

UNDER THE SKIN: A THEATRICAL EXPLORATION OF ART, POLITICS, AND FIELDWORK DYNAMICS¹

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Abstract: *Under the Skin* is a play that explores art production in state-socialist Czechoslovakia during the normalization period. It investigates the slippery meaning of the word politics in relation to totalitarianism and performance art, and discusses how internalized taken-for-granted social rules can be made evident through artistic inquiry. The script offers insights into the improvisational nature of fieldwork, and invites producers and consumers of ethnographies to reflect on the ethical and affective dimensions of anthropological labour and knowledge production.

Keywords: *ethnographic drama; Czechoslovakia; performance art; state-socialism; censorship; Jiří Kovanda*

Pre-script

Under the Skin is a play for two actors that explores the dynamics of visual art production and politics in state-socialist Czechoslovakia, a theme that has interested me for over thirty years (Svašek 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2001, 2022, 2020a, 2020b, 2012, 2018, 2022). The script investigates the

¹ A different version of this text has been published as the article “Invasive Writing: Exploring Subjectivity, Performativity and Politics in the Art of Jiří Kovanda” in the journal *Liminalities* in the special issue “Performance and Politics, Power and Protest”, editors Kayla Rush and Sonja Kleij (see Svašek 2022).

slippery meaning of the word *politics* in relation to 20th century totalitarianism and performance art, and explores how internalized taken-for-granted social rules can be made evident through artistic inquiry.²

The script also offers insights into the improvisational nature of fieldwork, confronting the reader with an embodied sense of the anxieties, hesitations, and negotiations that commonly shape ethnographic knowledge production. This methodological meta-perspective urges the co-producers (researchers and research participants) and consumers (readers and instructors) of ethnographies to reflect on the ethics and affective relationality of anthropological labour.

The two characters central to the play enact a walking interview that I carried out in 2017 in Prague with the Czech artist Jiří Kovanda.³ During the encounter, he showed me some of the locations where he had performed non-conformist art in the 1970s and 1980s. The script is a logical extension of an experiment in “invasive writing”, in which I presented my own *and* Kovanda’s voice from a first-person perspective (Svašek 2022). The stylistic departure from mainstream ethnography allowed me to intimately explore the enfolding interaction through spoken and inner dialogue. For obvious reasons, this invasive act needed the artist’s approval, which he kindly granted.

Eager to experiment further, I decided to turn the text into a play to be performed at the 7th PACSA⁴ conference in 2019.⁵ Familiar with early theatre experiments by the anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, I was unaware of

² The questions raised by the play about the dynamics of in/visibility, knowledge production, politics and public space continue to be topical today. Numerous governments employ oppressive surveillance techniques to silence their citizens and remove unwanted individuals from the public realm. Digital media afford the circulation of biased information across the globe. Algorithms create feedback loops that produce and perpetuate preconceptions and lies. Apart from providing insights into life under State Socialism, *Under the Skin* intends to stimulate critical reflection on these 21st century processes.

³ The interview took place on the June 24, 2017. The script also draws on a second interview with the artist earlier that month in the garden of the Academy of Fine Arts (*Akademie výtvarných umění v Praze*), and relies on fieldnotes written after several informal meetings. It incorporates quotes by a number of Czech art historians from their writings on Kovanda’s work (Ševčík and Schöllhammer 2006; Jeřábková 2010; Humhal 2019; Morganová 2019, 2020) and refers to the artist’s own published reflections (David and Kovanda 1991; Havránek and Kovanda 2004).

⁴ PACSA was established as a network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in 2005. It draws together scholars from all over Europe and beyond to facilitate co-operation and collaboration in the fields of peace and conflict studies in anthropology.

⁵ I also experimented at the time with representational and performative styles to discuss a game of visual exploration, played in 2018. Using two screens, I presented “Between Facts, Fictions and Fun: Spatiality, Temporarily and Multi-Sensorial Improvisation” at the Sharing Space II Conference, organized at Queen’s University Belfast in the Brian Friel Theatre in 2019 (see also Svašek 2020).

more recent examples of ethnographic drama.⁶ Invited by Richard Schechner⁷ in the late 1970s, the Turners had collaborated with anthropology and drama students, creating a play based on Victor Turner's fieldwork among the Ndembu in Northern Rhodesia (Turner 1957, 1968). According to Turner (1979, 85), "An actor who enacts ethnography has to learn the cultural rules behind the roles played by the character he is representing".⁸ In the case of my own play, I provided historical information to encourage the two young non-Czech actors to identify with their roles. I explained how the Prague Spring, a period of relative freedom in Communist Czechoslovakia, had suddenly ended when the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact army invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968.⁹ The invasion had a devastating impact on public life and culture, and a system of strict censorship was reintroduced as the authoritarian wing of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia took control over the country. This was the context in which Kovanda had created his works.

