



Something In The

Anarchic Czech inventor
and musician

Petr Válek

improvises in his workshop
of mutant electronics.

By **Miloš Hroch**

Woodshed

"I am not able to plant anything in the lines. Why should tomatoes be with tomatoes and cucumbers with cucumbers?" declares musician and instrument maker Petr Válek. He stands barefoot in a greenhouse near his birthplace in Loučná nad Desnou, which lies in the border zone of the Sudetenland, about 250 kilometres from Prague. Válek never uses gardening tools conventionally, as one of his long series of Facebook videos shows: he kneels between the flowerbeds and plays the watering can like a saxophone. Other times, he closes himself in the shed and beats sticks against the stacked slats of wood, playing it like a xylophone. He calls it "unbearably free improvisation", and his performances would be unthinkable without a wide range of materials, or moving gadgets made of unconnected components. "It's research," he says. "I study my relationship with the surroundings. For me, the music is something I can hear music in."

Válek is a begrudging YouTuber out of necessity. He spent his whole life in Loučná isolated by nature, three and a half hours by train from the cultural epicentre of Prague. As an escape from the village stereotype, he immersed himself into a fantasy world between his shed, greenhouse and a nearby forest. He collects found sounds, or records weird tutorials in his improvised studio.

Thanks to the internet, Válek's outsider art has gained a global audience. With their mix of humour, post-Soviet cool and artistic enthusiasm, his videos entertain people accustomed to the logic of meme culture. In one clip he sits in a workshop surrounded

by gutted speakers, wearing a leather coat and a welding mask, while a microphone fries in a pan on a small stove. Considering national borders, he says, "Everyone should use their own language, but people would have to be a lot more sensitive – perceive sounds, instead of words."

Working as Der Marebrechst, his art brut noise and homemade electronics have been embraced by the local experimental scene. Yet he declares, "I have never listened to anything, I haven't had a metal period, instead I prefer to listen to the rustling leaves." Until 2017, Válek used to send CDs to Czech industrial noise legend Radek Koppel and a small circle of people he read about in the avant garde music magazine *His Voice*: Tomáš Procházka from krautrock band B4 and electroacoustic group Gurun Gurun, and music journalists Petr Ferenc and Pavel Klusák. By 2012, these figures began to invite Válek to events in Brno and Prague. Válek played his first concert at an event called Wakushoppu in Brno (organised by Ferenc and Procházka) in 2012. And Klusák invited him to participate in Prague's Quadriennale in 2016.

At vocational school, Válek trained to be a stonemason, but he imagined it as sculptor's work, even as his teachers focused on the functionality of stairs or landmarks. "It was such suffering to work at a right angle," he recalls, and instead took a position as a nurse in a local retirement home. There Válek founded a noise workshop, and let participants bang together pots and any available junk. The home's management didn't like his distinctive art therapy, and Válek was forced to make a living in the region like

many others. He produced cute garden gnomes which quickly sold out; he had the same success with his paintings and was even taken on by the local gallery – indeed, he still makes a living out of art.

As we step into his studio, paint is splashed everywhere, and there are canvases full of dead beetles on the walls. Válek shows me his 'gramophone' built from a circular saw blade, and a monster with tentacles from rattled cans of paint. "This is my way of a barrel organ," he reveals. Its mechanism is composed of found rubbish. There is something morbid about his fascination with wear and tear. He even hides animal bones in the electronics boxes of some instruments. After a short demonstration of the gramophone and barrel organ, Válek connects his new DIY effect called the Orkán to the amplifier. "I don't deal with circuits much, because I don't understand it," he confides. "Every time I buy something, I disassemble it – then I have a problem putting it back, I have to tame myself, moreover, when it costs money. I can't accept the function it has. I suspect that there is huge potential somewhere."

His most significant works feature in the travelling exhibition *Figments (And Other Stuff)*, which was on display at Brno's House of Arts from May to July, and is now touring galleries in other Czech cities. It covers a full spectrum of Válek's work, from his kinetic objects, to an environment inspired by his studio. "My electronics are very intimate," he concludes. "It makes me nervous thinking about how people try to play them – the only manual is in my head." □ Petr Válek's The VAPE channel can be found on YouTube

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William Basinski photographed by Dana Boulos

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