Hans-Ulrich Obrist talks with Jiří Kovanda.
Conversation I: I always felt that I didn’t need a studio.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Let’s talk about where we are right now. Is there a difference between your apartment and your studio?
Jiří Kovanda: I live and work here and that’s the way it’s always been. Years ago, when I worked at the National Gallery, I had a space there where I worked. But otherwise, I’ve never had a studio.

HUO: What did you do at the National Gallery? Did you work as a curator or as an artist in residence?
JK: I worked in the depository, that is, neither as a curator nor as an artist.

HUO: Back to the studio issue. Maybe you actually didn’t need a studio; because, if we look at your work, in the 1970s it involved actions and then later installations – things that don’t require a studio. Could one say your work is “post-studio”?
JK: I always felt that I didn’t need a studio, because the things that I made weren’t complicated. But I also wasn’t a professional artist. I hadn’t studied at any art school, so I didn’t have the right to one. My needs were combined with the existing conditions. I simply got used to not having a studio.

HUO: Could you tell us about how you got started, about your very first presentations? How did you begin? Was there anything before the actions?
JK: I started with children’s books. When I was 15–16 years old, I was, of course, interested in the Surrealists. That was in the 1960s, when one had the opportunity to see things, to get one’s hands on things. On the other hand, I don’t recall that there was any one experience, any one thing that would have set things moving. Before the actions, I made little drawings and collages. Actually, I continued to draw at the same time that I was doing the actions. The drawings ran parallel to them.

HUO: Do you think you could show us the drawings?
JK: I can hardly do that. They were simple drawings on graph paper with, for example, a geometrical shape outlined in ink and inside it, in pencil, a drawing inspired by the context. So they were really also actions of a sort.

HUO: Like maps?
JK: More like records of motion.

HUO: What inspired you in your actions? (I don’t necessarily mean a linear sort of influence.) I was told there wasn’t that much information available.
JK: I think that impression isn’t quite accurate, because everything did end up here although only after it had been digested by the media (catalogues, the news, and magazines). Another source was Poland, which we often visited. The atmosphere there was much freer; normal exhibitions were held there. Of course, I didn’t just start doing actions like that on my own.

HUO: Could you maybe give us an example, from the previous generation, for instance?
JK: At that time, I was working with a few other people, like Karel Miller, Petr Štembera, and Jan Mlčoch, who were doing more or less pure Body art. Through them, I became acquainted with that scene. Chris Burden was very important to me in this sphere, although he didn’t have a direct impact on my work. But his manner of expression – simple, blunt and, radical in a way – was important for me. I was more interested in the American scene than in European Body art. I never got into that. It seemed to me too poeticizing and theatrical.

HUO: What was your contact with Poland like? Did you travel to see exhibitions there? Did you correspond with any Polish artists?
JK: There was no one in Poland who had a direct influence on me. At the time, the people I had the most contact with were Žofie Kulik and Przemyszl Kwiek, who I stayed with when I was in Warsaw. They introduced me to the art scene there. Over two or three years, I was in Warsaw eleven times.

HUO: What were the earliest actions you did in the 1970s?
JK: (Browses through the material he has at hand and puts his head in his hands.)
Havránek: Those were really early performances. He doesn’t show them to everyone. You are looking at something really private.

HUO: In honor of Jindřich Štyrský …
JK: Štyrský was a Surrealist painter – here you see the connection with Surrealism. He had a dream that someone was reading his fortune from cards on a grave, and this is that reading on his grave. It’s just Surrealist drivel and I don’t present it anymore at all. It’s sort of childish work.

HUO: But wasn’t this actually like a burial of Surrealism?
JK: Yes, I suppose. I was much more interested in the connection between time and place than in the poetic character of a things, which is what the Surrealists were interested in. More than dreams and the unconscious, I was interested in real space and in the fact that the dream seemed to occur in a concrete place and at a concrete time.

HUO: Let’s move on to the next very early performance on June 12, 1976, “Petřín Hill.” Here you have a sort of a photo within a photo. It is like a Russian matryoshka …
JK: Those are also things that I wouldn’t show today. Here you can see that enthusiasm for conceptual influences.
H: Are you thinking of Kossuth, for example?
JK: Kossuth was too much of an intellectual for me. More like Dibbets.

HUO: Compared with your previous work, you seem more interested in observation here.
JK: I don’t think that was all that important. It was more like the result of some kind of fascination, a great experience, a discovery of something I’d encountered before.

HUO: And what about “Leaves,” dated October 29, 1976, which is set in a park?
JK: Those are fallen leaves, stuck with adhesive tape to an asphalt path. It’s about bringing time to a halt, once again in a concrete place. At the same time, it has a certain aesthetic quality.

HUO: But here in November 1976 we’re looking at something different. Before there seemed to be more of a script, but now it’s more like a story.
JK: The year 1976 was a tumultuous period of searching and discovery. I don’t think that there was any rational sequence, or that I moved logically from one thing to another. They’re more like forays in different directions. At this point I discovered something that was important for me and so I continued in that direction. It was a slightly different approach than that of my colleagues; I was after something they weren’t pursuing and something that might have been important for me. And yet it was something that I never came across anywhere around me.

HUO: The Czech action artists and, of course, the Viennese Actionists were much more subjective, expressive, and aggressive, one might say.
JK: I never liked the European performance artists and of those in Prague, I was least drawn to Petr Štembera. I was put off by the more aggressive elements in their art.

HUO: And what about Fluxus and their everyday actions?
JK: I didn’t really understand Fluxus.

H: Weren’t you aware of it through Knížák?
JK: No, not at all. He consciously distanced himself from our group. But I don’t see much everyday life in Fluxus. I see more of a kind of artsiness. The actions of Acconci, Oppenheim, and Burden seem like more extreme situations, but they seem to be more from real life than those of Fluxus. When Richard Long went somewhere and made a row of stones, it seemed to me that there was more of the ordinary in it than in Fluxus. It was more ordinary in the good sense of the word.

HUO: This actually leads us to the next piece, “Theater,” which is about walking. It is a piece from 1976, performed on Wenceslas Square, and it says here: “I follow a previously written script. Gestures and movements have been selected in such a way that passers-by will not suspect that they are watching a ’performance.’” I am obviously very curious about what was in the written script.
JK: The script was primitive, only about three or four simple movements. (He demonstrates, wiping his nose, and grooming his hair.) It wasn’t that important what I did, but rather the fact that it wasn’t distinguishable from everyday life.

HUO: This is something that appears in many of your … What do you actually call them? Are they actions, performances, events?
JK: At that time I called them actions.

HUO: And today?
JK: Actions, I suppose.

HUO: In many of your actions, then, you did things that straddled the boundary between intelligibility and disappearance. Could you talk a bit more about this dimension of your aesthetics?
JK: I think that the message that I was sending out was not intended for the people who were present when the actions happened, at the concrete moment they were taking place. The message was intended more for those who would read about them as actions. What I was interested in was that something ordinary, something normal, might happen that way. That’s what they were all about. For me, they don’t have any symbolic meaning.

HUO: This brings me to another question. When I look at your work today, I see a photograph and a typed text and I wonder what determined the forms this documentation took?
JK: Naturally, someone else took the pictures and the text was chosen in such a way as to be as concise as possible, without any emotional content, as neutral as possible. I didn’t write the texts out by hand, which is connected with what I was just saying: that I wanted it to be as cool, as impersonal, as possible.

HUO: I also wanted to ask about the status of the text, as there has been a whole series of discussions starting with Duchamp, whose instructions were clearly laid out, to John Cage and his notion of open partitions, to Fluxus, where you have event scores. I was interested in the possibility of re-enacting your actions. I’m thinking of “instruction art” here. I was wondering to what extent these texts or instructions might make it possible for you to repeat your own actions. Have you ever “redone” your own actions or offered them to someone else to do?
JK: They were definitely not intended as instructions for someone else to act out because for me the personal experience was always important. Understandably, anyone at all could have that experience, but for me my personal involvement was the most important thing. They were definitely not just instructions. “Remakes” are possible; I’m not against them. Everything can be done again because the experience will be different each time. Even though I’m a little afraid of what the outcome might be. These things arose in a state of tension or a sort of trance, because I’m a timid person, so they were a violation of boundaries with respect not only to the person who was on the street next to me, but also with respect to myself, because they involved behavior that was unnatural to me. That’s why I’m afraid that if I did them again, they would be a little artificial, lacking in enthusiasm; they’d come from a colder, more calculating place.

HUO: Now let’s talk about “The River”; “I carry some water from the river in my cupped hands and release it a few meters downriver … ” Could you tell us something about it?
JK: I think that it’s connected with “Theater,” with doing something that’s invisible, something completely unnecessary. I do something that can be done normally, something that happens all the time, in a way that is abnormal.

HUO: How about another piece: “I’m crying … ” This reminds me of a piece by Jan Bas Ader, where he says “I am too sad to tell you” and he cries.
JK: I know him too, but at that time I didn’t know him very well. Here, by contrast, it’s important that there is no emotional reason for the crying. They’re tears called forth in a mechanical way, rather than by something that has been experienced. Actually, it’s crying that’s not crying. One could do it with onions, but I’ve never used any props for my actions. I wanted there to be only what a person might haven at his disposal, right then and there. Štembera, for example, used various tools and materials, all sorts of props. I wanted the action to be built only on what I am. So I ruled out onions immediately.