To produce a play, I had to rewrite the text in a script format and add stage instructions. The need for these emerged when I rehearsed with two drama students who experimented with different bodily movements, gestures, facial expressions, and intonations.¹⁰ This introduced an element of collaboration and performance normally absent in standard ethnography. Polly Iakovleva took on the role of the artist, and Ash Jones played the anthropologist. The fact that both actors were female was unproblematic, as gender was not central to the play. We

⁶ See, for example Saldaña 2005 and 2011; Moretti 2008; Kaur 2017; Garbovan 2019; Mazzetti 2019; Skilton 2020; and see for more information about Raminder Kaur's collaborative projects <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/research/projects/co-power/theatre/>; www.sohayavisions.com www.placesforall.co.uk www.aldaterra.com/

⁷ Professor of drama who worked at the time at New York University, see also Schechner 2002.

⁸ See also Turner 1980.

⁹ See for basic details McDermott 2015, Rychlík and Penčev 2018. Prague House of Photography (2008) published a book of photographs taken during the invasion.

¹⁰ The students did not co-write the script with me, and we did not have the luxury of working with an experienced director as in the case of the Turners. Victor Turner (1979, 91) commented on the collaborative nature of the process, writing that "[t]he playscript, of course, would be subject to continuous modification during the rehearsal process, which would lead up to an actual performance. At this stage, we would need an experienced director, preferably one familiar with anthropology and with non-Western theater (like Schechner or Peter Brook), and certainly familiar with the social structure and the rules and themes underlying the surface structures of the culture being enacted. There would be a constant back-and-forth movement from anthropological analysis of the ethnography, which provides the details for enactment, to the synthesizing and integrating activity of dramatic composition, which would include sequencing scenes, relating the words and actions of the characters to previous and future events, and rendering actions in appropriate stage settings".



Figure 1. Polly Iakovleva (on the left) and Ash Jones (on the right) performing *Under the Skin*. Photograph by Fiona Murphy, 2019. Used with permission.

were limited by financial constraints, as I could not pay them enough to learn their lines, so they read them out, holding the script in their hands (Figure 1). To heighten dramatic tension, I decided to shorten the “invasive writing” text and create a new ending.

I also had to think about costumes, stage design, sound, and lighting. We decided on simple black outfits and a shirt for Polly that resembled Kovanda’s on the photographs projected on the back of the stage. A few stage props helped bring to life the scene of the walking interview: a camera around the anthropologist’s neck, a catalogue placed on a coffee table with chairs placed around it as part of the “café” (Figure 2). In addition, various research materials gained temporary stage presence as screen projections, including photographs of Kovanda taken during our walk, and a few pictures taken at the time of his actions. I also included various quotes to emphasize the theme of the play, and instructed the actors to interact with the projections in particular ways (see script below).

The spatial setting of the conference limited the theatricality of the performance. The organisers had assigned a room with large curtain-less windows and unsuitable features such as a huge painting, large radiators, a wall-to-wall

Figure 2. The actors looking at Kovanda's catalogue. Photograph by Fiona Murphy, 2019. Used with permission.



carpet, a banner advertising the university, and a projection screen too small to serve as a proper backdrop. The projections intended to evoke the Prague setting and Kovanda's presence, but they were hardly visible to have the intended visual impact (Figures 1, 3). While a proper theatre would have been the ideal performance space, the conference theme of "Creativity, Resistance, and Hope: Towards an Anthropology of Peace",¹¹ contextualized the play very well. Post-performance comments and questions from the audience revealed that we had managed to communicate the main gist of the play. The experiment demonstrated that the theatre format was an appropriate genre for posing anthropologically relevant questions, presenting ethnographic findings and investigating practices of fieldwork.

¹¹ See <https://pacsa-web.eu/pacsa-conference-2019-belfast/>.



Figure 3. Polly Iakovleva stretches her arms out. She is copying a photograph of Kovanda's pose in 1976, projected behind her on the slide. Photograph by Fiona Murphy, 2019. Used with permission.



Figure 4. Kovanda stretches his arms out wide in one of the photographs projected as Polly Iakovleva stretched her arms out on stage. Photograph by Maruška Svašek, 2017.



Figure 5. Photograph of Kovanda's performance on November 19 1976. Copyright by Jiří Kovanda. Used with permission. This is one of three photographs projected when Polly Iakovleva stretched her arms out on stage.

