

Pavĺína Fichta Āierna – Diagnosis and Observation

Pavĺína Fichta Āierna through consequent artistic development managed to find her special place in the Slovak visual art scene and abroad. In her unique work, in a long-time development of ideas she elaborated various strategies, which are sometimes stressed, sometimes suppressed. She entered the art scene in the beginning of the 1990s and experienced and contributed to the moving energy of the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Artists and students were the social groups considered to be voices of change and played a crucial role in the process of the historical and political turn. As an art student, Āierna became the part of developing new progressive art scene formed from the formerly unofficial artists during the regime and the fresh young creators, such as herself.

This time can be referred to as a Golden age of (not only) Slovak visual art when all the energy hidden under the cover of the communist control shell suddenly burst out and everything seemed possible in the revolution euphoria. Young artists could make the connection with the artists from another countries through individual contacts, overstep the media boundaries in their art work and accept parallel works of one artist in various kinds of art. It was also the time when intermedia found their protagonists in the alternative art scene. So the background for the development of the new art tendencies after the break of the 1990s was rich and full of challenges. Many artists tried to universalize their artistic language in an effort to become generally readable and accepted in the international art world. Few of them, like Pavĺína Fichta Āierna, remained anchored in their particular socio-political context and preserved their authentic attitudes and means of expression. Never looking left or right she refused the universalist „confection“ and has always been sensitive observer, recorder and explanator of the seemingly not important signs

that in broader view provide a concentrated report on the art, culture, society of its special time of origin through particular research activities or individual case studies. She approaches the public sphere from the point of view raising from her private observations and remains able to capture certain key moments in her work. We can even say, that a deliberate choice of being an outsider became a platform of formulation of ideas that contain a sharp diagnostics of the current state of the society. And the words „diagnosis“ and „observations“ are not used by coincidence.

Čierna´s work is very complex and rich in using various strategies. In her diploma work *Diary* (1993) she managed to use both her experience from the study of graphic art and her enthusiasm for the new media. Many other works since then were derived from the very private observations of the author herself. In these introspective works she often used her own body as a means of expression. The female body has been represented as fragile medicine body reminding us of works by artists like Hannah Wilke or Katarzyna Kozyra, subverting the topic of Christ-like male heroic suffering body carrying the destiny of the whole society in its public manifestation of voluntary exposure to pain.

Art through Communication (Individual Approach to the Beholder)

Another characteristic of the artist is her working with the boundary that lies between private and public spheres, while at the same time, her work offers an intimate, often individualized contact with the viewer. In her interactive installation *Communicat.tor* from the year 2000 she openly approached viewers through Internet and over her cell phone – in this manner she exposed herself to mutual, yet somewhat restrictive manipulation. *"This resulted in a comprehensive archive made accessible to the visitors by means of specific application. The manipulation was mutual, though its impact was (on purpose) greater on me. On the one hand, my sampled voice was continuously trying to entice the visitor to talk to me ("come closer and ask me") which in turn affected my mentality and my every day life and sometimes even annoyed me. Voluntarily*

though it was, I was constrained and forced to react promptly to any given situation – and sometimes I found myself under harsh attacks. On the other hand, with hindsight I regard this experience positively. The questions imposed on me were similar in structure, showing resemblance in the experience of mostly young visitors to the art museum." (P. F. Čierna)

A very interesting strategy of intervention into public space shows her work *Neither Much Nor Little* (2001) – a drop-down menu in a cash-dispenser. „*A specially designed software offered the user to display 20 short videosequences of the artist doing various houseworks – such as slicing an onion, dancing, sewing or counting money. Those who were interested were provided with a receipt testifying their using of the cash dispenser.*" (P. F. Čierna)

Similar approach employs her work entitled *Infoterminal* (2004) – by using specific application and the touch LCD screen, the artist presented 12 short "touchy" stories, in which 12 people from diverse social background reluctantly talk about themselves and their problems to answer a fictive question aiming at the root of the crucial problem of their private life. In this work the artist pointed out how shallow the information media are and how insensitive we get. *Intimate Topography* was a part of the *Geschichte(n) vor Ort* in Vienna. Via marks in the streets Čierna traced the individual paths of some residents she had met and interviewed about their everyday life; she located their haunts and enters into houses and building characteristic for their life context.