HUO: As in other pieces like, for example, the one dated May 19, 1977: “I rake together rubbish, dust, cigarette stubs, etc. with my hands and when I’ve got a pile, I scatter it all again … ” and “I’m scratching previously drawn hearts off the wall with my nails … ” It’s all done without any props. In many of your works there is also a Sisyphean dimension in which there’s no clear end point. I was wondering if you could tell us about the infinite dimension of these pieces.
JK: As I said before, here too something is done, but in the end nothing comes out of it. With these things, a kind of base dimension, a kind of degradation, something unacceptable, is also important. “Degrading” is probably the best word. Digging your hands in muck while someone watches you. That’s what’s important in that action and in those hearts, which I don’t like anymore because it doesn’t seem ordinary enough to me. There’s pain in it and symbols of tenderness that conflict with that pain. That’s what’s common to all those actions, that the activity is not magnificent, but rather something ordinary that doesn’t deserve praise, that it’s base.

HUO: There are pieces where you are alone, but then there are pieces which involve other people. Could you tell us about “The Contact,” which you did in 1977 and also about another 1977 piece which happened on an escalator and in which you looked into the eyes of the people standing behind you?
JK: But that too is very much about me. As I said a moment ago, the violation of what was a boundary for someone else was also a violation of a boundary for me. I think that that step made towards another person may be connected with a more personal feeling I had at that time, with a certain feeling of isolation. Although I wouldn’t want that to be interpreted as alienation or loneliness, for it to be interpreted from a social perspective. For me it was something more personal than society’s alienation, or people’s alienation from that society. I always felt it was more of a personal matter for each individual and not a social matter. A lot of people have asked me what influence the state of society at the time had on those actions, and I’m not saying that there was no influence, but it definitely wasn’t the most important element for me. The personal aspect always predominated over the social.

HUO: I found it interesting that in some pieces there are witnesses, rather than just an audience. For example, here: “I arranged to meet several friends … we were standing in a small group on the square, talking … suddenly, I started running; I raced across the square and I disappeared down one of the streets.” So these people were your friends and at the same time they were participants and also witnesses.
JK: When a chance passer-by was involved, it was important that the person was a stranger, whereas those who were invited, whom I called my friends, as you noticed, were not anonymous observers. That really was a group of

people I knew that I ran away from, so there the relationship was important. Wherever I spoke about friends, it was important that they were friends. Friends are not observers; they' re fellow participants. They were also watching, but I had a certain relationship with them.

HUO: It seems that from around 1978 to 1980, something important happened because you disappeared from your work. But before that, there were two public performances: that one in 1977 where you pressed yourself as close as you as you could to the wall and people watched you; and another piece where you walked blindly into a bunch of people standing at the opposite end of a corridor. This seems to be a typical public performance situation; but then there's the opposite and you completely disappear. I was wondering if you could tell us about this transition.
JK: I don't know how to answer that. At that time, a personal presence was no longer necessary; it had lost its importance, and all of a sudden a simple trace of the activity was enough for me. But why that happened, I really don't know. I did my first installation in spaces where my colleagues were still doing actions. And at that time I'd said to myself that I no longer had to be present myself; that the traces really were enough.

HUO: But what remained was that they were, again, on that boundary between intelligibility and disappearance, between visibility and invisibility. Many of these interventions were very discrete. They weren't about occupying space.
JK: They weren't brutal interventions at all, but again, they were things that were so out of place that they created discord. They might have been inconsequential, but the fact that they were so clearly out of place made them stick out. They were often white …

HUO: Why?
JK: I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with that out of place quality I was talking about. On the street, for example, the color white seems rather artificial. It provides a certain contrast.

HUO: What exactly is going on in the piece "Salty Corner and Sweet Curve"?
JK: It's about the contrast between a corner and a curve that was given architecturally.

HUO: Why did you choose that place?
JK: I simply saw it there. It wasn't set up.

HUO: Do you think that those things have a relationship to that specific place, or could they have been done anywhere at all?
JK: They could have been done anywhere. The important thing was that it was a public place, that is, a street. The geometric composition was important, that is, that there was a curve and a corner. And clearly, the color was also important, as I said, and the fact that edible things were involved. There was also an opposition that you had a curve and an angle on the one hand, and sugar and salt on the other; though that isn't apparent at first sight. There's a play between contrasts and connections.

HUO: I imagine that the piece came about without any exterior impetus. Did you get any kind of permission?
JK: Not at all. It wasn't part of any symposium and naturally there was no permit. And then it all remained there afterwards. I did what I did, I left, and then I didn't bother about it anymore. The things there lived out their existence in their own way.

HUO: One of the things I was wondering about the actions, and also about the later, more sculptural pieces, was that obviously at that time they weren't quite legal and had an oppositional, unofficial character. So I wondered whether they could be seen as a form of infiltration.
JK: I don't think so. You just moved about within the limits that were given to you. I didn't experience that as something that I had to fight against. I just worked under the given conditions and I didn't think of it as infiltration. That's too strong a word, even though to some extent there might have been some of that. But there definitely was no political subtext. I worked within the framework of a particular set of possibilities and I didn't feel like I was rebelling against anything.

HUO: This is a really mysterious piece done in 1980, an installation that was set up in your absence.
JK: That's one of the few things I've made for an exhibition; I think it was presented at Karl Tutsch's in Brno, which, wasn't a gallery, but where the event took place. I couldn't go there, but I'd been invited and so I came up with this project. There was supposed to be a chair somewhere in a room; it was supposed to be sitting on top of four cobblestones. I imagined it would be in a normal room, by a table somewhere, and that it wouldn't be an exhibition piece, but they didn't quite understand (though Ivan Kafka is sitting on the chair in the photo). It was presented as an object at an exhibition, which wasn't what I had in mind at all. That's why I wrote that note that it was installed in my absence, because I would have done it differently.

HUO: Let's go back to the way you documented your work for a moment. You were telling us that these pieces were photographed and made for a sort of "post-audience" and that was probably also true of the installations, which hardly anyone saw and which were then photographed. How were these pieces documented?
JK: The principle was the same as with the actions, except that I was able to take the pictures myself. The places and dates were important, for it was a particular activity was being documented. I wanted it to be clear; I wanted there to be a record that in such and such a place and at such and such a time, such and such had happened. And it was supposed to be as simply put as possible.

HUO: What's your archive like? How is it organized? In your later work in the 1980s and 1990s you use a lot of collages and found images, so I was wondering if you had some kind of filing system. How is your material organized?
JK: I've never had an archive. The objects were found and then put into new contexts. I never collected them. It was simply a spontaneous encounter with and combination of objects. There was no systematic work behind it.

HUO: What are you working on now?
JK: I'm not working on anything now. In the winter, I had an exhibition with Ján Mančuška; we did some things together for this specific space and since then I haven't done anything, actually. I'm a little sceptical. I don't have anything planned.

HUO: You started teaching in 1997. What role does teaching have in your life?
JK: For me the most important thing about it is meeting with young people. There's a certain energy involved.

HUO: The last question, which I ask in every interview I do, has to do with unfinished works. Do you have any unfinished projects, any utopias, works that were forgotten or were too big or maybe too insignificant to be completed? Is there any type of project that you think would be worth mentioning or that you would still like to work on?
JK: Naturally I've jotted down some things, including some things that I've never done, and sometimes I've gone back over them and drawn on them. Sometimes I've even used something that had previously seemed unusable to me. That used to happen to me, though not very often. So there are things that I haven't done, not because I didn't have the opportunity, but always because I rejected them. I don't have any dreams I've failed to pursue.

HUO: What do you think about utopias? The utopian theme has become a cliché, but don't you think it could be revived or given new content?
JK: For me, utopias have never been too important. I was more concerned with what I had at my disposal and what I could do with that. And I think that's far more important and not just as far as art goes, but generally speaking, too. It is far more important for a person to make the most of what he has now, of the opportunities that present themselves, and of his limits as well. It's more important for him to be able to give his maximum, rather than dream about how great it would be if we could change this and that and blah blah blah sometime in the future.