Script

[Backdrop 1: projection of a photograph of Wenceslas Square]

[SVAŠEK stands on the left, waiting; KOVANDA walks onto the stage from the right]

KOVANDA: When I appear aboveground at the Museum metro entrance, I see her standing by “the horse” between some Chinese tourists. She rang me a few days ago, asking if I could help her with her research ... She is writing a book on Czech art and politics ... Good luck with that! How old would she be? About ten years younger than me? She told me in March that her father had left our joyous Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1948 when he was in his early twenties. That’s a plus, by the way. Her dad couldn’t stand the situation anymore, and ran before the all-seeing eye of Big Brother Stalin had fully opened. She’s been here numerous times, visiting her grandma, having at least some knowledge of life under Communism. Awareness beyond the simplistic Cold War rhetoric that reduces everything and everyone to politics, and imagines “The Communist East” as a place and time of pure terror and oppression ... There was more to us than just that! She wants to “walk the walk”, the one I have done on at least two occasions: once with my friend, the art historian Pavlína Morganová; and once with some of my students ... It’s almost a pilgrimage ... A “sacred” walk that connects locations in Prague, where I made my small interventions many years ago. Unnoticed disruptions ... Performances ... Call it “Art”! I remember so vividly feelings of shock and wonder, when I first saw that toilet by Duchamp.

[Backdrop 2: projection of a photograph of Duchamp’s toilet]

[KOVANDA turns for a moment to look at the toilet. Then turns back to the audience]

KOVANDA: The shock that anything could be art. How liberating! But wait, let me concentrate, here she comes, a camera around her neck. Well, well, she turns her head to kiss me on my cheek.

[Backdrop 3: projection of a photograph of Wenceslas Square]

[SVAŠEK walks to Kovanda, and presses her lips to his cheek. They freeze for a moment]

SVAŠEK: Jirka Kovanda asked me to meet him at 10:00 am near “the horse” on Wenceslas Square. I knew from several publications and the interview

last week that this was where he had performed his first actions. I walk up the street, quickly get a cappuccino for the ridiculous price of 90 crowns, and approach the monument. As usual these days, lots of tourists – what a difference to when I came here as a child in the sixties and seventies. When I walk past the monument, I see the artist coming out of the metro. I wave, and we kiss each other, Dutch style.

[SVAŠEK turns around and kisses KOVANDA three times on his cheeks, starting on the left cheek. KOVANDA turns to the audience]

KOVANDA: I am not fully sure what she wants ... When I ask, she laughs nervously and jokes that “this is a joint performance”. I take her to the fence behind the monument ... Here we go again, but why not? The sun is shining and she is genuinely interested. And of course I don’t really mind being the centre of attention. Who would have known, 32 years ago, that I would return to this spot, reenacting myself? Now teaching at the Academy of Arts, no longer working in the dark depository of the National Museum. It’s still weird ... Let’s concentrate. She’s turning on the recorder.

[Backdrop 4: projection of a photograph of Kovanda standing on the spot of his first action]

[KOVANDA takes on the pose of backdrop 4]

SVAŠEK: He smiles and says, “This is where I stood. I acted as if I was waiting for someone. I created a script beforehand that described the movements I was supposed to make, so what I did was in fact theatre. It was like ... I behaved according to the script. But of course, it was not obvious because my movements were completely normal. I was the only one who knew, and my friend, of course, who took the pictures”.

[Backdrop 5: projection of a photograph of Kovanda sitting at a table looking at the catalogue]

[KOVANDA and SVAŠEK sit down on the chairs and KOVANDA points at pages in the catalogue]

SVAŠEK: Later that day, when we sit in a café, we look at photographs of his performances, printed in his catalogue. There he stands in 1976, a younger version of himself. The accompanying text says ...

[Backdrop 6: projection of the text “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 quoted by Jeřábková 2010,7)]

KOVANDA: 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”.

SVAŠEK: I wondered about his assertion, the other day, that his art is “not political”. He stressed that several times. In fact, it reminded me of the numerous times artists complained to me in 1991 that they were getting fed up with Western journalists who were not really interested in their work but just wanted to hear an adventurous story of “political dissent” ... Yet I cannot help reading the political into his work. This has everything to do with my interest in the emergence of an official art world that was more or less controlled by the Party, a political regime that also controlled public space. As I see it, Kovanda appropriated public space to create art that disagreed with the official Party line. Does that not make it a gesture of resistance?

