

Mazarna

Definition of Space by Fire

A record of a drawing made by flame and cave shapes in 30 exposures –  
Velka Fatra, 10/07/1982

(14 selected photographs)

The Mini-gallery of the Veterinary Research Institute in Brno-Medlanky

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The key feature of the latest realisations by Milos Sejn is their multitude of layers, the way the author incorporates, into seemingly very simple projects, many aspects referring to various (and sometimes also quite distant in time and type) methods of art work but also various moments of human perception or various cultural and historical contexts. At the same time, they also include the conceptualist need to “communicate the idea as expressive spontaneity or urgency of gesture”, a reflection of the extraordinary sensibility of the author as the need to incorporate it into a structurally more complex, rationally formulated unit. By the way, this tension between the urgent immediateness of a sensitive reaction and the felt need for further more generalising statement was, if I’m not mistaken, one of the key stimuli for the “active graphics” of Vladimir Boudnik. The multitude of layers mentioned above is certainly conditioned by the feeling of exhaustion of elementary and primary demonstrations as brought forth by conceptual art, body art and land art, but it’s also probably the dominating feature of Sejn’s creative kind.

The author’s latest realisation that I have seen is the book “By Stone on Stone” from the end of last year, consisting of several leafs with traces of stone touch; on one of them a leaf of paper was placed and the others were manipulated by the author. There we meet the recording of a certain process, but it is not an objectivistic enumeration, such as with P. A. Getto, or a recording with maximum formality, such as with P. Holous, rather a restatement and a new update of an informal gesture, reminding of the demonstrations by former Gutai group members. The sense of recording here merges with the formal subjectivity, adding the sensitivity to paper and its organisation into the shape of a book, sensitivity to the most elementary natural materials and the ability to reflect them further, the presence of one’s own body isn’t merely a demonstration of its presence, but it also implies, in elementary features of man with stone, references to ancient cultures, emphasised by realisation in a cave which brings the whole action yet closer to a ritual ...

In his work, “Zebin Hill and the Moon”, the key issue is the correlation between the changes in natural structure, i.e. the Moon and stars in a section of the sky, defined by the view out of the cave (and the changes of human activities, i.e. human motion and work necessary to capture the photo sequences), a certain affinity (if I may use this term, introduced into Czech art by Frantisek Hudecek and so necessary for understanding his work) between the natural process and human actions, the relation between the objective and the

subjective, changes in time. At the same time, moments are updated here such as the “ritual” nature of behaviour in a cave, introducing the relations to historical cultures, here emphasised by observing the Moon and stars as certainly one of the oldest pieces of human research into nature (see Lunar cycle records from Palaeolithic sites), accentuated experiencing of these situations is also manifested in the author’s text records, photographs only imply the flow of time and the gradual prolongation of each exposure, mentioned in the text. All photo works also update the characteristics of photography as a medium, a collection of photographs from an action is also a message of the nature of a photographic image, of its formalising aspects and purely aesthetic characteristics. “Zebin Hill and the Moon” thus refers not only to the time determinants of the creation of each shot, but it also speaks of the sensitivity to light, of the possibility to create a photograph under minimum light. In the realisation called “Hammer / Definition of Space by Light” of 2 July 1982, this moment is yet emphasised by using two cameras which enable parallel photographing of two views of one and the same situation, and also characterise their mutual relationship, defining the space “from camera to camera”, providing their own spatial structure which is implicit in the final pairs of photographs. These aspects merge with others – with the actual meaningfulness of the cave space, with changes of the mutual determinants of the rock or stones and the human body, with gesture development and modification of the cave shape illuminated by the flame, with correlation between the actual shape of the rock and boulders and their appearance and disappearance with transformations of light. In the latest fire realisation of 30/12/1982, “Zebin Hill / Definition of Space”, shapes of certain parts of the quarry appear depending on changes in the burning strips of paper, momentous transformations caused by the wind reflect in the selected situations, thus another phenomenon participates in the final appearance of the photographic record.

