independent of international influence. Because every form of

175 Ibid. Knížák’s appointment to the position of Director of the National Gallery was met with skepticism which escalated into open criticism when he used the position to collect and promote his own work from the 1960s-1970s. This background knowledge makes Mečl’s otherwise indirect critique extremely pointed.

176 Mečl, 23.
nationalism is in fact a fabricated and inorganic concept, it can only have real power within the nation-state through the investment of its citizens into that constructed ideology. It was this investment in the 19th century revival and after the 1918 founding of Czechoslovakia that ensured the successful formation of nationalism in those periods, as citizens, artists, and arts institutions joined together in this construction. Without a similar kind of local involvement and enthusiasm in a post-1989 redefinition of Czech nationalism, it seems that any unified idea of a national identity cannot be formed.

But to a Western audience, the view of contemporary Czech art and identity is drastically different. Foreign critics continue to write of Czech art as an identifiable and unique entity that could be recognized for its national association. It is significant to note that such observations are almost exclusive to non-Czech writers. After all, Ian McKay, one of the biggest advocates for the 1980s ‘dissident’ art and one of the loudest lamenters of the post-1989 ‘death of Czech culture’ was not Czech, but British.177 His cut-and-dry attitude towards shifts in the understanding of a Czech identity is rarely articulated in such definitive terms within the Czech Republic, but is often echoed by foreign observers. The crucial question then arises: what exactly is Czech art and nationalism to non-Czechs?

Foreign audiences watching the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe through the mass media saw the inspirational uprising of a united people overthrowing its totalitarian shackles and fomenting political and social revolution. The language of the media supported this interpretation. According to a BBC report of the fall of the Berlin Wall,
“the unassailable edifice of communism has been *leveled by the power of the people.*”

Media images of the momentous event and its aftermath [fig. 3.14] became the iconic representations of the victory of Western values – democracy, freedom of expression, and the power of the free market – over those of the oppressive Eastern regimes. In Czechoslovakia, Pavel Štecha’s documentary photographs of the Velvet Revolution became world-famous for the same reason [figs. 3.15 & 3.16]. British writer Gregory McLaughlin notes that such photographs, continuously shown in Western media sources, “told a story of ‘How the East was won’ by the West.”

This narrative not only paints a vivid image of the dissident and revolutionary nature of the Czech and other Eastern European people, it defines that image based on Western interventionism. The end of the Cold War was understood as the triumph of Western values over Communism, and the Eastern European people who had ‘leveled’ the totalitarian regimes had been acting in support of Western ideals.

Western audiences therefore already had an investment in the narrative of the Velvet Revolution, and in the ‘dissident’ movements that had made it possible. It is little surprise, then, that ‘dissident’ art became so closely associated in the West with post-1989 Czech art. In her catalogue essay for the 1989 exhibition *Dialogue: Prague/Los Angeles*, American art historian Kim Levin wrote of Czech art that “in a place brimming with veiled symbolic allusion, it was hard not to interpret things [artworks] politically.”

This statement seems to imply that a politicized reading of Czech artworks was imposed on them where it was not obviously evident due to their political and social context. The

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179 McLaughlin, 189.
presence of an imagery of dissent was expected from a nation that had produced such a revolution – and, perhaps more significantly, that had produced such dramatic photographs of that revolution. Indeed, another essay by Zdenka Gabalová for the same exhibition notes that the lack of this expected imagery was met with surprise from Western viewers. She notes that, “many foreign visitors were surprised and often disappointed to see that the art of dissent… was generally far from being politicized.”¹⁸¹ When the West finally had unobstructed access to the famous ‘dissident’ art of Czechoslovakia, their expectations were shattered by the absence of the anticipated oppositional imagery. Despite this disappointment, the American-born Levin’s insistence that “it was hard not to interpret things politically” trumped that of Czech-born Gabalová that such a reading was a gross misinterpretation, and Western viewers continued to look for the revolutionary images which they had seen constantly in the media.

This Western obsession with the 1989 images of revolution continued well after the Czechoslovaks had moved beyond their ‘dissident’ past to pursue different artistic concepts and movements. James Aulich explains that this fixation of the West on the past events of ‘the former East’ was due to the momentous characterization of the Eastern revolutions in the media. He notes that “by 1992 many [Czechoslovaks] were bored or irritated by the naivety of Westerners, like myself, who marveled at the historical enormity of the events that had taken place.”¹⁸² This audience’s understanding of these momentous events was linked almost exclusively to its knowledge of Czech visual culture, represented through the revolutionary photographs of Štecha and others. The Western interest in the Velvet Revolution and the new culture that developed after it

¹⁸² Aulich, 65.
therefore became synonymous with an almost exclusive interest in ‘dissident’ culture.

Aulich describes the frustrating nature of this reading from the perspective of Czechoslovak artists by explaining the repercussions of the Western attitude:

To carry out an investigation into the cultural effects of the political changes was necessarily to be involved in a treasure hunt for material defined within a myth of the dissident artist. To do so is to cast the world into a political ghetto and to deny the artists the independence they seek.183 The Western reading of an exclusively dissident Czech visual identity limits the potential for Czech artists to expand their work into other non-politicized themes or movements. The fact that this limited foreign perspective of Czech art persisted even after Czech artists had abandoned pre-1989 imagery suggests that the West is reading a national visual identity that does not actually exist.

The Prague Biennale encourages this Western (mis)interpretation of a Czech national identity in its continued promotion of a specifically Czech style of contemporary art. Further, it publicizes this definition of Czech art to the West through the pages of Flash Art, which is distributed in 87 countries around the world.184 As a foreign-sponsored entity with an eye towards the West, the Prague Biennale therefore becomes something other than a platform for the exhibition of contemporary Czech art. It becomes the promulgator of a Czech identity that is written by the West and for the West. The oppositional voices of Czech artists like Mečl who deny the existence of a unified identity are ignored in favor of satisfying the West’s need to classify ‘the former East’ as a less advanced Other, to see the victory of Western ideals over totalitarianism, and to continue to support these ideals as the force which will drag Czech visual arts out of the

183 Ibid.
184 Flashartonline.com
periphery and into the center. It is with these high-minded and problematic goals in mind that the Prague Biennale was founded and according to which it continues to operate today. Under the forceful guidance of the Prague Biennale, a unified narrative of a Czech national visual identity will continue to thrive internationally even as it ceases to exist within the Czech Republic’s own borders.
Conclusion: A Czech Identity for the Czechs

Answers to the questions surrounding the formation of the Czech Republic are often sought in the earlier formation of Czechoslovakia. As Pánková notes, “Czechoslovak history has two important dates – 1918 and 1989 – which mark two remarkable and very similar events: the formation of a democratic state and society and the overthrow of a totalitarian government.” These events are in fact similar not only in their nature and political importance, but also in the need to construct a new national identity that would be appropriate for each new democratic nation. To draw too fine a parallel, however, is to disregard the very different issues that arose with each instance of national identity formation, and the fall-out from those issues.

We have seen that, following the 1918 formation of Czechoslovakia, the building of a national identity was a common goal amongst both arts institutions and artists. While institutional leaders and art historians constructed the concept of Czechoslovakism to define the new country as distinct amongst other European nations, artists, and most notably Alfons Mucha, actively engaged in these efforts, and sought to provide a cultural history, mythology, and style for the Slavic peoples. Indeed, these goals were not only parallel but actually unified through Mucha’s employment in government commissions. As artists and institutions joined forces to define a visual identity for the new Czechoslovakia, an imperative after nearly a century of the Germanization of Czech culture, the construction of Czechoslovakism became a relatively easy task and its success was ensured.

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The difficulties in forming a cohesive visual identity after 1989 were due to this very lack of a joint effort between artists and institutions that contributed to the success of Czechoslovakism. In a globalized world in which artists are increasingly ‘nomadic,’ easily able to cross borders to participate in biennials and other international exhibitions all over the world, there is little incentive for artists to maintain nationalistic ideologies in their work. From their perspective the nation-state has been established, is not under threat, and holds a reasonably powerful (although, to some, still peripheral) status in an international context. Indeed, in recent years the Czech Republic has experienced great economic and political growth, and in 2009 even took over the European Union (EU) presidency. While Mucha’s Czechoslovakia was a fledgling state that still needed to be defined and justified, artists today perceive the Czech Republic as a well-established and prosperous nation. In light of this prosperity, they no longer feel that they are beholden to nationalistic interests, and are free to pursue their international interests in their work.

From the perspective of arts institutions, however, the new Czech Republic still needs to be justified in terms of its unique cultural identity. The breaking up of the Czech and Slovak peoples into two nations must be legitimated through an argument concerning the distinct visual arts tradition of each ethnic community. This imperative becomes even more pronounced with the rise of the EU. Philip Schlesinger argues that the formation of the EU is not so much a conglomeration of existing nations, but rather the construction of a new European state. This becomes problematic when we remember that the building of a nation-state is always linked to the forming of a sense of nationalism – or, in the case of the EU, a European cultural identity that threatens to supersede the individual

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186 Geilen.
187 Schlesinger, 319.
identities of each country. As Schlesinger notes, “the difficult search for a transcendent unity by the EC [European Community] – one which must recognise component differences – throws the nation-state into question from above, arguably contributing to crises of national identity.” The integration of the Czech Republic into the EU in 2004 thus gave arts institutional leaders more incentive to preserve and closely define a specifically Czech visual identity that could transcend an over-arching European culture, just as artists were pulling away from nationalistic visualization.

The Prague Biennale, founded just one year before the Czech Republic’s entrance into the EU, is embedded within this schism between artists and institutions. But as an international exhibition – both in the sense of its foreign organizers and its global audience – it is not invested solely in nationalistic concerns. It is, of course, engaged in constructing a Czech visual identity that is distinct and internationally significant. But the goal of this construction is no longer to unite the country under a common culture, as it was after 1918. The point now becomes to define Czech nationalism specifically for an international audience, and to present a Czech visual identity in biennials and other international stages that can compete with other European cultures and even maintain its individuality in a Pan-European state. While the goal is still to construct and legitimate nationalism, the target has moved focus more onto the international.

The Prague Biennale is therefore simultaneously engaged in national and global interests, as it promotes a Czech identity outside Czech borders while ignoring the protests of the internationally-minded artists themselves. This refusal to acknowledge the concerns of these artists is highly problematic, as the Prague Biennale is essentially arguing for a kind of Czechness that does not in fact exist. The Western audience looks

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188 Ibid, 325.
towards the periphery and sees in Prague a unified ‘dissident’ art, which maintains its strength through the historical roots of a “‘national popular’ sentiment preserved in a radical memory,” but which actually faded out of practice almost immediately after 1989 and now exists only in national memory. The role of national visual identity formation has been taken away from the artists who are supposed to produce this national style, and given instead to a biennial that rewrites and reinterprets contemporary Czech art to fit the Western imagination of Czechness. This schism between the actual work of Czech artists and its presentation on an international stage will continue to exist as long as the Prague Biennale keeps its eye turned towards the West. As long as the biennial tradition continues to operate within the framework of the *glocal*; as long as the leaders of the Czech Republic and its art institutions feel the urge to define their individuality within a larger European Union and global context; as long as the West views Prague as ‘the former East’ and insists upon dragging its artistic tradition out of the periphery, ‘saving’ it despite the protests and alarm of Czech artists themselves – any sense of a unified Czech visual nationalism will exist only in the minds of outsiders, and a Czech identity for and by the Czechs will remain unattainable.

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189 Homi Bhabha, “Narrating the Nation,” in Hutchinson & Smith, 308.
Fig. 1.1. National Theatre, Prague.

Fig. 1.2. National Museum, Prague.

Fig. 1.3. Alfons Mucha, *Gismonda*.
Fig. 1.4. Alfons Mucha, *Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy in the Great Moravian Empire*.

Fig. 1.5. Alfons Mucha, *The School of the Bohemian Brothers in Ivančice*.

Fig. 1.6. Alfons Mucha, *After the Battle of Grunwaldu*.

Fig. 1.7. Alfons Mucha, *Master Jan Hus Preaching at the Chapel of Bethlehem*.
Fig. 1.8. Alfons Mucha, *The Slavs in Their Original Homeland*.

Fig. 1.9. Alfons Mucha, *The Apotheosis of the Slavs*.

Fig. 1.10. Josef Mánes, *My Fatherland*.

Fig. 1.11. Alfons Mucha, *The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree*.
Fig. 1.12. Alfons Mucha, 8th Sokol Festival poster.

Fig. 1.13. Alfons Mucha, Design for the central part of a stained-glass window in St. Vitus Cathedral, Prague.
Fig. 1.14. Alfons Mucha, Hradčany variety A postage stamp.

Fig. 1.15. Alfons Mucha, Czechoslovak 10 crown bank note.

Fig. 1.16. Veletržní Palace, Prague.

Fig. 2.1. Geli Korzhev, *Picking Up the Banner*. 
Fig. 2.2. Arkady Plastov, *Tractor Drivers at Supper.*

Fig. 2.3. Arkady Plastov, *Portrait of Stalin.*

Fig. 2.4. Lev Šimák, *Plowing Limits.*

Fig. 2.5. Lev Šimák, *CPCz Congress.*
Fig. 2.6. Mikuláš Medek, *Big Meal*.

Fig. 2.7. Jiří Beránek, *Outcry*.

Fig. 2.8. Jitka Válová, *The Conflagration*.

Fig. 2.9. Jitka Válová, *All Our Deeds are Being Recorded*. 
Fig. 2.10. Květa Válová, *Wonder and Surprise*.

Fig. 2.11. Květa Válová, *Trapped Dog*.

Fig. 2.12. Jaroslav Róna, *Crucified*.

Fig. 2.13. Jaroslav Róna, *Watchmen*.
Fig. 2.14. Květa Válová, *They Are Leaving at Last*.

Fig. 3.1. Miloš Šejn, Interaction with the landscape, Drawing on Mt. Luční.

Fig. 3.2. Interior of Karlín Hall, Prague Biennale 4.

Fig. 3.3. David Černý, *Brown-noser*. 
Fig. 3.4. Stanislav Kolibal, *Ironic Monument*.

Fig. 3.5. Petr Štembera, documentary photograph of *Cinema*.

Fig. 3.6. Jan Merta, *Slum*.

Fig. 3.7. Jan Merta, *Red Slum*. 
Fig. 3.8. Jan Merta, *Echt (Genuine).*

Fig. 3.9. René Magritte, *The Treason of Images (This Is Not a Pipe).*

Fig. 3.10. Josef Bolf, *School Entrance.*

Fig. 3.11. Josef Bolf, *Burning Car.*

Fig. 3.12. Josef Bolf, *Playground.*
Fig. 3.13. Pavel Šmid, *In the Morning, In the Afternoon, and In the Evening.*

Fig. 3.14. Lionel Cironneau, photograph from *The Associated Press,* November 12, 1989.

Fig. 3.15. Pavel Štecha, *Prague, November 20, 1989.*

Fig. 3.16. Pavel Štecha, *Prague, Velvet Revolution.*
Appendix A: Timeline of Events

1526 Ferdinand I ascends the throne, integrating the Czech lands into the Hapsburg Monarchy.

1618 The Czechs rebel against Hapsburg rule, triggering the Thirty Years’ War.

1620 November 8: The Bohemian armies are defeated at the Battle of White Mountain by Emperor Ferdinand II, restoring Catholicism to Bohemia and purging the Protestant nobility from Prague.