Treatment and Health care as a Specific Kind of Communication

One of the most important lines of the artist's thinking is the theme of medical treatment, in which she questions sensitivity of men and human virtue of empathy. In many of her works, the artist deals with external factors that are to improve the quality of people's lives such as drugs or medical treatment. This resulted in her looking for the non-evident relations between physical and psychic world of the human being (*Ceteris*

paribus/Everything Else is the Same, 2001, Undesirable Effects, 2000). The still lives with pills and ointments and all kind of medical drugs that people use came out from the artist's personal contact with some concrete people and their life stories. The way how she had to get into quite close relation with the people she asks to take part in her sociological research is typical for her art social operations. She is then the observer who actually cares a lot about the human beings and their live conditions being very empathical and sensitive as will be made clearer in the next block of works. Video *Transport* depicts a cheerless view patient has from the wheelchair used in hospitals, and *Treatment* – photoperformance showing “treated” bandaged parts of artist's body. The paradox of the second “the bad” impact of treatment, of the side effects of the improvement is expressed very straightforward. As a means of expression the artist prefers to use video – from earlier realizations, where the artist used to perform, and where she also used to include some transformed autobiographical motifs she shifted to narration of stories of other people, where she remained present only metaphorically.

Social Operations – Focus on the Individual and his Behavior in the Society or Diagnostics of the Society through the particular „case studies“ and portraits

From focusing on her own body, Čierna gradually changed her position and moved behind camera viewfinder. These works can be considered as a raising from the synthesis of the two artistic approaches mentioned above. It is through empathy and experience with lives of others, that she started to impose questions of essential or even ontological nature thus emphasizing themes that are indirectly but at the same time inseparably connected to her. This is why her works are logically grouped into series, and to enhance interpretation there are also other links between the works. Contents range from symbolic representations of female body and sincerity of psychological investigation of the “video-portrait” to issues of sociological/political nature like the exploration of life in isolation (*Janka*

Saxonová, 2002). This video started a big series. According to Čierna, the mentally handicapped Janka Saxonová *"is inseparable person to the city to that extent that she is a part of the cityscape. Video shows a day in a life of this forty years old woman. Her different pace of life renders slow motion of the piece and non-synchronous sound. Non-consistent sound track is to evoke her departure from standard and to imply her mental condition. Sometimes the soundtrack meets the image displayed. The camera is again used as a non committed objective bystander. The images are static, and separated by short sequences of graininess, which is typical for tuning. Perceiving Janka's peculiar world, in her usual rhythm we follow her walking downtown as she pushes her buggy and collects cardboards and then takes it to collection places. Seeing her in her social situation, with her family relations and with her infantile hobbies, we understand that she is content and even-tempered, living in a harmonic world, and this, in turn, makes "other" patient's usual condition relative."* (P. F. Čierna)

Work entitled *Three Men for Life* (2003) plays a unique role among Čierna's works – it consists of three video-works and a slide projection. The artist uses various approaches to portray lonely men, who represent specific motifs – through scrutinizing them she deconstructs some schematic modes of reception of the gender characteristics and, similarly to her previous works, she questions prejudices about them and existing categories of success and happiness in the hierarchy of values in our society. The videos are moving, because they intuitively focus on the so-called "short histories of human life", yet the artist manages to evade banalities when speaking about details. She explained that she has chosen this subject because her previous works *"were focused on women and she decided to take close look on men, not attracting our attention, which does not mean that they are uninteresting; men who are lacking something or on the contrary, have something unusual... This explains how the project Three Men for Life came into being. The titles of these works reflect the idea: there is the story About Jozef / O Jozefovi, then we*