ŠEV: Do you sense that Kovanda's work was created in a different milieu?
SCH: Jiří Kovanda's starting point was the late 1970s in Prague. With its particular history of performance art, from Knížák's Fluxus in the 1960s to Miler and Mlčoch, as well as Štembera, who began in the mid-1970s. Kovanda transcends the milieu and the mood of this time. His concepts and his way of working of course draw upon this local sphere, this local context, but his work has a universal approach. He takes the context and transposes both the political situation in the "leaden" years of the late 1970s, when everything starts to close up, as well as the situation of performance art itself at this time. From this he draws one large universal conclusion, creates his performative statements in a totally reserved way, totally reduced, totally conceptual.
ŠEV: We'll talk more about that later. I've intentionally started with this question, which comes from the opposite point of view: Can you perceive the local milieu in his work? You surprised me a little, since you said that it transcends its local environment. Now, I am working from a peripheral background, but still there's this milieu and a local dialect.
SCH: All of these works speak a local dialect. The dialect is already present in the material. The paper, the photographs, the urban surrounding and the physiognomies; all this, even the documentation, is colored by as local athmosphere – up to as is the documentation, and the whole objective world which surrounds his work. I think it's quite interesting that this fact is often seen as something that makes art peripheral and that makes peripheral art interesting for the international canon. People are used to perceiving the local context and the material culture of American and Western European object art as "normal." Other art has to begin by positioning itself in opposition to that culture. But when this cliché is reveiled and one looks closer at the concepts behind the images, it is difficult to find any simple and direct reference to the local. These references are always very indirect and mediated in Kovanda's performative work.
ŠEV: I also wanted to go a bit deeper here at the beginning and ask whether these works reflect the differences in climate between East and West.
SCH: Well, what do you think?
ŠEV: After the many symposia of the 1980s and 1990s, which were overly concerned with questions of identity and center and periphery, people often state that the differences between East and West are obsolete today, out of fashion, or have been overcome.
SCH: In no way are they obsolete. At least not as far as historical positions go. They are changing. It really makes a difference whether or not we are in the Western Avant-garde landscape of the late 1970s. In the West an institutional context for new works is biulding up: courageous curators, young galleries that organize performance art festivals and alternative spaces, even some museums; there is a wide range of criticism, there are references to an internal tradition. The possibility of immediately placing one's work in a dialogue with the work of others was certainly more limited in Prague during the late 1970s. The information was there in Prague, that all of this existed – there were visits by Chris Burden and others, and there had already been Post-Fluxus contacts in the 1960s – but just not in public. And therein lies an important difference between that which happens in private and that which happens in the institutional sphere. Kovanda's work was a gesture of self-empowerment, in it meant placing oneself as an artist-character into a very specific political framework which was in opposition to certain recalcitrant practices of the established art world of the West and to the underground in the Czechoslovakia. That's a very important difference.
ŠEV: Of course it's not just a question of environments, there aren't just cultural specifics, not just the way things work in the West and the way things don't quite work in the East. There are other strategies as well that emerge from this, strategies that may sometimes be hard to interpret, hard to accept, hard to decipher. But this is connected to my next question, and I think that it's very important for Kovanda. Evidently, the subject matter hasn't been fully exhausted, even in the context of the most recent developments. Do you see Kovanda's work in any sort of political context?
SCH: The conceptual practices of Socialist Eastern Europe have often been misunderstood as a direct reaction to the political restrictions; they often have been perceived as anti-communist, as directly opposed to a political regime, as "dissident" in the restricteded meaning the Western media gave Eastern European countercultures. They have been political, of course, but in a sense that's quite different from what's usually meant when describing these works as political. By the way, it's the same with many of the conceptual practices in the West. If there's something political that motivates artists like Kovanda, it's not agit prop. In the 1960s and 1970s, people in both the East and the West felt the urge to rediscover and redefine the expressive possibilities of the individual against the socialized, normative, standardized public – or the bourgeois public of Fordism (West) and bureaaucratic Socialism (East). How should one respond to this socialization? This is a question that comes up in Jiří Kovanda's work. In the context of such questions, Kovanda's performance art is political. But it's not political in the sense of the Prague Spring or the dissidents who acted politically by using the West as an amplifier, as a megaphone. Kovanda doesn't do this. Instead, Kovanda tries to find gestures in his work to act against the manifest ossification of society in the late 1970s, to transcend it and to find traces of an expression of individuality. Kovanda acts not in a rhetorical sense that emphasizes the body, but rather by trying to establish a distance between these symbolic worlds. Or better, he seeks to distance himself from them by refusing to cooperate, by seeking to prevent the socialization of his own work. He doesn't make rhetorical use of the old avant-garde motif of creating distance by aesthetic shock, like many other performance art of the time did.
ŠEV: I only wanted to say that we know that Kovanda never wanted to speak about his own works as political pieces, but rather in terms of more subtle, personal problems. This kind of political interpretation isn't acceptable to him. But I think that this interpretation is usually brought from the outside. There's a tendency in the West to want to explain works in general political terms. Of course there are also differences between Kovanda and older performers like Štembera and others. Some works by Štembera were more political. Kovanda couldn't stand on his head while reading Heidegger or eat a newspaper; that sort of thing was alien to him. Also, it's well known that some statements by dissidents were very restrictive, very excluding, very limiting. They were often very moralistic and programmatic, and all that was a bit alien to Kovanda. Kovanda offers something different. He offers a freedom that can't limit itself. His actions are very minimal, very personal, and they turn to a different form of communication. I only want to say that we have to make distinctions when we want to talk about politicization in art.
SCH: There was a group of dissidents that very clearly sought to find an immediate echo in the West, people who had strongly limited moral positions and always saw themselves as mirroring Western values of democracy.
ŠEV: They were very demanding of others, and often tried to implicate you, to draw you in. It was only when you were compromised that you knew what it meant.
SCH: I can imagine that. It must have been: if I implicate you, if I blacken your name, then you will be a dissident too and only then will you be able to imagine what it means to live like a dissident. Kovanda uses his art to avoid that kind of logic. His question is: Can you imagine – and not in an everyday sense – what it means to step away from this society, to reject it, to reject its language, and to think of yourself as the Other, as an autonomous subject? Along with Levinas, I might say that it's to think about oneself as a subject and to position oneself as a subject in a intimate dialogue. But Kovanda doesn't conceive of this as reflecting the East-West dialectic. He's not interested in political or moral discourse. It's always his intention to simply act out his subjectivity or to create a minimal conflict with the social body, to capture his own body in a minimal conflict with the social body, and to feel it for himself. And he is highly ironic.
ŠEV: I'm trying to remember our interpretation. We always talked about the fact that these small interventions can be overlooked. They are so insignificant that they can't represent an attack, and they have a lasting effect. In Kovanda's gestures, there's a little bit of Romanticism. I'm not sure if you see it too. His style could support and cheer up, in contrast to these other very traumatic gestures and shocking actions.
SCH: Štemberas performances represent the great Baroque theater of the world which performs itself, which depicts itself once again, along with its wounds. Kovanda would be more Rococo, to follow through with the sublime stylistic metaphor.
ŠEV: His Romanticism is a quest, a dream of contact, a desire for contact. There was a bit of a therapeutic function involved. He had to overcome his own reserve, his shyness. It created difficulties for him, and he could find contact only after he had overcome it. A desire for contact, for communication.
SCH: No, in my view Kovandas actions and performances always demonstrate the impossibility of communication as well. He rejects communication, showing the border that exists between this shyness and the possibility of communication: he turns around and runs away. I see it as more than shyness. It could be called romantic, I absolutely agree with you on that. The use of the most minimal formulae of pathos, the revocation of the rhetoric of gestures, turning into something lyrical, something casual – that's romantic, though not romantic in a cultural historical sense, but rather in the way in which the word may be used to describe the folk movement of the 1960s. As a sculptural gesture, this attitude is developed in Kovanda's object installations at the time, in which he piled up small heaps of sugar and salt, stretched a string across a room, or made piles of fallen leaves with his hands.
ŠEV: I was thinking in particular of the performances in which his shyness was overcome. We can see in them a latent request for rapprochement. It's this dream of communication, of things that didn't exist in society, that weren't practiced. This has a political dimension too. The return of normal contact – that appears to be a possible interpretation.
SCH: This is what I tried to explain at the beginning. In those years, the fossilization of society provoked desires in many youth movements, such the desire for the reintroduction of a certain naturalness in the aesthetic sense typical of 18th-century Romanticism, a desire for that which is direct and "un-courtly." And nevertheless, I wouldn't be able to grasp Kovanda's work if I didn't have a general understanding of the societies of the East and West in the 1970s. This is the rock, the structural fabric, from which he steps away, from which he develops his simple lyricism of abandonment.
ŠEV: In pointing out these rediscovered sub-Romantic layers, I wanted to suggest that it's to be contrasted with a direct attack. He doesn't attack at all. Neither is he a voyeur. He doesn't take you by force. All there is is a latently suggestive act of relationship-communication. He doesn't have to stand on his head to communicate a message that's politicizing and aggressive.
SCH: Kovanda's position is more difficult and it is simpler at the same time. He doesn't have to stand on his head – a gesture that comes to mind right away. He just turns around on an escalator, the first escalator in Prague. What he does entails nothing but a small shift. He doesn't have to have to attack anyone directly. All he has to do is to create a certain discomfort, to walk past someone as if he were about to bump into him, with a very small space between them.
ŠEV: Simply put, the need to establish this simple type of contact is an expression of the political dimension of the art of the 1970s. This minimal gesture is very important for us now, because all large gestures are false.
SCH: Yes. All large gestures are dubious, sold-out, have been surrendered to consumerism.
ŠEV: That's very important for our times as well. It's a question of being politicized from the inside as well as the outside.

SCH: The general position of Western art history towards the conceptual aesthetic practices of the 1970s is that they can be reduced to transparent political gestures. This position has to be rejected in Eastern Europe as a whole. As a result, it's very important to contextualize these practices in a new way. Some of the aesthetic categories developed using Western terminology are simply inadequate. One has to try to find a new aesthetic terminology by describing them. Changing this canon will require a serious effort.

ŠEV: The things we are concerned with are the things that developed after performances or parallel to them: installations, interventions, objects, etc. They are actually quite similar to the performances. They are also micro-interventions, not rude confrontations or monumental efforts. Kovanda's work isn't burdened by symbolism, as is Štembera's.

SCH: I do believe that Kovanda works with symbols, but his use of symbols has a different goal. He doesn't eat chalk, but there are many other metaphors for being. The ordinary is briefly altered. For example, an ordinary object is removed from its usual location and context and is serially treated using classic methods, like those of Minimalist art. In Kovanda's work, this doesn't mean drawing a large abstract and purely Minimalist square. Instead he uses sugar cubes, objects that already have the form of Minimalist objects.

The sugar cubes are transposed, are placed somewhere in a public space, serially piled up, creating a small – almost natural – minimal sculpture. However, it doesn't emerge out of an abstract dimension, as art does in other cases. Instead, it emerges – as do the performances – from a slight shifting of the ordinary. This manner of production, which was industrialized at a later point, has a normalizing effect on things, defining them as cubes or containers. Minimalism is aware of this, but it develops from it a great language of forms, a large separate world, and it feigns blindness towards its own knowledge, making believe it's unaware of the interrelationships involved. Kovanda, on the other hand, senses that it's already there, perhaps in a pre-conscious kind of way. He takes the Romantic movements of the 1960s and 1970s and produces a small aesthetic gesture out of them: piling up leaves and then destroying the resulting pile, for example. No order, and then order again. He knows very well what he's doing, what he's referring to.

ŠEV: He knows very well which language he's parodying.

SCH: Absolutely, which language he's parodying, ridiculing, removing from the ordinary … And he transposes simplicity into a language of his own. It's always a minimal gesture, reduced and simple.

ŠEV: Miscellania in the margins, in the peripheral field of vision.

SCH: There's also a contrast in his work to the strategies of Arte Povera. Kovanda doesn't turn poor materials into great rhetorical installations. He has at most an ironic relationship with grandiose rhetoric, but at the same time he does also produce a serious object. It's always both. He can take an ironic stance towards his own discipline, but it nevertheless does a very serious thing, formally very precise and well thought out.

ŠEV: It's significant that performances and interventions mutate into objects which entail minimal shifts, differences and diversions. The most important rhetorical figure is this digression of large things to small things, which seem not to be essential or important.

There's also a rhetoric of double coding in his work. On the one hand, these readymade objects, assisted and intervened, often refer to the contexts they were taken from and which they were originally used in.

Minimalism, which frees itself from memory, is different. Kovanda takes risks by requiring a Minimalist reading, but the memory of the things overturns this reading. We lived in a milieu where radical minimalist things couldn't be developed, a milieu that needed content-based interpretations, speech, narrativity, coded stories. There's another code which refers to the great art of the time – to painting and its different forms. However, this reference isn't direct, because direct contacts to other countries weren't possible.

SCH: From your point of view, or from his, what kind of information was available? What were the references within Czech modernism, and what were the international points of reference?

ŠEV: Most artists at that time didn't have frequent concrete contacts; they were completely mediated. Kovanda at least searched for information. In the 1970s, he translated for and worked on an anthology of texts on contemporary art edited by Jazz Sektion. He got his information from the available printed material, but he couldn't see things with his own eyes. Still, he had pretty good information that enabled him to work with the second code that I mentioned, and his interventions were able to parody the paintings of Reiman, for example.

SCH: All that was available, was it? In the form of narrations, or in documents?

ŠEV: Except for the artists who could travel, information existed in the 1970s and early 1980s in the form of narration and as documents, samizdat, catalogues and literature. For example, there were thirty booklets about contemporary international art edited by the philosopher Petr Rezek.

SCH: Did Kovanda have any ties to local thinkers, like Egon Bondy or others?

ŠEV: He was in touch with Petr Rezek, he knew about his work. He was always perceived as a man on the sidelines, a non-professional, a total dilettante. His exhibitions were never really taken seriously.

SCH: That was also true for Július Koller in Slovakia.

ŠEV: It was true until recently. Now Kovanda is now successful abroad; he's able to exhibit and his work is being presented to a wide public. In the Czech Republic, few people are interested in it apart from a narrow circle of insiders.

SCH: There's still a deep distrust today, isn't there?

ŠEV: Society hasn't quite digested it yet. He used ridiculous materials, and his performances weren't quite really performances. Until recently, he hasn't been contextualized correctly, hasn't been appreciated in the context of Czech art history, in an official sense. His double code, his high art, and his found "refuse" involves a risky strategy. He offers a minimalist reading, but it's immediately neutralized by memory. And in addition, his work is ephemeral.

SCH: That's right. Sugar cubes have no sharp edges. They melt in the rain.

ŠEV: One thing distorts the other, to some extent, doesn't it? He also lives in a space where no real Minimalist work could develop.

SCH: Well, but Stanislav Kolíbal did try something.

ŠEV: Yes, that was close to Arte Povera. But that was an exception; there were what we called "traumatic remains" in each sculpture. There was always something creating friction. Our milieu always requires a content-based interpretation, it needs language, narration, it needs a story that's coded inside it.

SCH: But what I find exciting about Kovanda is that he always presents a story, but at the same time leaves the story unfinished. He always begins by telling a story, but then the narrative gets lost, deconstructs itself, comes to an end before it's begun. He doesn't let the story take up any room, so it collapses. Those are very explosive strategies.

ŠEV: Of course, there are narrative moments when he puts wallpaper on a tiny piece of wood, when he uses leftover packaging that carries traces of what it was originally used for. But these narrative moments aren't so meaningful, and people see in them only a poor frame, and nothing else.

SCH: But the readymades and the collages aren't the only elements that point to reality. It's not the readymade gesture that screams "Now I'm not on the street anymore; I'm in a museum!" In Kovanda's case it's always a question of polluting the museum with something ordinary. He seemed to be saying, "Now let's see if we can load even more onto the idea of a white cube."

ŠEV: I think Kovanda's objects were always "polluted" by art, because the first things were made from leftover materials like packaging from the gallery where he was working and pieces of wood and boxes from the depot of the National Gallery where he worked. He sat in the gallery, manipulating art. He was in charge of items that were on loan, and basically he was surrounded by art all the time.

SCH: Life in that institution certainly played an important creative role, and promoted a kind of poetic criticism of the institution, which grew out of his biographical background. Yes, Kovanda lived surrounded by art, but in the depot of the art world, in the backwater of art so to speak, excluded from the canon. Kovanda always tried to place this element of exclusion within that "white cube" with a fragile gesture.

ŠEV: It was probably possible for Kovanda to continue later during the postmodern era because he had used the language of the medium of painting, in contrast to other people who did action art and whose careers subsequently ended.

SCH: It's a totally empty form of painting. It says only "I'm a painting" and nothing else. It's not postmodern painting. Kovanda depicts complete emptiness; his paintings are nothing but objects. As a consequence, one can't say that it's qualitative painting, because it takes a conceptual position. This is because Kovanda, again, takes up a critical stance which distances itself from dominant genres. I think that reading, assessing or appreciating this part of Kovanda's work is very problematic, due to the fact that he's always viewed as an artist, as a postmodern painter. Of course he was a painter. He did paint. But all he did was present the painting process; again, he did the same type of thing. He places an old board somewhere, as an object in an exhibition, for example. He hangs a clumsily-made painting on the wall and says, "Again I bring you dilettantism, something off the cuff." Each of these gestures is aesthetically thought through. But the objects and images are empty; they remain empty. It's the gesture of bringing it there, of using it as a support, that's the real work. Not just the object itself.

ŠEV: Of course there are a number of paintings from this period that are truly paintings, despite being conceptual. And this evokes again my question about his relationship to the West. It often happens that a thing is accepted because it's universal, or because it can be subsumed under a certain genealogy. Other things aren't like that, and it takes a while to live with them, to find out more, in order to accept them.

This fact seems interesting to me: that among Kovanda's works the performances are the ones that are universal, but not the paintings nor – until recently – the objects, which remain alien and which are difficult to interpret and to classify.

SCH: In the West people haven't really begun reflecting about the 1980s yet either. The re-assessment of postmodern painting and of the object art of the early and mid 1980s has mainly been done by the market and by large institutions, through prizes and large retrospectives. Beyond that, I really don't see a distanced evaluation. However, it's significant that Kovanda has been noted as a painter, that his objects and his paintings have been better represented in Western exhibitions than his performances.

ŠEV: We've often exhibited his post-1989 work – his objects and installations and his small conceptual paintings – but I don't think it was ever truly accepted. We felt he didn't really fit in a historical context, that the West perceived his work as something spent and not the real thing. Aside from universal pieces, the West was looking for political interpretations, to facilitate things, as a mitigating circumstance, as an alibi for the art of the East. That was something that was already a bit irritating for us in the late 1980s.

SCH: I understand very well. It's a great problem with interpretation in general; works which purposely distance themselves from local issues are harder to read than works which present local issues politically in a direct way, amplifying them rhetorically, or which tie into a local tradition. The latter can immediately be subsumed within a genealogy and given a frame of reference and interpretation. The former are, however, unusable. After 1989 the great problem many artists in Eastern Europe faced was that they were forced to argue in terms of local references in order to simply state any sort of universal message. If they refused to do so, the art world was very reluctant to receive them. One had to bring in local color. And Jiří Kovanda was always rather reluctant to do that.

ŠEV: Yes, again we have a series of issues that are important to us. For example, all art in the 1970s was basically political in its own context, whether it was abstract or figurative. Everything was a political issue; it was

a part and parcel of the times. Of course one can say that art is always political because it's always context-dependent. But from another point of view, art isn't political; art can only be politicized in special contexts.
Under what we called totalitarianism, even apolitical art was also a political issue. Even art which took a true aesthetic distance in its lack of commitment was political, because commitment was a requirement; it was a basic attribute of socialist art. It seems to me that some unpleasant consequences of this can still be felt in our culture today – everything since 1989 has been de-politicized. Art doesn't want commit itself anymore and it doesn't even know which side it should be on. In my view, this de-politicization of art is a bad thing. It's one of the serious losses we've experienced since 1989.

But in reality this minimalization, intimization, and ephemerization in Kovanda's art was also political (let us say it was domestic politics in the unofficial art of totalitarianism), because most unofficial artists not only wanted to be apolitical, they wanted to produce "authentic" works with spiritual content and thus tended towards the archaic. Of course, Kovanda doesn't like this interpretation at all – not even today – and one can sense in him a displeasure with any kind of political commitment, despite the fact that performance art is actually political in principle.

SCH: With his attempts at communication, Kovanda wants to create an apparent directness, a space where power doesn't hold sway, a space that contradicts the power theorists and works with something that's direct. I can understand his refusal to be politically engaged very well. It's not his field, not his style of work. He goes beyond this and thinks of a different space of subjectivity.

ŠEV: … which is rare these days …

SCH: … there are many subjectivities. There are many discourses of power that structure them. Nevertheless, individualizations and subjectivizations were possible.

ŠEV: They wear off quickly, of course, in contemporary political discussions.

SCH: Many of the contemporary artistic strategies that present themselves as radical (which are to be found in the Czech Republic as well) have a very short half-life. This putative treatment of contemporary images wears off incredibly quickly, whether the images are taken from the media or from the world of technology. Media images rebel against art; they continuously cancel it out, making the art appear ridiculous very quickly.

ŠEV: I was always opposed to the de-politicization of art. On the other hand, I would like to see a counterpart – a counterpoised position that would be more ephemeral, less complicated and more conceptual. It's questionable whether this ephemerality can be combined with politics, but it appears to me that both are strategies that should be nurtured.

SCH: There's a politics of aesthetic autonomy which is very important. But not in the classical sense of aesthetic autonomy in bourgeois society …

ŠEV: One would have to put it differently now …

SCH: But when this position is formulated, it becomes a very fundamental political motif of self-empowerment, which rejects the absolute subjection and functionalization in the spirit of discourses of power and economics.

ŠEV: You know, that reminds me of a classic strategy of the leftist Czech avant-garde: on the one hand, there's total artistic autonomy, total aesthetical distance – in those days they would have preferred to call it freedom – and on the other hand there's a complementary and completely determining counterpart: the attempt to change the social system. That was already present in 1920s Czech Poetism, when the first readymades were exhibited in Bohemia: a ball bearing, a mirror, and a barber's head.

SCH: As you said. The traumatic remainder remains with Kolíbal. The narrative is inscribed in those readymades as well.

ŠEV: They are talking worlds.

SCH: Do you think something like that could also be said about Jiří Kovanda's work?

ŠEV: Yes, I do actually think so, if we are talking about his coding of readymades. One has to talk about them as those dirty objects that are part bricolage, soiled by everyday life, worn out by concrete life. They've become hybrids.

SCH: They also throw a new light on what was such a widespread notion of sculpture in the 1970s.

ŠEV: For us there was a liberation from uptight moral interpretations in the simplest things. Kovanda "transcended" with his work, for example, but not in the metaphysical sense of Czech critic Jindřich Chalupecký, according to whom art takes on a religious function and leaves society, which has no place for it, somewhere behind it … That was his program of "moving away absolutely."

SCH: It's an anti-metaphysical thought in Kovanda, but he has to elevate his objects from everydayness into an aesthetic autonomy. This is what I meant when I spoke earlier about the universalist appeal of Kovanda's work.

ŠEV: Then metaphysics can come into play, of course.

Conversation III: ordinariness is invisible.

Text by Vít Havránek with e-mailed commentary by Pawel Polit and Igor Zabel.

I. VH: The complete archive of Jiří Kovanda's actions and installations is being made public thirty years late, for several reasons. The social-historical context of the time was determinant for Kovanda. Because he was self-taught and his work had a performative character, he was relegated to the sphere of unofficial art. When his works were first enacted, they were known only to a relatively small circle of artists, professionals, and friends, and there was no great expectation that they would be presented publicly in his own country. It's only in the last fifteen years that they've been, in part, subjected to theoretical analysis and set in their historical context. Thus, we're witnesses to the fact that, thirty years after the event, a secondary public is showing a serious interest in Kovanda's actions and installations now that they've become a subject of history and legend. The time that has passed and the intellectual shift that has occurred in the interval have also had an influence on the character of this text. On the one hand, it turns to history in an attempt to decode the meaning that Kovanda's work had at the time and to seek interpretations and contexts relevant to the period. On the other hand, it does this on the basis of current ideas and uses the methodology and vocabulary of today.

II. Art and Art from the East

VH: Jiří Kovanda is referred to as an artist of the "East." I mention this at the very beginning of this text about Kovanda so that I won't have to return to it at a later, less favorable moment – while I analyze his work. It seems that the paradigmatic "East" was omnipresent and yet, for a long time, invisible. Like other artists who were close to him, he was a victim of "The Power of Exclusion" – the exclusion of art from the East from the universal art which Igor Zabel talks of and analyzes in his texts. As Zabel concludes, the term "art from the East" contains ideas about what is to be considered "ethnic" and "exotic"; thus, if someone subscribing to the idea of universal art categorized a work or a group of works as art from the East, they would be perceived primarily as ethnographic artifacts.

IZ: The relation to Eastern Europe is interesting in several respects, some of which I'll mention here. One is that the generally accepted ideas about the historical development and the main representatives of post-1945 art aren't the result of a disinterested and "objective" point of view. Historical perspectives and their guiding ideas are established within the context of strategies of confrontation and as attempts to achieve a dominant position in a world filled with conflict. Since the end of the cold war, the context has changed radically, but strategies of division (which, in turn, are strategies of dominance) remain decisive. It's enough to look at the number of books published recently – general and historical overviews of, for example, the art of the 1960s and 1970s. Eastern European art (and not only the art of the East) remains largely, and often completely, excluded. Even the most important artists are treated as marginal and not particularly relevant – if they're mentioned at all, that is. This is no coincidence. Today, one can't assume that the reason for this is a lack of information, since information is available to anyone willing to put a little effort into getting it. We're obviously witnessing a deliberate disregard for this information. One of the reasons for that might be the fact that it's simply impossible to continue with the existing, established understanding of the development of art if we take into account, for example, Eastern European artists. These artists weren't merely provincial followers of the ideas and approaches developed in the West. It is, of course, clear that the art practices of the West represented an important resource and a source of motivation for them. On the other hand, there existed a particular art scene (or, rather, a number of them) in Eastern Europe with its own relatively autonomous developmental dynamics. Admitting that Kovanda, Koller, Filko, Kozlowski, Krasinski, Monastyrski, the Gorgona Group, Trbuljak, the OHO Group, and a number of other artists represented key figures in European art in the 1960s and 1970s also means accepting the fact that the art in question was broader in scope, more complex and more diverse than is usually assumed. What we normally consider to be the line of development should actually be seen as just one line in a broader, often heterogeneous field. This complexity and diversity in the art of Eastern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s is also connected to the differences of the conditions in which the artists worked. These conditions determined – sometimes quite fundamentally – their particular approaches. In several cases we could show how the lack of public spaces for exhibiting their work made them move in the direction of smaller, often closed circles where they developed their ideas in an intense, ongoing dialogue and produced works and actions under intimate, private circumstances. Despite the huge differences between the various Eastern European countries (and between different periods in each country), there were several circumstances that were, at least as in structural way or representing a pattern, common to all Eastern European (or, better, socialist) countries. One of them was the non-existence (or, sometimes, an undeveloped form) of the art market, as well as very limited opportunities for social and financial success for avant-garde artists, especially in comparison with officially recognized artists (in Yugoslavia, for example, a number of modernist abstract artists enjoyed such official status). One of the effects of this was a particular strictness and preciousness in the work of such artists. They were unwilling to accept compromises that would call into question the radicalism with which they followed their approaches through to their logical consequences. (In the case of the OHO Group in Slovenia, one such consequence was their decision to abandon the field of art exactly at the moment when they were at the threshold of international success.) It's well known that Eastern European Conceptual artists reacted with disappointment and anger to the fact that their Western colleagues entered the institutional art structures and the art market. For them, it was a betrayal of the most fundamental political and moral aspects of Conceptual art.

VH: As Kovanda himself points out, his works were seen by Western theoreticians and curators primarily in the spirit of a historical determinism and a legendary interpretation, as political gestures that attempted to regain microcontrol over a public space ruled by the political authorities. Kovanda, along with other Czech performers such as Mlčoch, Štembera, and Miler, repeatedly ran up against this interpretation and rejected it as a one-sided simplification. In the 1970s, Mlčoch and Štembera even protested against their inclusion in the section of the Venice Biennial devoted to dissident art. They did so not because they were afraid of the reaction of the authorities at the time, who punished protesters, but because they didn't agree with a primarily political interpretation of their activities.

PP: Around 1970, some Polish artists and theoreticians, especially Wlodzimierz Borowski and Jerzy Ludwinski, shared the idea that art is a process – that it undergoes constant change – and that each creative act consists in revealing a previously unknown aspect of art. Like Czech artists, they too questioned the direct political interpretation of their works, but it seems that it was always the particular historical and political circumstances that determined – to certain extent – the way in which the changeable "essence" of art was revealed. I agree that there's no such thing as "Eastern" art – social, political, and historical contexts were different in each country – but maybe it's necessary to balance the "universal" and "particular" approaches in discussing the artistic phenomena of the time.

VH: Today, Kovanda says, "Yes, we lived normal lives. I don't think that I lived a less valuable life than I would have in a freer society because of the situation at that time. I'm thinking in terms of things like communication and relations among people, among men and women and private life. Politics can't have a radical influence on that. Unless you're risking your neck. But we weren't threatened in that way and therefore politics was only an incidental factor."

One has to understand his statement as defining artistic creation as an activity connected with everyday life, bound up with living and being ("Unless we're risking our lives"). This approach – which situates the individual at the center of reflection and at the frontline of all relationships the individual constructs around him in his immediate environment – is universal. We'll be looking into this universal – and yet specifically subjective – level here, along with a reconstruction of the context of the period.