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA stand up from their chairs and walk to the middle of the stage]

[Backdrop 7: projection of a photograph of Kovanda standing on the spot of his first action]

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA walk until SVAŠEK says the words “we stop” and they stop]

SVAŠEK: Back to 2017, to the fence. After taking a few pictures, we cross the road, turn our backs to the museum and start walking down the street. After about 50 meters, we stop.

[KOVANDA looks around, frowning]

KOVANDA: I don’t remember the *exact* spot ... I think it was a bit further down, where those people are standing.

SVAŠEK: I suggest he takes on *The Pose* ... It’s the one that has been engraved in my mind since I first saw the photograph.

[Backdrop 8: projection of the photograph of Kovanda performing his action in 1976] (see Figure 5)

[SVAŠEK pauses to look at the image on the screen]

SVAŠEK: A crucified Jesus! In this case, my association with political dissent was even more immediate: surely this was a physical statement of suffering and defiance ... or do I misunderstand?

[KOVANDA spreads his arms, his face turned to the audience]

KOVANDA: *[in a serious, dramatic tone]* I stretch my arms out wide.
[KOVANDA stays in that pose, looking far into the distance; SVAŠEK looks at him intensely]

SVAŠEK: With anticipation and the photograph in my mind's eye, I see him spreading his arms wide. Here it comes, I somehow expect a magical moment, a crossover into the past.
[SVAŠEK freezes]

[Backdrop 9: projection of a photograph of Kovanda reenacting the pose] (Figure 4)
[KOVANDA paces]

KOVANDA: I am reminded of those days, when I deeply felt the urge for human contact, and when I designed actions to reflect on the ways in which people ... are ... always ... formed ... by ... society. I thought that by acting out an everyday situation in a scripted – and thus extraordinary – manner, I could pose universal questions about human nature. People keep misinterpreting my interventions as critical commentary on the oppressive workings of the Communist regime.

[KOVANDA pauses and looks at the audience]

KOVANDA: But it is more complicated than that! The art historian Georg Schöllhammer explained this very well in 2006, writing that:

[Backdrop 10: projection of text: “One of the biggest misunderstandings about conceptual work in socialist Eastern Europe is that it is immediately seen as anti-Communist, as a direct criticism of the regime” (Ševčík and Schöllhammer 2006, 110)].

[KOVANDA turns his face to the screen]

KOVANDA: One of the biggest misunderstandings about conceptual work in socialist Eastern Europe is that it is immediately seen as anti-Communist, as a direct criticism of the regime.

[KOVANDA turns to SVAŠEK, who unfreezes]

KOVANDA: He stressed that, if there is a political aim in my work, “the political” is not simply a direct reaction to the political system, but rather a reflection on the way in which the individual is always shaped by societal norms. He understood that well. It has never been my direct aim to take a political position through my work.

[KOVANDA stretches his arms again, looking once more into the distance; SVAŠEK takes a few pictures of KOVANDA then stops with an unsure expression in her eyes]



Figure 6. Two actions by Kovanda. On the left, *Contact*, September 3 1977. On the right, *Untitled*, September 3 1977. Copyright by Jiří Kovanda. Used by permission.

SVAŠEK: I look through the lens, take a few shots ... But then, the magical moment doesn't arrive. What is it? I'm not sure. Something is wrong ... In the original performance, was he not standing with his body turned in the other direction?

[KOVANDA puts his arms down and addresses the audience]

KOVANDA: I also performed everydayness in other performances, for example in the one where I softly bumped into passers-by, and the one where I turned around on an escalator and stared into people's eyes.

[Backdrop 11: projection of two photographs of Kovanda's actions] (Figure 6)

[KOVANDA turns around and looks at himself on the screen]

[KOVANDA turns again to the audience]

KOVANDA: I am quite a shy person, so that felt really awkward ... But that was intentional, putting myself in a awkward position ... Hang on, what is she saying now? Did I *not* face this way in 1976? ... But I *did!*

[KOVANDA spreads his arms again]

SVAŠEK: I saw the photograph in the catalogue a few days ago ...

KOVANDA: Might she be right? Wait a minute, I remember it now, she *is* right!

[KOVANDA turns around, his back to the audience]

[Backdrop 12: photograph of the action in 1976] (Figure 5)

SVAŠEK: He looks puzzled, then laughs and says: Yes, you *are* right, it was like that! You remember it even better than me!



Figure 7. Photograph of Kovanda, facing the right direction. Photograph by Maruška Svašek, 2017.



Figure 8. Kovanda on and by the escalator in 1977 and 2017 respectively. Photograph on the left, 1977. Copyright Jiří Kovanda. Used by permission. Photograph on the right by Maruška Svašek, 2017.