An interest in flame as an element can be seen in creative art since the end of the 1950’s, for instance, in the primary demonstrations by Aubertine, in the aesthetic records of Otto Piene, on the stylised reports of minimum actions by Jan Steklik or in meaning-accentuated situations and installations by Kounellis. Milos Sejn was quite interested in fire as a phenomenon from the beginning of the 1970’s, and in his recent realisations he incorporated it into comprehensive, differentially structured works in which fire appears not only as an element itself but in relationship towards man, in mutual connection of the variability of the flame and that of the human gesture. “Mazarna / Definition of Space by Fire” of 10 July 1982 is among the most important of them. The initial moment here is probably an interest in photo documentation of the emotionally and sensual intense environment of the cave, rich in reference (the environment of stones, rocks and caves many years ago became virtually the only environment for Sejn on which his work was based, undoubtedly because of its primary and archetypal characteristics), in transformations caused by illuminating with a fire torch. Fire itself has been formed by a human here, “controlled”, becomes part of his activity. The gradual “research” into each part of the cave is determined by the author’s

subject and transformation of fire, and also the mechanical properties of the photographic image and accidental and unexpected interventions from outside (such as the accidental momentary presence of people). Only in photographs can the true appearance of this “research” be seen, not only because it was realised without spectators, but primarily because it is fully based on the possibilities of photography, allowing longer exposures to record the whole movement along the cave wall or roof, along the boulders or small lakes. It is actually mutual “research” into the natural environment through the technical media of photography and vice versa, the medium of photography through a particular situation, elementary for man. The torch flame sometimes provides a true model of the rock wall, sometimes detracts from it and becomes independent in a peculiar calligraphy, following the appearance of the environment and developing it further. The presence of a human body isn’t apparent in the photograph, but we realise it merely due to the dynamics of the record which we connect with a human gesture (and, last but not least, also with the expression of the author’s subject). Thus the initial intention to document the appearance of the cave through the light of fire still changed, enhanced with other aspects ... Certain sequences will contain water (another element!) and also the clay floor of the cave with spread stones reminding of the cave’s ancient role as shelter and the moment of time connected thereto, and its passing. The expressiveness of some light traces implies again the ritual substance of human behaviour, obviously strengthened with the cave environment inside. The closing sequence not only connects the cave environment with boulders in front, this implying the unity of the “inside” and “outside”, the mutual condition of these two types of environment (with all associations implied by this relationship) and their mutual transformation in the course of time, and also – probably unintentionally – reminds one of Plato’s cave ... The fact that the author isn’t so much interested in the document of action as in the “nature of that which is seen”, i.e. recorded in photographs, is also supported by the fact that Milos Sejn, rather than exhibiting the complete collection, prefers a selection of shots which accentuates internal relations, visual consistency and the consistency of references and evocations.

The art work of Milos Sejn from recent years is difficult to classify, it cannot be mechanically identified by any more or less current trends. Its inner difference and structure creates more and more individual solutions; these appear to me to be more insistent over the past decade, as the time of joint programmes is long gone, despite the neo-expressive tendencies of recent years. It appears to me that Milos Sejn newly establishes the question of the appearance and meaning of “open art work”, not only in the mechanical sense, as brought forth by the post-constructivist aesthetics of the end of the 1960’s, but in the sense of its meaning and mentality, as conditioned by the multitude of subsumed aspects and various possibilities of their identification.