III. Art As Invisible Theater

VH: While preparing Kovanda's exhibition in Brno, Kovanda, Zbyněk Baladrán, and I were discussing how the pieces should be installed. Kovanda decided that he wanted only second-hand exhibition material from the gallery storeroom to be used in the installation. He didn't want anything new to be purchased. Thus, old pedestals were used. We selected panels, boards, and sawhorse stands from tables in the storeroom. Even the glass was cut from panes of glass that had been used before. Everything was just cleaned and, if necessary, painted white. This wasn't the first time this principle had been applied in art.

IZ: I think that artists in the 1960s and 1970s often worked immediately, on the spot, using materials that were available to do their work. The OHO Group, for example, often came to a gallery or exhibition space and used materials found in storage there, or maybe in the local shops. Sometimes they invented works based on the materials they found. For example, they often used exhibition equipment, especially glass plates. An important work by David Nez, "The Roof" (1969), which consists of a roof placed on a gallery floor, was created when the artist found a pile of old roof tiles at a nearby house that was under renovation at the time of the exhibition.

VH: What distinguished Kovanda's approach was that he wanted the materials used to be cleaned and painted so that it looked as if they had been made for the installation. Unless someone was informed beforehand, there was no way they'd be able to find out at the exhibition itself.

In the script for Kovanda's action titled "Divadlo" (Theater), which took place in the heart of Prague on Wenceslas Square in November 1976, one reads: "I follow a previously written script to the letter. Gestures and movements have been selected so that passers-by will not suspect that they are watching a 'performance.'" Kovanda scratched his nose, ran his fingers through his hair, crossed his legs, held onto a railing, and so on. It's clear that he chose such inconspicuous gestures so that not even the most perceptive passer-by would have a clue that it had been planned – let alone that it was an artistic activity – and conceived beforehand. At the moment it was carried out, the action was invisible. It was perceived only from a great distance by a camera that was held by a friend of Kovanda. It could only acquire meaning when it was presented to a secondary public. Another dimension of the action was the process that occurred within Kovanda himself. But one doesn't learn any details of this process, which raises questions for the secondary viewer.

The fact that one could watch an ordinary activity straight from everyday life and regard it as an artistic situation solely on the basis of information obtained after the fact meant that Kovanda had stripped the situation of all the frames, pedestals, galleries, and quotation marks that separate artistic activity from the everyday.

PP: This reminds me a little of the anti-institutional impulse that manifested itself in the late 1960s among critics and artists connected with the Warsaw Foksal Gallery. They attempted to neutralize the institutional framing of artistic activities and systematically rejected the main principles according to which galleries operate: principles guiding how exhibitions are put on and other principles related to time, place, public life, and criticism.

VH: One and the same activity was invisible (because it was ordinary, unnoticeable) to the passer-by, while it was art for the secondary viewer. Kovanda was interested in and identified with the most ephemeral gestures of everyday life – the gestures that, when repeated, constitute ordinariness. And ordinariness is invisible. In the filmed action "I Am Making Art" (1971), John Baldessari made all sorts of ordinary gestures and bodily movements for twenty minutes, all the while repeating the words "I am making art." The premises behind both actions are closely related. Even quite ordinary gestures which are basically invisible can be art, as long as we present them that way to a secondary public (Kovanda), or even the most ordinary gestures made as a performance in front of a camera can be art, as long as we clearly label them as such (Baldessari). Baldessari's approach is partly ironic, whereas Kovanda's is more politely lyrical.

IZ: When I prepared a retrospective exhibition of the OHO Group in 1994, some critics thought that such an exhibition couldn't be a faithful representation of the work of the artists, whose works were so intimately bound up with the situation they'd arisen in. Kovanda's work illustrates the complex relations between action, documentation, and audience – and thus between an actual situation and information about it – particularly well. His actions can be taken to be art because they've been documented. However, the documentation itself is not art, as Vit pointed out. Nonetheless, I think that, paradoxically, neither is the situation itself – that is to say the situation without the particular framework given by the artistic context. Therefore, I think that in this case the work of art is constituted – with the help of the documentation – in the viewer's relationship (involving reflection and perhaps even empathy) to a past situation. The relation to the past immediacy of a situation that's now lost and to the invisibility that we're made aware of, is, I think, a constitutive element of the work.

VH: According to this logic, the photographic documentation of Kovanda's actions wasn't conceived as artwork. Rather, it was intended as a set of instructions for the secondary public to add their own empathy or imagine the artist's situation for themselves.

PP: It's interesting that many years later, when commenting upon the projects in which he merged artistic activity with the everyday (e.g. in his Motion Picture of 2000), Polish artist Pawel Althamer described them in terms of "film." This probably has to do with the "super-natural" character of his work.

IZ: The difference between Althamer's projects and Kovanda's work, however, was that Kovanda's immediate audience wasn't aware that there was an action going on, while Althamer invited people to attend his performances ("films"), but the visitors were unable to say for certain what was performance and what was just everyday life. In one case there was an unexpected shift or incompatibility in reality; in the other, there was a shift in perception as the audience, searching for the "film," started to look at the situation in a new, more attentive way.

IV. 1. The Character of Places

VH: The first clue to an interpretation of Kovanda's actions and installations is place: the locations where they occurred. These can be divided into several groups. Most of the actions and installations were held on the street, in squares and parks; that is, in public urban spaces. A second group of actions took place in warehouses and apartments with the participation of the public. A third group took place in apartments or people's homes without the participation of the public.

Here it's necessary to recall what the parameters of "public space" were like under socialism. With the exception of private spaces, like apartments, spaces were potentially guarded and controlled by the political authorities. Now, on the one hand this assertion is truthful; on the other hand, it's not entirely adequate. Familiar tools – such as cameras and wiretaps – were used on high-profile people and places. The police strategically assigned secret agents and informers to specific people, organizations, and enterprises. The space of the media was closely guarded. The distribution of parallel information and knowledge was tied to private spaces (samizdat publications; seminars, theater performances, and concerts held in people's homes, etc.). The political apparatus didn't have the technical capacity to supervise all public space, so it proceeded quite rationally. It focused its attention on the people and places who were known to constitute a threat, as well as on the mass media. Kovanda's micro-situations were held in public spaces, but they never attracted the attention of the police or other repressive bodies.

IZ: Today, it's sometimes unusual to think about the life people led in socialist regimes – particularly the more politically repressive ones – as "normal." It's true that life was heavily controlled and influenced by the party-and-state apparatus. But it's also true that, especially in periods of relative stability, politics was certainly not the only issue on artists' minds. On the one hand, the fact that they were largely excluded from social eminence was a factor in many artists' decisions to develop techniques and styles of reflection that were quite committed. On the other hand, there remained social spheres and public spaces that weren't very closely monitored by the apparatus where it was possible to be active even in quite radical ways. They dealt with the more general questions, such as the potentialities and outer limits of art, the relationships between art, creativity, and life, etc., and not just with the ways an artistic activity could be used as a political tool. If we interpreted the action by Kovanda in which he stood with extended arms in the square as, for example, a personification of a crucified nation suffering under a repressive regime and not as a situation that involves an artist making a mental and bodily effort and causing a strange disturbance in the daily routine of the passers-by, we'd completely miss the point of the piece. Of course, the directly political aspect was often present as well, especially in periods of crisis. I think that during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, for instance, many protest actions came very close to being artistic actions, and vice versa. We should keep in mind, however (as both Vit and Pawel point out), that even works and actions that had no deliberate political content could have a political significance, especially (but not exclusively) if they were performed in a public space. Even small, all but invisible interventions like Kovanda's could represent a disturbance in the order of things and thus an unidentified but clear threat to the understanding that the status quo was something "natural."

VH: As mentioned above, Kovanda rejected a strictly political interpretation of his work – that is, his actions never attempted to change the awareness of the passers-by, the primary public, the crowd. For example, the action dated September 3, 1977 ("On an escalator … turning around, I look into the eyes of the person standing behind me … "), wasn't motivated by a desire to enter into communication with the person standing on the escalator whose eyes he'd be looking into. Of course that wasn't ruled out, but it wasn't the aim. Today, photographs of actions in which the artist is at the center of the viewfinder can have this dimension. If we set aside his central position for a moment and focus on the background, all of a sudden the photographs lose their monumental dimension. And this is precisely the kind of perceptual shift that corresponds to Kovanda's understanding of his activities. His concentration and expectations were projected into the changes that his activity would bring about in him, initially, and subsequently in the people who came to his exhibitions.

This stance is a sign of the great shift that occurred in the relation between the performer and the secondary and primary publics, and in the way they interact. When one compares Kovanda's work with the activities of the Czech action artist Milan Knížák fifteen years earlier, it's clear that Knížák's works were primarily focused on changing the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of the public or participant. In "2. manifestace aktuálního umění" (2nd Manifestation of Actual Art) (1963), Demonstrace jednoho ("A Demonstration of One") and a number of other actions and activities of Knížák's, it's clear that his activity aimed, in general, to have a direct impact on the primary public. Thus, at a given moment, the street became a unique site of interaction and communication between specific participants.

Moving on to the typology of place in Kovanda's actions, one notices, first and foremost, the great many actions that were held in squares. It was often the actions that his friends participated in that took place in squares. That's connected, no doubt, with the archetypal symbolism of the idea of the encounter, the agora, an earthly and metaphysical or mythical crossroads. Under socialism, squares were sites of great "people's" demonstrations organized by the political authorities to celebrate political ideas (the Great October Socialist Revolution, May Day (Labor Day), Liberation Day, etc.). In the communist era, a new political scheme and naturally a new political iconography replaced religion. There certainly must have been a motivation behind Kovanda's constant need to return to squares, which he never recognized explicitly. Perhaps he was motivated by the fact that a group of people on a square is a natural phenomenon, whereas a group standing on a sidewalk would block the flow of passers-by. Obviously, the group of friends observing or participating in his actions wasn't supposed to draw attention to itself. Rather, it was supposed to be part of the ordinary urban landscape.

Kovanda's most spectacular action, dated November 19, 1976, took place in Wenceslas Square, in the heart of Prague. Kovanda stood with arms spread (de facto in the position of the crucifixion), facing the stream of pedestrians and parting the crowd. Kovanda resolutely rejected the metaphor of the crucifixion, so close to that of the square, and commented that in this as in other, similar actions, he was more interested in achieving a cathartsic experience with the anonymous passers-by. The theme of the obstacle in this action, the position that the artist find himself in, has an existential dimension and one could analyze it in a number of different contexts.

The above-mentioned action, dated September 3, 1977 ("On an escalator … turning around, I look into the eyes of the person standing behind me…"), which took place on one of the first escalators running down to an underground metro station, must have been inspired by the way people were behaving on what was then a recent technological innovation. It's interesting that Jan Ságl's experimental film from 1970–1971, "Underground," was made on the same escalator. Ságl placed a camera at the top of the escalator and filmed the constantly changing faces of people churned out by the escalator. This film was unedited; it was the first Czech real-time film. The topos of the stairs was important for Kovanda. He's mentioned one of Karel Miler's actions which also took place on a staircase as being important for him. In Kovanda's installation "Kožich" (Fur) (Winter 1982), he wrapped the end of a handrail with a furry sleeve in order to warm it up and soften its edges. The setting for this installation was also a set of stairs leading down to Střelecký Island in Prague.

Two of his installations, "Slaný roh, Sladký oblouk" (Salty Corner, Sweet Curve) (Winter 1981) and "Dvě bílé hromádky" (Two White Heaps) (Winter 1980), were set up on a bridge, the symbolism of which could also be subjected to analysis. In this connection, it's more interesting to look at precisely where the bridge installations were situated. Both installations on the bridge were removed from the main current of pedestrians and they weren't at eye level. The location of his installation "Věže cukru" (Sugar Towers) (Spring 1981) was of a similarly marginal character. Kovanda's location strategy is characterized by the need to focus on places on the margins, on the periphery of attention, in the corner of one's visual field.

PP: One more Polish reference: Jerzy Rosolowicz and his conception of the creative act as a "neutral activity" – the kind of activity which is purposeless and anti-utopian. An instantiation of this conception can be found in "Rosolowicz's Naczynie do łowienia rosy" (Utensil for Catching Dew) (1974), an inconspicuous and transparent cone-shaped object with a small opening; it served both to catch dew and to let it escape. There's a clear analogy between this work and Jiri Kovanda's "sculptural" works or actions, such as those of May 19, 1977.

IV.2. Corners

VH: On an abstract level, the metaphor of the corner appears in the imagination of many artists (from Bruce Naumann and Edward Krasinski to Miklos Erdély, Stanislav Kolíbal, and many others). The position of an object or a body in a corner illustrates the hopeless situation of the individual who's reached the limits of his physical possibilities. The external environment prevents him from continuing on the path he's chosen. The limitations appear to be insurmountable, but if he could just break through the wall, he'd end up "on the other side," in a different world, a different reality.

IV. 3. In People's Homes

The installations and actions that Kovanda set up and carried out in domestic settings constitute a special group. Kovanda never had a studio (which was the case with many other unofficial artists, too); Andrei Erofeev joked about this with Ilya Kabakov: "There was no distance, not even a symbolic distance, no countertop or partition to set the sacred tools of creativity and adoration apart from domestic utensils – like there is for instance, in a shared kitchen where a man eats his meals at the same table at which he writes the manuscript of a future book; from time to time he has to cry out: 'For God's sake, would you move over a bit! Can't you see I'm working? Why do you have to put the soup there, of all places, Mom?'" Kovanda's work systematically blended together with his everyday activities. The installation's title "Bílý provázek doma" (White String at Home) (November 19–26, 1979), and "Bez názvu" (Untitled) (1980 Uhlíře), thematize the domestication of a certain object (a wooden slat) or an obstacle (a string stretched across a room) as an experience of co-existing with an everyday object placed in an inappropriate position. In a certain way, these installations thematize the geometrical contrast between tools used for doing a variety of things, and domestic and natural environments.

V. The Body As Sign

VH: Kovanda didn't work with his body as a social symbol, although his clothing and hairstyle were significant in this respect. In the actions of the Czech body artists Jan Mlčoch and Petr Štembera, the body was a material extension of a spiritual dimension. They saw their bodies as connected to an absurd series of everyday activities; the body lived mechanically and mechanically attended to and experienced its needs, while its spiritual life was distinctly unsatisfying. Mlčoch's and Štembera's brutal and painful activities overcame the division and restored the physical and spiritual integrity of the individual through painful experiences. Although Mlčoch, Štembera, and Miler were in the same circle as Kovanda (some of their actions were carried out at the same place, one after the other), their starting points were different. Kovanda's work was doubtless closest to the poetic experience of Karel Miler. Kovanda didn't thematize the body. Rather, he perceived it in an integral way and defined his parallel modules of experience and relationships within this relative unity.

IZ: At this point, I'd like to mention three conceptions of the body that I find important in Eastern European art. (I'm speaking specifically about Eastern art, as the use of the body in the "East" depended – whether directly or indirectly – on the discourses and practices used to construct an ideology of the body that was different from that of the West.) In the first, the body expresses the need to be liberated from social conventions and traditional limitations (for example through play, nakedness, sexual activities, and different types of excesses). An example of this conception might be found in the work of Tomislav Gotovac, in the way he uses the naked body. In the second conception, the body is the object of self-aggression and self-torture (proving the predominance of the spirit over the body). The works of the artists mentioned earlier are excellent examples of this. The third involves rituals, bodily practices and "disciplinizations" that lead to a harmonious relationship between spirit and body, and to harmony with the universe. (The late work of the OHO Group is a good example here.) So there's also the aspect of the interdependence of body and mind in these approaches. The role of the body in Kovanda's actions can't be neatly subsumed under any of these conceptions, although it could perhaps be connected at least to the second and the third. I agree that his actions aren't body art in the most direct sense, and yet they are at least closely connected to it because of the effort and discipline, both physical and mental, involved in them.

VI. 1. A Distinct Historical Paradigm

VH: Kovanda, along with several other Czech artists (such as Vladimír Boudník, Jiří Kolář, and Milan Knížák), didn't have the sort of traditional artistic education provided by the Academy of Fine Arts or the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design. Although these figures differed considerably from one another, they had one thing in common: the radical quality of their thinking. One result of this was that they brought to postwar art a new type of relationship between the content and the form of a work.

People who are self-taught are free in their treatment of history; they go through it selectively and do so at their leisure. Kovanda has said that he was always interested in American action art, in which "gritty actions predominated." As far as Czech art was concerned, Kovanda followed the work of Stanislav Kolíbal closely. To a certain extent, his ephemeral installations were an ironic paraphrase of Kolíbal's work, stripped of the existential dimension. Karel Miler introduced Kovanda to Zen literature, such as D. T. Suzuki's writings about Zen Buddhism and Eugen Herrigel's Zen in the "Art of Archery."

VII. 1. Science, Bureaucracy

VH: One has to give some thought to the status of technical documentation since, if one concludes that Kovanda's activities were invisible from the perspective of the primary public, it follows that the documentation of his actions and installations involved a process in which their form was crystallized for a secondary public.

Consequently, each one of Kovanda's works exists in two forms: first, as a work presented to a primary public and second, as its documentation. The documentation frames Kovanda's actions and installations pictorially and textually; it also frames them in that it is intended for use in informing about and exhibiting his work and reproducing it in publications.

The accounts which Kovanda, in accordance with prevalent conceptual tradition and trends, understood as the "documentation" of his actions are presented in a simple A4 or similar format. One or more black-and-white photographs are stuck on the paper; there's also a brief typed text, which is something between a script and a commentary on the action that has taken place. As a result, they look like technical or scientific reports or even police proceedings. The method used is noticeably de-subjectivized. The reports make use of the format and method of illustration used in the exact sciences and also by bureaucratic and administrative structures. The format of the reports was standardized, as was the system he used to document the series of actions and installations he did from 1976 to 1982. A separate documentation sheet was drawn up for each action and installation, a practice which wasn't unique in the context of the conceptual trends of the time.

PP: In Poland this was related to special ontological approach to artistic questions. According to Jerzy Ludwinski, the art theoretician mentioned above, the artistic process, which he conceived as autonomous and objective, manifests itself either in the form of score for an action or in the form of its documentation. For him, what’s - “between” these two phases – the very content or essence of the work, the immaterial, the extra-sensual – is what’s most interesting. His main concern was the question of the possibility, or rather the impossibility, of finding the means of communicating it.

VH: There’s also a clear gap between image and text, which constitute two layers of documentation that reflect on one another. Kovanda’s friend, the amateur photographer Karel Tuč, photographed his actions, but Kovanda usually photographed the installations himself. We could say that Kovanda’s photos have a documentary function with no direct artistic ambitions. In contrast, the texts, although descriptive and precise, create their own sort of inner space. The first sign of the their openness are the ellipses (“ … ”) which invite the viewer to engage his imagination and fill in the implied gap.