[Backdrop 13: photograph of Kovanda who has turned around] (Figure 7)

[KOVANDA turns around; SVAŠEK takes a few more photographs of KOVANDA]

SVAŠEK: We cross the road and walk on, downhill, until we reach the escalator where he performed another scripted action.

[KOVANDA and SVAŠEK walk a few steps and stop]

[Backdrop 14: photographs of Kovanda standing on and by the escalator]

(Figure 8)

SVAŠEK: He tells me that while going down, he turned around to stare into the eyes of people behind him. It was the exact same escalator, but in the 1970s, many more people used it because there was no crossing above ground. When I ask him whether people laughed at him when he turned around, he says:

(pause)

KOVANDA: No!

(pause)

SVAŠEK: And that –

(pause)

KOVANDA: It wasn't funny!

(pause)

SVAŠEK: I try to picture the action, back then, and remember how people used to be suspicious of unfamiliar others, careful because anybody could be an informer. During one of my visits in the mid-seventies, my relatives became very worried because one of them, who had had too much to drink during a dinner party, had sung an anti-Communist song when we returned home by tram. Their fear did not surprise but still shocked me as it made the everyday effect of repression so real. I was 14 years old, it was 1975 ... But still ... might the action on the escalator not have been perceived as a comic moment? "Why not funny?" I ask. He frowns.

KOVANDA: It created a terribly uncomfortable moment ... It was as uncomfortable for me as for them.

SVAŠEK: So why put yourself in that position?

KOVANDA: Why did I ...? It is hard to explain ... "Well", I try, "I think it's good, sometimes, to put yourself in an *awkward* position, to overcome barriers, overcome shyness and embarrassment. It was *really* a bit embarrassing, but that was good".

SVAŠEK: So does that mean that it made you acutely aware of your physical presence? Like self-harmers ... people who cut themselves?

[pause, Kovanda thinks]

KOVANDA: “You mean like Štembera?” I reply.

[Backdrop 15: photograph of Štembera’s action Grafting]

[KOVANDA points at the artist in the slide]

KOVANDA: I refer to Petr, a Czech artist whose action art meant inflicting pain on his own body. He called one of his works “Grafting” – inserting a small branch into a cut in his arm. If I remember it correctly, he did that performance in 1975. I look at her. Would she find that horrifying?

[SVAŠEK talks to the audience]

SVAŠEK: Luckily, Jirka does not seem to be taken aback when I bring up the theme of self-harm. In the role of the anthropologist, you always have to walk a fine line, gauging what is an acceptable question and pulling back when you have crossed a line. But he is OK. He starts talking about the body artist Petr Štembera.

[SVAŠEK turning to KOVANDA]

SVAŠEK: I heard about his work.

[SVAŠEK looks at the photograph, then turns back facing the audience]

SVAŠEK: A black-and-white photograph comes to mind of Štembera with his left sleeve rolled up, holding a small branch against a cut in his skin while another person is about to tie the branch to the artist’s arm. Didn’t he strive for self-empowerment and self-experience through these kinds of actions?

[Backdrop 16: the text: “Based on post-war existentialist thought. In an uncertain world, man could only confirm his existence through acting in the here and now. Performance was a personal act demonstrating free will in an unfree world. It was a method of liberation as well as an expression of anxiety” (Morganová 2019)]

[KOVANDA reads from the slide]

KOVANDA: Štembera’s events were, “based on post-war existentialist thought. In an uncertain world, man could only confirm his existence through acting in the here and now. Performance was a personal act demonstrating free will in an unfree world. It was a method of liberation as well as an expression of anxiety”.

SVAŠEK: Existentialist thought was not specifically related to Communist oppression, but linked to a broader sense of uncertainty in Europe and the U.S. The question remains, however, whether Czech performances were *not also* shaped by the specific kind of non-freedom during Normalisation.

[Backdrop 17: the letters ‘p’ and ‘P’]

SVAŠEK: Not the more general politics of the human condition, but state repression: Politics with a capital P.

[SVAŠEK looks back at the audience]

SVAŠEK: To the wider theme of existentialism. If Štembera’s action art enacted self-autonomy, how can I relate Jirka’s actions to Štembera’s approach? Jirka did not use physical pain to feed a sense of independent self, but instead produced a moment of self-inflicted awkwardness. Directing a staged activity, he *purposely* disturbed everyday routines. The key, it seemed to me, was taking control through self-scripted action. I think I have gained some insights.

