

Jirí Sevcík and Georg Schöllhammer

in conversation

on the work of Jirí Kovanda:

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on the work of Jirí Kovanda:

Sugar cubes don't have sharp edges; they disintegrate immediately when it rains.

SEV: Do you sense that Kovanda's work was created in a different milieu?

SCH: Jirí Kovanda's starting point was the late 1970s in Prague. With its particular history of performance art, from Kniak's Fluxus in the 1960s to Miler and Ml och, as well as ·tembera, 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.

SEV: 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 atmosphere – 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 revealed 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.

SEV: 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?

SEV: After the many symposia of the 1980s and 1990s, which were overly concerned with questions of identity and centre 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 building 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-Fluxes 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.

SEV: 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 politic 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 restricted 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 bureaucratic 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.

SEV: 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 subtler, 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 ·tembera and others. Some works by ·tembera 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.

SEV: 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 an 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.

SEV: 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: ·temberas performances represent the great Baroque theatre 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.

SEV: 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 Kovanda's 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.

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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 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.

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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 'tembera'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.

SEV: 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.

SEV: Miscellanea 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.

SEV: 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 ready-made 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?

SEV: 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?

SEV: 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?

SEV: 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 Julius Koller in Slovakia

SEV: 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?

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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 Koli bal did try something.

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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.”

SEV: 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.

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

SCH: It’s a totally empty form of painting. It says only “I’m a painting” and nothing else. It’s not post modern 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 post modern 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 diletantism, 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.

SEV: 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 post modern 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.

SEV: 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 colour. And Jiří Kovanda was always rather reluctant to do that.

SEV: Yes, again we have a series of issues that are important to us. For example, all art in the 1970s and 1980s 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.

SEV: ... 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.

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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...

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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 Koli bal. The narrative is inscribed in those readymades as well.

SEV: They are talking worlds.

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

SEV: 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.

SEV: 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 Chaloupecký, 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.

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

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