1627 The Revised Ordinance of the Land establishes Hapsburg absolutism in Bohemia. German becomes the official language.

1648 The Treaty of Westphalia ends the Thirty Years’ War and confirms the incorporation of Bohemia into the Hapsburg Empire.

1789 A Czech newspaper is published, marking the first mass reading material in the Czech language in 170 years and the beginning of the Czech National Revival.

1848 The Czechs convene the first Slavic Congress to discuss the possibility of political consolidation of Austrian Slavs, including Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Ruthenians, Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs.

1848-1849 Prague Uprising and the European Revolutions

1867 Hapsburg Emperor Franz Joseph negotiates with Hungarian nobility to form the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

1897 The Ordinance of April 5, equalizing the German and Czech languages in Bohemia, is signed in Austria-Hungary.

1914-1918 World War I

1918 Founding of the Republic of Czechoslovakia.

1938 September 29: Germany, Britain, France and Italy sign the Munich Agreement, seceding the Czechoslovak Sudetenland to Germany. October 1: Sudetenland is invaded by German troops.

1939 March 14: Slovakia secedes from Czechoslovakia and becomes a separate pro-Nazi state. March 15: Bohemia and Moravia are invaded by German troops.

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1939-1945 World War II

1945 Soviet troops liberate Czechoslovakia.

1946 Czechoslovak Communist Party (CPCz) leader Klement Gottwald becomes prime minister in power-sharing government following national elections.


1955 March 15: The Warsaw Pact is signed by the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania as a military response to West Germany’s integration into NATO.

1960 Czechoslovakia becomes Czechoslovak Socialist Republic under new constitution.

1968 January: Alexander Dubček becomes CPCz leader and embarks on program of liberalizing reforms known as the Prague Spring.
August 21: Soviet-led Warsaw Pact troops invade Czechoslovakia. Dubček is forced to end the reforms.

1977 A group of dissidents including playwright Václav Havel publish Charter 77, calling for restoration of civil and political rights.


1989 November 9: Fall of the Berlin Wall.
November 17: Prague university students organize a peaceful protest which is brutally repressed by the police.
November 19: Civic Forum, a broad anti-Communist coalition, is formed.
November 20: A strike in all universities begins.
November 27: A mass general strike forces the CPCz leadership to engage in negotiations with the Civic Forum.
December 10: Husák resigns his presidency.
December 28: Dubček is elected chairman of Federal Assembly and Václav Havel is elected president, completing the Velvet Revolution and the end of the Communist regime.

1990 Country renamed Czech and Slovak Federative Republic.

1991 February: Civic Forum disbanded. Members form two new parties, the conservative Civic Democratic Party (CDP) and the liberal Civic Movement.
June: Soviet forces complete withdrawal.

1992

June: Due to a deadlock in negotiations on the privatization of the public sector, Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar and Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus agree to the separation of Slovakia from Czechoslovakia. Havel resigns as president after Slovak separatist parties block his re-election. November: Federal Assembly adopts legislation enabling the federation to disband.

1993

January 1: Czechoslovakia completes the “velvet divorce” and splits into the two nations of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Havel is re-elected as president of the Czech Republic.

1999

March: Czech Republic becomes a member of NATO.

2003

Prague Biennale 1 opens, co-organized by Giancarlo Politi & Helena Kontová, directors of Italian magazine *Flash Art*, and Milan Knížák, director of the National Gallery.

2004

May 1: The Czech Republic joins the European Union.

2007

The Czech Republic joins the EU’s Schengen Treaty free movement zone.

2009

The Czech Republic takes over EU presidency.
Appendix B: Maps\textsuperscript{191}

Map 1. Europe in 1914, showing the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia as part of Austria-Hungary.

Map 2. Czechoslovakia as it existed in the inter-war years, showing the position of Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia.

Map 3. Europe today, showing the Czech Republic as it was established on January 1, 1993.
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