IZ: It’d be interesting to rethink the role of documentation. While it certainly doesn’t make a work of art, it nevertheless does have some aesthetic qualities, even though Kovanda, along with many other artists at time, obviously tried to avoid them. The “non-aesthetic” photographs, the short and precise texts and the strict systematic character of this documentation could be understood as a new form of a poetic visual and verbal language, and thus as an important additional element in Kovanda’s work.

VII. 2. Kovanda stopped performing actions, and didn’t return to them until 2000. We decided to include his recent work in the catalogue as well. Kovanda didn’t bother with the format of the documentation of the actions after 2000, carrying out the actions without documenting them. Thus, the format of the photographs presented here approximates Kovanda’s strategy from the 1970s, but without the internal precision – as in, for example, the installation which was part of the exhibition UberlebensKunst (“Survival Art”) in Berlin, where, before the opening, Kovanda threw cooked spaghetti on a wall so it would stick. There’s only a poor photograph of this gallery installation showing Kovanda throwing the spaghetti. This action took place before the opening, so according to the logic of Kovanda’s work, the documentation should include a photograph of spaghetti on the wall and a short text describing the action. Considering that there’s no such photograph and that today Kovanda doesn’t consider documentation important, we decided on a method close to the one he used in the 1970s.

VIII. Actions: relationships – passers-by, friends

VH: One can distinguish two types of figures in the photographs of Kovanda’s actions. The first are passers-by, anonymous pedestrians. On the level of personal experience, they were, for Kovanda, a theme in some of his actions. But even for him, they didn’t lose their street anonymity. They were “used” for that very anonymity and their de-subjectified character. The indifference involved in the relationship with passers-by was thematized most strikingly in the action titled “Kontakt” (Contact), in which chance passers-by were touched in a gentle brushing gesture. This activity shifted the threshold of interest in the chance figure, familiar from Acconci’s Street Works. In his “Following Piece” (1969), for example, Acconci followed a passer-by, selected at random, until he entered a private space (a house, an office).

Kovanda related differently with the group of friends and acquaintances who were invited to his actions. This group knew that something was going to happen. They had been invited, but, just like the anonymous crowd, they had no idea exactly what was going to happen. Like the passers-by, they too were part of the script (“I invited some friends to … ”; “I invited some friends to watch me … ”; “I had arranged to meet some friends at 7:40 pm … ”; “I arranged to meet a few friends … ”).

Kovanda didn’t arrange the friends who came to his actions into a hierarchical order determined by their degree of intimacy. Rather, he saw them as one group, in which friends mixed with acquaintances. His friends, like the passers-by, were seen as highly de-subjectivized. The action elevated them and subsumed them under a universally comprehensible concept (everyone has friendships of different types with different people).

The center around which Kovanda’s actions revolved was the discovery of alternative relationships that the artist could have with the two types of groups. He was aiming at the convergence of his relationships with them. One generally associates friends with an intimate space, and this was particularly true if we recall what we said before about private spaces under socialism (that there was a free flow of information and interactive discussion in them). Nonetheless, the actions with friends took place in public spaces. Kovanda was thus aiming to overcome the closed nature of intimate space; he exposed personal and private relationships to the outer world (as in the actions on squares, the action dated November 18, 1976 – “Waiting for someone to call me,” etc.). In contrast, he re-evaluated on a personal level his relationship to passers-by, and in his later installations his relationship to a “foreign” public space. He overcame his shyness and discovered types of relationships that he could have with the anonymous crowd in such works as “Kontakt” (Contact), dated September 3, 1977, and so on.

PP: What Jiří Kovanda’s work seems to diagnose is the crisis of authorship and the absence of authorial intention, and the concomitant impossibility of expressing or communicating anything. This is why he explores the possibilities provided by entering into relationships with viewers in unofficial ways, beyond an institutional framework.

IX. The 1980s and 1990s

VH: In the 1980s and 1990s, Kovanda’s work manifested a certain flightiness of idiom. He didn’t identify permanently with actions, painting, objects, or collages. He worked in different media for long periods of time, alternating over the years. In the era of Kippenberger, this was hardly surprising, but it did attenuate the reception of Kovanda’s work in the Czech milieu. When he was interviewed by Jiří David, they decided to call the interview “Kam vítr, tam plášť” (Where there’s wind, there a coat). The reference to the expressions “to be a turncoat,” and “to trim one’s sails to every wind” drew attention to Kovanda’s scepticism regarding any kind of stabilized visual idiom. The first turning point captured in the book was the disappearance of the subject. In 1978, Kovanda’s performance work went in a new direction: the artist began to focus intensively on the creation of ephemeral installations in urban spaces. These “micro-interventions” referred to and ironically paraphrased Minimalism and the formalist idiom of sculptures and installations in a manner typical of Kovanda. For the most part, he used found objects and other everyday materials and forms (like sugar, salt, dried flowers, crumpled paper, leaves, and pine needles) in these installations.

X. Openness, a system of objective subjectivity

VH: In discussions with Georg Schoelhammer, we touched on the interesting issues of the reality of the public, the communicative quality of actions, and the degree of openness and interactivity with respect to the public in actions like Kovanda’s. The historical activities of the action artists of the East are often interpreted as protests attempting to interfere with the control of the political authorities over public spaces, but I believe that they only have this character in rare instances (in Czechoslovakia, for example, this character was only evident in Knížák’s work).

PP: In Polish art there are a number of instances of “neutral” work designed for public contexts, such as Jaroslaw Kozlowski’s “Strefa wyobrazni” (Imagination Zone) (1970), for which a number of signs with “IMAGINATION ZONE” inscribed on them were displayed in various public places – or Krzysztof Wodiczko’s “Vehicle” (1974), the first in a series, which was operated by the artist in the streets of Warsaw. It would be difficult to deny the political significance of these works. Even if not overtly critical of the political system, they nonetheless disturbed the functioning of administrative infrastructure around them. It’s the dimension in which the works are received that seems provide the political significance of works of art.

VH: The dichotomy between institutional and “free” art, which was automatically considered by the public to be marginal, was fundamental at the time within the framework of Czechoslovakia and part of the communist Eastern Bloc. In the socialist system, if an artist decided to make free art, he put himself in the position of an anti-official, marginal outsider, removed from the public. In doing what he did, he didn’t answer to publicly controlled and socially interactive values, but to a subjectively defined absolute. Andrei Erofeev speaks of the “paranoid behavior and mental schizophrenia” caused by this duality. Koller aptly referred to the individual’s definition of the relevant criteria in a work of art as “the system of subjective objectivity.” Komar and Melamid commented incisively in one of their texts on “the space of authentic existence.” When an artist decided to take the path of free art, he polarized the world. He proclaimed his independence and official culture reacted with indifference and cut off his contacts with the world. As a result, the artist found himself in a neutral intellectual space which he then occupied, creating a framework of inner freedom for himself. He cut off his artistic ties to the public space – in fact, the ties were almost completely cut off in both directions. It was “only” everyday ties that connected him to real life. For some artists, such as those discussed above, these ties were transferred to the center of attention after the fact, because they were all that remained.

Authors

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currently works at the Academy of Fine Arts, where he founded research centrer and lectures on the history of modern 20th-century art. In the 1960s he was editor of *Architektura* magazine and worked in the department of History of Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture. He has published reviews and theoretical texts on contemporary art and focused on the problem of mental maps and hybrid structures in architecture. In the 1970s and 1980s he was curator of several exhibitions of contemporary art in alternative spaces. From 1990 to 1993, he was head curator of the Gallery of the City of Prague, and from 1993 to 1996 he was director of the Modern and Contemporary Art Collection of the National Gallery in Prague. He has curated and co-curated many exhibitions of contemporary Czech art in the Czech Republic and abroad, such as "Zweiter Ausgang" (Second Exit), Ludwig Forum, Aachen "Abstrakt/Real and Aspekte/Positionen," Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, 1996, 2000; "Jiří Kovanda, Vladimír Skrepl," Forum Stadtpark, Graz, 1995; "Prague-Bratislava," Musée de l'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1992; "Kunst Europe 1991," Kunstverein Braunschweig, 1991; "ÜberlebensKunst" (Survival Art), Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 2000; "Současná česká malba" (Contemporary Czech Painting), Walker Hill Art Center, Seoul, 1990; "Vzdálené podobnosti" (Distant Resemblances), Národní galerie v Praze, 1999, and others. In 2001, he and other colleagues published an anthology of texts on Czech art from 1938–1989 which is currently being prepared for publication in German and English editions.

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earned a degree in comparative literature, philosophy, and art history from the University of Ljubljana. After spending two years as an assistant at the Comparative Literature Department at the Ljubljana Faculty of Arts, he joined the staff of the Moderna Galerija Ljubljana in 1986 as senior curator, presenting several solo and group exhibitions of artists from Slovenia and several other countries. He was the coordinator of Manifesta 3, which took place in Ljubljana in 2000, and was co-editor, along with Viktor Misiano, of the *Manifesta Journal*. Jestli ano, tak kurzivou. Jestli ne, tak ne). In 2003 he worked as curator for one of the sections of the 50th Venice Biennial. He also co-curated "The Seven Sins," Ljubljana, 2004–2005. Zabel's research concentrated primarily on post-communist literature and art in Eastern and Central Europe. He also published two books of essays on contemporary art as well as numerous articles in catalogues and magazines (*Art Journal*, *Art Press*, *Flash Art*, *Index*, *Moscow Art Magazine*, and others). He was a member of the international advisory board of the tranzit initiative.