[KOVANDA looks at the audience]

KOVANDA: As we move down the escalator, I explain that the experience of awkwardness made me realize how unspoken rules always regulate everyday behaviour.

[KOVANDA looks directly at SVAŠEK]

KOVANDA: Through that action, I became conscious of unconscious psychological barriers with regard to private space.

SVAŠEK: So you created the extraordinary to make the ordinary visible?

KOVANDA: This is turning out to be a pleasant walk. I think she gets me! *“Exactly!* I used the same principle in my installations, which, as I’ll explain later, were rather minimal interventions. You don’t need large, aggressive statements. A small change is enough to create awareness of the everyday”.

SVAŠEK: As we walk in the direction of Old Town Square, we speak about his clandestine get-togethers in the 1970s with Petr Štembera, Karel Miler, and others in the Museum of Decorative Arts. Štembera worked as a night guard in that museum. Non-conformist artists and intellectuals who did not want to tow the Party line frequently worked as stokers and night guards, away from the public eye. Their spatial marginality created possibilities for involvement in alternative underground culture. Jirka says that they would invite a small group of trusted friends and perform action art, using the back entrance to get in.

[Backdrop 18: photograph of Kovanda pointing at the building projected as backdrop]

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA turn to look at the slide, KOVANDA points at the building]

X X X

23. ledna 1978
Praha, Staroměstské náměstí

Dal jsem si sraz s několika přáteli... stáli jsme v hloučku
na náměstí a hovořili... náhle jsem se rozběhl, utíkal jsem
přes náměstí a zmizel v nejbližší ulici...



Figure 9. Action at Old Town Square, January 23 1978. The text says, "I had a meet-up with several of my friends ... We were standing in the square talking ... Suddenly, I started to run ... I was running over the square and got lost in one of the streets ..."
Copyright by Jiří Kovanda. Used with permission.

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA start walking]

[Backdrop 19: photograph of the action in 1978 on Old Town Square] (Figure 9)

KOVANDA: When we arrive at Old Town Square, I describe my last action to which I invited eight friends.

[KOVANDA points at the friends on the slide]

KOVANDA: I asked them to gather here, and as they stood around chatting, waiting for me to start, I suddenly ran away. When I did not return, they eventually understood that the disappearance was the actual performance.

[KOVANDA smiles a broad smile; SVAŠEK speaks to the audience]

SVAŠEK: So he purposely acted *against* the audience's expectations to witness an action. This would be in line with his earlier work, wanting to create an awareness of normality. While abnormal for most people, to the small circle of people around Jirka and other underground artists, the actions and performances were, if not normal, at least familiar. His vanishing act reminds me of a more recently staged absence, when he hid behind a pillar during the opening of one of his exhibitions in Berlin. He told me about it during our last interview.

[Backdrop 19: Photograph of the action Hiding in Berlin]

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA walk to opposite sides of the stage, looking at each other]

SVAŠEK: As I see it, in both cases, there was a tension between presence and absence.

KOVANDA: Presence and absence ... You mean the idea that a person is physically there, but at the same time isn't? That seems an interesting way of framing it. I like that.

[SVAŠEK smiles and looks at the audience]

KOVANDA: I did not understand her earlier when, at the start of our walk, she already mentioned the idea of presence and absence, suggesting that this may be something I am working with. I thought she referred to presence as the opposite of an absent *past*, which is not my theme. But presence as *being-there* as opposed to absence as *not-being-in-the-same-space*, yes, that does resonate with my work.

SVAŠEK: He looks at me with a focused expression, and says that this certainly resonates with his fascination with hiding. I want to push him further.

[SVAŠEK looks at KOVANDA]

SVAŠEK: Why do you do that? Where does it come from? Do you simply not

want to be there? Or is it a game? Or an ironic statement? Is there a psychological reason for hiding? Or is it all these things at the same time?

KOVANDA: I'm not sure. Certainly during a recent exhibition opening in Berlin there was a clear expectation that I should be there. I told you before that I purposely hid behind a pillar. My absence signalled a deflection from the usual, the normal, the ingrained ... and then, I don't know ... if ...

[SVAŠEK looks at the audience]

SVAŠEK: He is searching for words. Perhaps another question helps.

[SVAŠEK looks at KOVANDA]

SVAŠEK: Or do you want to surprise people by doing something unexpected?

KOVANDA: Psychological reasons might be relevant because I use the idea of hiding quite often. When I think of my childhood, one of my most favourite games was hiding. Whenever I managed to hide myself so well that nobody could find me I would feel complete victory! And in the 1970s, I created a few actions where I hid in street corners. The act had no function outside the action ... Perhaps hiding was a game where I secretly observed or followed something. Like an animal photographer who wants to see without being seen. When I was very young I found that a romantic idea, to be a nature photographer who needs to hide ... Perhaps that is why hiding has appeared in my art.

[SVAŠEK walks around, deep in thought]

SVAŠEK: As he is speaking, I reflect on our unfolding dialogue. Ethnography is so often a mutual search for interpretation, a negotiation of perspectives. My questions have led him to speak about his childhood. It seems we are getting further away from the idea that his art had anything to do with politics – the political situation of the time ... I think about the difference between hiding *through* physical absence and hiding *despite* physical presence. He has done both in different actions. Standing behind a pillar is a clear example of staged physical absence. By contrast, the act of inconspicuous performance in public, hiding artistic and documentary aims, exemplifies the latter. In both cases, he used his body to reveal the workings of social “normality”. Phrased like that, there is an obvious comparison to the work of the nature photographer. Is that the link to his childhood?

[SVAŠEK ends her walk next to KOVANDA and looks at him, puzzled. Then the pair walks together across the stage as Kovanda talks]

KOVANDA: We have almost reached the Municipal Library. I think more about the theme of hiding and tell her that an art critic once wrote that I often place

things in the corners of larger spaces in my installations. The works won't be completely hidden, but they won't be directly noticeable either. "Maybe this has indeed a psychological dimension", I say. "The wish to be present while not being noticed!" She is right. The theme appears in both actions and installations.

[KOVANDA smiles and looks at SVAŠEK. They stop walking]

KOVANDA: A psychoanalyst should analyse this!

[Backdrop 20: photograph of the Municipal library]

[SVAŠEK looks at the audience]

SVAŠEK: As we stop in front of the Municipal Library, he jokes about needing a psychoanalyst to analyse his fascination with inconspicuous presence.

I make an instant association. Could I say it? Is it too risqué? I take the chance.

[SVAŠEK turns to KOVANDA]

SVAŠEK: So did you ever want to be a secret agent?

[SVAŠEK looks at the audience]

SVAŠEK: I use the word *estébák*, referring to the Communist secret police force in Czechoslovakia that served as repressive intelligence agency. With the help of a widespread network of informers, the organisation's aim was to suppress activities considered to be anti-Communist.

KOVANDA: No.

SVAŠEK: He says in a neutral voice.

KOVANDA: *[quiet voice]* I never wanted to be that.

SVAŠEK: Perhaps I have gone too far? I try to lighten the conversation, making a more obvious connection to his artistic approach. "It seems interesting, the idea of secret observation. You know, you are there, but nobody knows you are there, it resonates with your work". His face lights up.

KOVANDA: That is interesting. It never occurred to me. You mean a spy?

[KOVANDA looks at the audience and SVAŠEK laughs nervously]

KOVANDA: She surprised me there. She laughs, perhaps relieved?

SVAŠEK: Yes, a spy. It does sound more romantic, and less morally charged, than "estébák"!

KOVANDA: No, I did not want to be that. The idea of a spy is of course adventurous, full of drama ... But I don't like dramatic things ... Perhaps I am not so interested in following someone, but rather in being unseen!

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA turn to the building behind them]

[Backdrop 21: photograph of a poster advertising the exhibition Free Assembly by Richard Deacon in the Municipal Library]

SVÁŠEK: “So”, he says, “this is the Municipal Library”. There is obviously a gallery on the first floor, the Gallery of the Capital of Prague. There is an exhibition on of Richard Deacon’s work. From a longer-term historical perspective, this has strong political significance. There is no way that his work would have been presented in an officially funded Czech gallery during the Normalisation period. Its presence indexes the transformation from state-socialism to democracy, from a politically censored art world to an art world that, while not completely unconnected to state politics, is rather shaped by trends in global Biennales and art markets. But why has Jirka taken me here?

KOVANDA: “Well”, I say, “before 1990, the building housed the depository of the National Gallery, and I worked here for 17 year. Karel Miler, also an action artist, was my superior. He was the curator of the collection. The space still exists. Under Communism, the National Gallery organized exhibitions in the building, but they looked very different to today’s displays”.
[KOVANDA turns to the audience]

KOVANDA: Of course she’s done enough research to realize that these would have been displays of officially accepted art, vetted by the Communist Art Union. Behind the scene, however, a lot more went on! “Between the official exhibitions”, I explain, “I used the space to take pictures of my own work, and we organized *illegal* exhibitions for small groups of invited friends”.