by Jiri Valoch

Catalogue for the exhibition Definition of Space with Fire, 1983

I was leaving for Velka Fatra on 4 July 1982 with the first experience in paintings made by a torch and the results in photographs (Kladivo, 2 July 1982), expecting to work in the Mazarna cave. I already knew this space from my previous journeys from 1977 (colour photograph studies of views out from the cave). The primary impression here is monumentality with associations of its ancient inhabitation. On 9 July a preliminary inspection of the place was made with a strong light, leading to research of the cave parts not yet known to me in the left-hand direction, with mighty stalactite decoration, rich articulation of the space and tufa pools. "The ideas of torch drawings are becoming more concrete", reads the diary. The original idea of walking with a burning torch through the main hall is enriched with uncapturable richness of the rear space and mirroring water surface (water is manifested in Mazarna with audible drops in the main hall, pool stalagmites). On 10 July in the morning, the road was taken to Mazarna to the steep slopes. Under the impression of the photographs from Kladivo, the idea of slow walking through the space. As a surprise, high intensity of light near the cave entrance, almost illuminating the rear wall. The camera was therefore located somewhat deeper in the cave beyond the entrance, pointed inwards. Walking in the cave, excitement of senses. Registration of the rear part with spaces on the right hand side. Progress with equipment towards the inside, to the left towards the stalactite decoration. Accidentally interrupted by cave visitors. In order not to be uncovered, I photographed the columns without the torch, only in the reflections of daylight. Then the deeper spaces with pools, details of the variety of shapes, light reflections. Another column hall with several smaller pools, their elastic contours, whitish grey of the stalactites, small slippery dams between rounded protrusions and water surface. Parts protruding from the bottom as natural situation points to place a tripod on – using the rotation of the camera around its axis. A peculiar situation – the only place – inspection of this place's possibilities – intermediate steps between change in site. Views, although various, but from one tripod position – a certain unity. Rotation of the field of vision also ushered in the future road to the new site. The rotation follows the composition of the cave spaces – the pool as a mirroring surface, windows between columns, another hall beyond the window, the inner space of the hall, consistency between the cave spaces, main hall, entrance.

The travellers then came to me – work and movement interrupted. Walking around the shapes of the column hall with the torch. New figures appearing with candles in hands, then all alone for the following hours. Hectic action, quivering flame, slippery surface and lack of stability when moving on the pool bottom. Falling in the pool, head bruised, darkness. Creeping among the columns, again attempts to capture the pool shapes with a flame. The same camera view – definition of shape in each shot only along the bottom or wall windows, or the cave roof only, calligraphic capture in one. A sequence of 8 shots of the same view on colour film. Views through the columns with vision

and anticipation of daylight with cold colours, quick alternatives of light drawings with the torch still burning, until the fire burns out naturally. Prior to that, always intentionally extinguished and set alight again. For colour shots, further simplification of the drawing, only the pool, definition of the distant tunnel, column, view, entire hall contour, primary shape of the roof and walls ... The same happens in the third black-and-white film. Further approach to the endmost spaces, hall, large pool and corridor with an empty pool in the rear. The utmost tension and tiredness. The concentration and anxiety from being in an enclosed space for many hours. The inversion of the field of vision from the rearmost location of the camera towards the cave entrance, this also being the motivation for all other movements of the location until a large hall is reached. Its size itself leading from petty relationships of the shapes to continuous moves through the space, rather than around edges and contours in the sense of the ground plan, interruption of the movement with prominent boulders on the bottom or carinated protrusions from the roof. The end of drawing made by putting the torch on the bottom and leaving the fire to go out; illumination of the space. Light entering from the entrance. The drawing from the rear part along the right hand side of the hall towards the outside across the kinked shapes around the boulder in the bottom and the break-off edge in the roof – to the entrance, in the warm air of early evening, to the megalithic boulders at the entrance, following the contours and merging the light of the torch with the sunlight; briefly marching with the torch in hand in a hieratic manner and extinguishing the light on a stone. The tension quickly relieves, quick packing up and descending to the valley. Next time perhaps more attention should be paid to the main halls. Stalactite part with water – greyish white labyrinth, stalactite piles with pools in a straight stony bottom.

Initial data: The Mazarna cave space in the Velka Fatra mountains (800 m a.s.l.) in the Tlsta mountain massive, 151 m in length, 22 cm max. pool depth, oil torch, 6x9 roll film camera with a Tessar 1:4.5 f=10.5 cm objective, black-and-white Agfa ISOPAN 22 DIN negative material, AGFACHROME 50 S 18 DIN colour inverse material, auxiliary tools.

The exhibition also includes a selection of texts and topographic documents of the whole work; the catalogue contains some notes from 22 July 1982; the invitation card includes a text record for the closing sequence (30) from the stay.

Order of exhibited sequences:

Order of sequences reproduced in the catalogue: