

by Jindřich Chalupecký

# art insanity crime

More and more often today public indignation is being aroused by avant-garde manifestations, and in many cases these have been jeopardized and even banned by police intervention. It is enough to announce them and a wave of displeasure is aroused, an implicit threat. In July of this year, Jean-Jacques Lebel intended to hold an avant-garde festival at Saint-Tropez; two months before its opening, *Le Figaro* carried an article which was an appeal to the local police: "La police locale participera en connaissance à cette belle manifestation. Si l'on n'arrête pas les organisateurs pour attentat à la pudeur ou outrage aux mœurs, ils seront poursuivis pour vagabondage." And the article went on to depict the orgies which were anticipated.

It would be easy to dismiss such indignation with ridicule or condescension. But in reality a serious moral and legal problem is involved here. To what extent are we dealing with deliberate conscious creation, to what extent with mere immorality, and to what extent with asocial or anti-social behavior? The question concerns the avant-garde movement all over the world, in Czechoslovakia as well, which has a long series of quite original avant-garde manifestations.

From 1949 to 1957, Vladimír Boudník held a number of provocative art demonstrations on the streets of Prague; in 1962 and 1963, Milan Knížák began his public art demonstrations here, and since 1964 has been carrying out demonstrations with his friends which in essence are group plays in which both invited guests and

passers-by take part; more and more he has been seeking to transcend the entire distinction between "art" and "life." Noteworthy is the fact that these manifestations have been carried out spontaneously, without information about parallel developments in other countries. In Bratislava, the regional capital of Slovakia, Stanislav Filko and Alex Mlynárcik sent out invitations in April 1965 to attend a "happsoc," the one subject of which was "Reality Bratislava," and went on at the end of the year to create a similar demonstration, "The Seven Days of Creation," which Filko later supplemented with a "Third Happsoc — the Altar of Contemporaneity." In 1966, Mlynárcik began his "permanent manifestations," in which he put together three-dimensional objects, inviting on-lookers to draw on them; these palimpsests he later exhibited in 1966 and 1967 in Paris at the Cazenava Gallery. In the autumn of 1966 he went on to stage a "Second Permanent Manifestation" in a Bratislava pissoir.

At first almost unnoticed, with the passage of time these manifestations have become a subject of greater and greater interest to the press and police, as has been the case all over the world, and I have several times taken it upon myself to speak out in their defense. The present article deals with the last-mentioned "Manifestation" of Mlynárcik.

In autumn 1966, Alex Mlynárcik, a Bratislava artist, decided to fit out a pissoir in the center of the city for a three-day period. He set up seven large rectangular mirrors at an angle in the gutter of the urinal, and fixed slogans on them which proclaimed these mirrors to be dedicated to St. Anthony, Hieronymus Bosch, Gabriel Chevallier, Godot, Michelangelo, Pistoletto, Stanislav Milko and CO/NH<sub>2</sub>/<sub>2</sub> (muriatic acid); on the opposite side he arranged tablets and pencils in the expectation that users might write or draw; over the entrance

he placed a large banner announcing his "Second Permanent Manifestation," to be held October 1 to 3, 1966, from 6:20 a.m. to 9:10 p.m. He distributed and sent out invitations, especially to participants in the Congress of the International Association of Art Critics, which was then being held in Bratislava.

Those who visited the pissoir were placed in an unexpected position. Some smiled distractedly. Some no doubt asked themselves what it could all mean. Some found an outlet in moral indignation. Among these, as chance had it, was the editor of the Bratislava daily *Prace*, and on October 18, that paper carried a long editorial on the subject. "Should not the psychological condition of these people be investigated? . . . Is this a matter of incipient schizophrenia? . . . Should we punish such people? . . . Is some sexual deviation involved? . . . This phenomenon . . . is imported exclusively, it would seem, from the West. . . Originality which borders on bad taste and vulgarity. . . A qualified artist should have enough sense. . ."

In spite of all these reproaches and warnings, no one put Mlynárcik in an asylum or in prison, or even excluded him from the artists' union. But the question remains: If this is not schizophrenia, or perversion, or an act of criminal intent, what, actually, is it? The question is all the more urgent in that various "manifestations" and "provocations" of this kind have been going on all over the world for several decades now. One of the first, if not in fact absolutely the first, such "provocateur" was the Czech writer Jaroslav Hasek, the author of "The Good Soldier Schweik," in his fabled appearances in Prague before World War I. From then on there is an almost unbroken tradition, going through Italian and Russian Futurism, through Dada and Surrealism, and culminating in the extremely varied

phenomena known collectively today as "happenings" or "events."

The creators of these manifestations are all artists. But can we speak of art? The word art implies a skill, and the fact that someone has placed a couple of mirrors in a pissoir certainly takes no special skill. Is it then a kind of scientific experiment? But such experiments derive from no theory and confirm none. Is it mere hooliganism? But those who risk such actions are consciously staking their social position; evidently there is something at issue involving mind or heart which is worth the risk.

What can it be?

My contention is that these are the manifestations of artists, and as manifestations certainly very spontaneous ones, called up by some urgent inner necessity. They have certain traits of an esthetic bent: In Mlynárcik's case the use of mirrors undoubtedly suggests an esthetic element, as well as the whole "staging," which exploits the banality of the place and milieu. But quite lacking, or at least pushed into the background, is the essential characteristic of art, its artificiality. In art we always create an artificial object, a picture, a drama, a musical composition. In this artificial object the author embodies his feelings and experiences and develops them in some new way: He makes the object a locus of his alter ego, creates in it for himself and for others an occasion for fictive existence. Art is then a kind of complement of real life, its compensation, the realization of the unrealizable, the fulfilment of the unfulfilable.

But just this disquiets the modern artist. Is not this fictive character of art an escape from life? Does it not give man a false consolation, take him away from the fulfilment of his life, from real fulfilment? Does art not give man an alibi against life?

Thus there arises the necessity to break down, to destroy, the boundary of art, which means to break down, to destroy the boundary of the art object: to take from it its very artificiality, which sets it apart from real life, to carry out an act of artistic creation in the very midst of living reality — any sort of reality. . This was at the bottom of the experiments of the Futurists, the Dadaists and the Surrealists, and this continues in many avant-garde trends today. But what will become of man if the experience of art is no longer a refuge from life, but must be found in the middle of life? What will man do if he is forced, even in the midst of such a banal act and place as those Mlynárcik chose for his manifestation, to face mirrors, and then draw and write in the bargain?

As early as 1917 Duchamp contributed to the New York Exhibition of Independent Pissior Bowls (the exact English title is still a question), and in 1920, at the Dadaist Exhibition by Arp, Baargeld and Ernst in Cologne, the entrance was through a pissoir. Man Ray has himself photographed with an assemblage in which a toilet seat frames the inscription, "Marteau." What of this?

We are used to the fact that the artistic work takes the reader or spectator far beyond the realities of life. Once Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* brought on a court action; today it is only embarrassing for the censors to cut something out of the repeated scenes of intercourse in Bergman's *Silence*. Less than twenty years ago when the author of the present article reprinted a story from Sartre's *The Wall* in his magazine, he was called "a sink of miasma" in a popular brochure by an influential writer; today the whole book has appeared in Czechoslovakia and no one has taken it into his head to become indignant. It has become clear that this is not pornography, but experience which is

recorded and which acts to move us rather than to shock us only.

Art must dare all and must move especially into places which are forbidden it, into darkness, filth, crime, despair, humiliation. Tragedy is its special realm.

. . . so shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts;  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;  
Of deaths put on by cunning and  
forc'd cause;

so recites Horatio, and we look on with calm. But what if that phantasmic world stepped down from the stage into the auditorium?

It is a great problem which modern art presents. Just as the writings of Baudelaire and Flaubert once appeared in the registers of the courts, so today the caption, "happening," appears on the ledgers — for the time being of the police only, for the most part — in Czechoslovakia as abroad. Art has determined to take upon itself its entire social function and at the same time has become something dangerous. No longer now in its fictive quality only, but in the reality of direct action it intercedes in life. But if the boundary of art and life is disappearing, how then shall we distinguish between the aesthetic on one hand and the irrational and immoral on the other, and in their final consequences between the tragic on one side and insane and criminal on the other?

And yet the boundary is a very precise one. Not only can it be defined in the abstract, but in every case it can be verified concretely.

First of all, art is figurative behavior. What is said, shown or done is never intended to be taken literally. Each thing and each action still mean what they

customarily do for us, but many other things besides. One could say that their lights spread out, that they acquire distant connections, that the whole universe is reborn in them.

Of course, the world of dreams and the world of insanity are equally figurative. Often art and dreams do trade places, and even the esthetic and the psychopathic. But the significance of art rests just in the fact that the artist uses figurative means consciously. The American psychoanalyst Ernst Kris has compared the artist to a sailor who ventures from the *terra firma* of reason onto the sea of insanity and dream, who chooses adventures in another element in the hope that he will surmount them, and with the risk that he will drown in them. Art is controlled madness, which is in fact not madness at all.

Crime too is controlled, completely conscious. But it is never figurative. It has nothing in common with insanity. It is carried out in a world which is fated to remain literal: in that is the tragic poverty of crime. Art inhabits a fairer world: a world which is purposeless and profitless.

And here is another similarity and another distinction. Art, like crime and like insanity, demands freedom for itself — absolute freedom. But the freedom of crime, like the freedom of insanity, ends in formlessness, vanity and extinction. The dialectic of freedom and necessity is thus broken: or neither for the criminal nor for the insane is there either freedom or law: they are left with mere inevitability.

Opposed to them, art makes law its freedom and freedom its law. And if its boundaries are broken, it is not so that they should dissolve into mere boundlessness. It is no longer enough for it to manufacture art objects; it seeks something more. In its attempt, confused, uncertain

108 and obscure, to be sure, it seeks a new foundation for giving form to life itself. This is not whimsy, hooliganism, or madness. It is consciousness and rigor.

If this is the true state of the matter, then there is no difficulty in classifying such a phenomenon as the Bratislava "permanent manifestation" of Mlynárcik. It is quite evident that here real behavior has changed into figurative behavior. The misinterpretation which the editor of *Prace* suggested, seeking to find some sort of rational explanation, is significant: he supposed that he was confronted with some sort of apparatus for homosexual voyeurs. But none of this was meant literally. The "permanent manifestations" of course did confront people with a situation completely new, unaccustomed, even unpleasant, but they did so to force them to a new reaction to the world, to a new gesture of self-consciousness, to "a faithful interpretation of man's existence encircled by objective reality," as Mlynárcik himself put it so well. Mlynárcik no doubt acted rather thoughtlessly, but, for all that, more effectively.

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Translated by William E. Harkins