[SVÁŠEK and KOVANDA walk a few steps over the stage, then stop. KOVANDA freezes, his back to the audience. SVÁŠEK turns to the audience]

[Backdrop 22: photograph of Kovanda’s back as he is walking]

SVÁŠEK: We walk further down the street. Illegality – surely that had all to do with oppression and resistance! When I ask if he was not afraid to be found out by the secret police, he says they were careful not to attract attention. Only small groups of up to ten people would gather to attend. And they did not turn on any visible lights... Is that not politics? Absence as hidden resistance? “So somehow we again touch upon the theme of presence and absence”, I suggest. While I now understand that I should not limit his interest in presence and absence to questions about politics, it can of course not be denied that the need for non-conformist artists to be invisible was directly related to oppressive politics.



Figure 10.
Kovanda points
at a spot where
the installation
happened.
Photograph by
Maruška Svašek,
2017.

[SVAŠEK freezes, KOVANDA turns to the audience]

KOVANDA: So where should we go now? I know, I'll show her some of the locations of my temporary installations ... As we walk in the direction of the Museum of Decorative Arts, I tell her how hard it was to find books about art beyond the officially accepted genres, especially after the invasion by the Soviets in 1968. The invasion ended the more liberal 1960s. Up to about 1973, 1974, you could find books about abstraction and performance art, but only if you knew where to go to. But that ended in 1974. After that, there was nothing. Really, nothing at all! I was 21 at the time.

SVAŠEK: 1974, that's when I was 13 years old. By then, my father had been unable to visit his homeland for 26 years. I had visited my Czech grandmother about six times. It was exciting, but also sad, to cross the Iron Curtain, having to leave him behind.

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA walk a few paces stage left]

KOVANDA: We arrive at the Museum of Decorative Arts, and I take her to a corner. Most of my installations at the time were made of sugar cubes and other impermanent materials.

[Backdrop 23: KOVANDA pointing] (Figure 10)

[KOVANDA bends down, pointing]

KOVANDA: Look, this is where I placed my first installation. Tucked away in a corner, but visible to those who really looked.

[KOVANDA and SVAŠEK walk a few more paces stage right]

KOVANDA: Let's cross Jan Palach Square.

[KOVANDA bends down, pointing]

KOVANDA: And in that corner, I pushed three wooden wedges in the gaps between the cobblestones. The wedges were almost invisible. If someone would see them, they would appear very strange.

[Backdrop 24: photograph of the installation]

SVAŠEK: We walk on and I ask him whether his parents knew what he was up to.

KOVANDA: I tell her that they knew a bit, at least my mum. My father didn't want to know. He was afraid that I would get into trouble.

SVAŠEK: Because of the political situation? Or was he scared that you were going insane?

KOVANDA: Because of the political situation ... He worked for the army and he might have *lost his job* if they had found out what I was doing. Personally, I wasn't in any danger. I didn't go to school and I had the lowest of the lowest job.

SVAŠEK: Neither Kovanda nor his family could of course live outside the political context ... I think he won't be offended if I ask another question:

[SVAŠEK turns to KOVANDA]

SVAŠEK: I suppose your dad, if he worked in the army, was a party member?

KOVANDA: *Of course*. He *had* to be!

SVAŠEK: I feel relieved that he doesn't mind talking about it. By now he knows, I think, that I understand the pressures of the time. "And your mum?"

KOVANDA: She was, but she returned her membership in 1968.

SVAŠEK: Out of protest, because of the invasion?

KOVANDA: That's right.

[KOVANDA turns to the audience]

KOVANDA: She tells me that some of her own family members also joined the party, mostly for pragmatic reasons. And other relatives strongly opposed the regime, refusing to comply ... That's the complexity of the time period.

SVAŠEK: It starts to rain, so we decide to cross the river and have a coffee on the other side. No need to see other locations. I think I have learned enough for today.

[Backdrop 25: photograph of Svašek and Kovanda sitting at the table]

[SVAŠEK and KOVANDA sit down at the table, and leaf again through the catalogue. After a while, they look at each other and smile]

SVAŠEK: So your art is ...

KOVANDA: Not political!

SVAŠEK: A staged activity?

KOVANDA: Yes, a performance.

SVAŠEK: Taking control, disturbing and unmasking routines?

KOVANDA: That's right.

SVAŠEK: Before and after 1989?

KOVANDA: Exactly!

SVAŠEK: A politics of outer and inner reflection, *perhaps*? Observing and creating awareness of the everyday? So politics after all?

[KOVANDA looks at SVAŠEK for a while before speaking]

KOVANDA: Ok, but the keyword is *perhaps*!

[They freeze]

[END OF PLAY]

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