met With Maroš / S Marošom, and are given the message From Vlado / Od Vlada and later have to think over Kamil's fate Without Kamil / Bez Kamila. Jozef proved to be very interesting for my project. He is a regional artist, well-known (now also thanks to me) in the Slovak art scene, a visitor to regional openings of art exhibitions and a regular attendant of trips to Biennale in Venice and Documenta in Kassel. His passion for art makes him exceptional. He took his discourse and my work very seriously. My video work About Jozef / O Jozefovi (2003) is almost documentary. The camera, well, to be exact, I follow his uncommon interpretations that he gives at one of the factory buildings in Žilina, where he works and operates the steam. He showed me his secret studio, crammed with diverse artworks, and explained to me his views of life and fine art. The images are accompanied by accelerated music of his favourite band Alkatraz. I used to meet handicapped Maroš when I was a child. He lives nearby my parents, in a peaceful neighbourhood. There he goes regularly for a walk, curiously eying his surroundings. I used to reflect on him, what is he looking for, what interests him... ? I lent my camera to Maroš, and was curious to see what catches his eye. I had to adapt to his routines and to his pace. For several days I accompanied him on his daily route, listening to his comments. He held the camera with a grip mixing his memories with talking of the present. The camera shifts to sides as he walks and the video has a touch of personal tragedy mixed with unintentional humour. Needless to say, to perceive your own self-portrait, it is necessary that you slow down: as the video With Maroš / S Marošom (2003) unfolds slowly. I made this piece with love. Vlado is my friend. Once, when drunk he said with a broad smile on his face, that he was the best, and wrote it down on a piece of paper. Funny though it sounds, I still have this remark somewhere. It did not have sexual meaning. Though I never knew what he meant exactly, I remember that moment for its special atmosphere. Besides, he really is an outstanding man. Well, this was long ago. When he was about thirty, something changed, and from that time on, his statements are not so definite. And this is exactly what

this video is about. For Vlado's piece I chose static camera. With a fixed look, he transmitted the message From Vlado / Od Vlada (2003) in three-minute intervals. His talk is calm, in a programmer's manner he speaks of his religious belief and of his communication with God. His talk is as monotonous as if he was praying. We talked over each sentence, each word we was going to say in advance. I did not want him to add anything to it. The sound was edited to make three tracks, it flows like an endless river, and only sometimes the words become easy to discern. Kamil was a lonely old bachelor. He spent his last years as an abandoned drunkard, suffering from depression, thinking of suicide. The slide shows me beside him. Sometimes I used to help him out. This static piece entitled Without Kamil / Bez Kamila (2003) displays the burden of loneliness or maybe even that of possible closeness." (P. F. Čierna)

Two expressive videos show a strong moments in life of two siblings from a Roma family living outside the view of the public. The artist made her observation with a tender touch of empathy (she has helped this Roma family materially and socially over the 5 years). *Jarka in Between* is a young girl acting in double role of the eldest sister and a second mother to her siblings. In contrast to her maturity and responsibility, Jarka's brother David has already had a bad start of his young life due to his mental disease, the artist visited him in penitentiary where he was put after he killed someone. In the *Reconstruction* piece from 2004 a victim speaks about home violence while the reconstruction of the most horrible moment she had experienced should help her to overcome the past.

Next three videos portraits keep a special atmosphere of each represented person, whether it is Anna in the first piece *Things that you do not think about do not exist* (1997) with her sculptural body and a heavy breathing, or the *Lady in Blue* (2005) is about a elder elegant lady having a cigarette with the beholder and while smoking she reveals part of her personal history. *Diffusion portrait* shows a sixty years old pensioner who tries to evaluate aspects that had affected his life. He suffers from agoraphobia a is very interested in getting up-to-date information all the time. The

divided screen shows two mirror portraits which exchange the roles of a story teller and of a contemplating person.

Release Notes

The new video *Release Notes* presented in Asifakeil is based on public action that Čierna realized in the streets of Vienna. She asks simple questions to make an observation of a more complex character. Her social operation thus leads to more complicated information of the society's willingness to communicate and to share values. From the position of the observer, of a stranger, she shows the alienation of the people in public sphere of the metropol where the mixture of heterogeneous elements led to a certain level of dissensitivation. Tolerance, openness and strengness on the other hand are touchy topics in the Central Europe, because this geopolitical space was always in history characterised with multiculturalism and coexistence of various social and ethnic groups. Instead of tolerance, the history has seen more fear from the loss of the own identity, the actual fear from the others, from the strangers.

The work also contains especially authentic art contextual reference to Viennese artist Valie Export whose examinations of the public reaction sharply tested the society. Čierna is in her bringing back the notion of the artist as an agitator, provocateur of the discussion, the virus re-coding previous organisation of information, of course in her own way.

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