

NATIONAL GALLERY IN PRAGUE



KINSKY PALACE

# Landscape in Czech Art of the 17<sup>th</sup>—20<sup>th</sup> Centuries



190-

# LANDSCAPE IN CZECH ART OF THE 17<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES

Guide to the Exhibition  
of the National Gallery in Prague  
in Kinsky Palace

National Gallery in Prague

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*New Approaches to Landscape in Action Art, Land Art  
and in the Ecological Tendencies of Czech Art  
from the mid-1960s*

Substantial changes in the conception of art — represented by new methods of visual work, material demonstrations, actions and happenings — stimulated increased attention to and observation of the world around us, including landscape. Many actions and installations were produced in Nature, and the landscape thus became the artists' asylum, partner and playmate for their creative challenges and experiments. The focus on landscape in the unofficial Czech creative movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was connected with criticism of the artificial, official and semi-official culture of Communist Czechoslovakia. For this reason, it was usually an underground movement.

This creative movement was stimulated by the influences of the new tendencies of fine art on a global scale, and more significantly by the artists' reaction to life under the Communist regime. In Communist Czechoslovakia, the life of the majority of the population was divided between the day-to-day struggle to survive and quietly maintain one's own existence, and the weekend escapes from residencies to Nature, which formed one of the most acceptable substitutes for freedom. The art that was officially supported and tolerated by the Communist regime had much in common with the imitation of the function and expression of culture, and of the corresponding perception of the world including Nature and landscape. The various underground cultural actions and events involving Nature were therefore not only intentionally opposed to what Ivan Jirous described as the "*conspirative, cloistered character of the imaginative art of the 1960s*," (V. Jirousová, entry "*Křížovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtipu*". *Nová encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění*, Praha 1995, p. 414.) but, in their results, had also political meanings. This was ironic, because at the time the turn towards Nature represented an effort to liberate art from the political ideologies and aesthetics that limited or narrowed its meaning.

One of the most significant artists of this movement, realizing actions connected with the new perception of Nature, was **Zorka Ságlová** (1942–2003). As with the movement of happening as a whole, her Land Art actions gave new meanings to objects and events. Zorka Ságlová belonged to the second wave of Czech Action Art (the first wave was represented by Milan Knížák's AKTUAL). The second wave of Action Art was inspired by action activities as we know them from happenings and Fluxus events and, more significantly, from Land Art. Ságlová's actions are specific, distinctive

combinations of both these positions, and with their lyricizing rendering of period motifs, they represent a unique creative expression. Many luminaries from the political and artistic underground took part in Ságlová's actions – including members of the music group The Plastic People of the Universe, and the artists and writers of the School of the Knights of the Cross of the Wittless Pure Humour [Křížovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtípu].

In 1969, Ságlová organized an action entitled *Throwing Balls into the Bořín Pond in Průhonice*. Ivan Jirous made the following comments on it: “In her realization, Zorka Ságlová has joined the growing tendency in contemporary fine art when the artists leave their studios in order to dig ditches in the Nevada Desert, to create configurations of grass turfs, to draw half-mile long parallel lines on the desert plateau, ragged with heat. One opinion claims that through this production, the artists oppose the commercial character of the marketing and gallery stereotypes, thus rejecting the impetus to create exhibitable and sellable works. An undoubtedly far more powerful stimulus for this work, however, is the artists' effort to give the fine arts new strength, via this confrontation with the natural grandeur of natural phenomena.” (I. M. Jirous, “Plovoucí plastika”, *Mladý svět*, 1969, No. 19, p. 26.)

Another realization of Zorka Ságlová, which differed from international Land Art but nevertheless gave new meanings to landscape Action Art, was her ritually conceived reconstruction of a scene from the Hussite wars, entitled *Laying Napkins near Sudoměř* and organized in May 1970. Shifting the action into virtual historical contexts extended its meaning in a way that has long been characteristic of Czech culture – it turned the action into a situation somewhere on the edge between the humour that liberates thought from the fetters of stereotype, and the newly-felt need to place creative thinking into a historical context. Ivan Jirous described *Laying Napkins* as follows:

“If Americans like Mike Heizer can basically appropriate virgin islands that lack any history to the spiritual context of their country, Zorka Ságlová – by choosing a particular place where the meaning of the place is still preserved – shifts the resulting action into a somewhat different position.” (I. M. Jirous, “Pocta Gustavu Obermannovi”, *Kýtvarná práce*, 1970, No. 7.)

The socially and culturally relevant implications of landscape actions were significant for many other artists, philosophers, art theoreticians and creative experimenters of the late 1960s and the 1970s. All these expressions involved a distancing from the old concept of a work of art as a finished, ultimate object, closed and not open to any further creativity. The transient nature of an action (a transience which left behind just a documentation in the form of photographic records, memories and oral stories) drew art closer

Jan Mičoch ▷

ASCENT OF THE KOTEL MOUNTAIN, 1974

photograph

to Nature through the new understanding of the ephemerality of the everyday character of both Nature and art.

**Jan Mlčoch** (\*1953) produced an action that initiated the demythologization of the artistic conception of landscape, by applying its new informal and ecological meaning. This action was realized in spring 1974 and had a conceptually simple scenario – *Ascent of the Kotel Mountain*. It was a record of Mlčoch walking and observing the environment that he was passing through. At this point, it is appropriate to remind ourselves of the work of the American artist Georg Brecht, who projected many simple actions in the early 1960s, in the framework of Fluxus *Events*. These usually consisted of mini-tasks – the deployment of an on-off switch, or the placing of a vase on a piano, presented as part of a musical composition.

Landscape was used by **Miloš Šejn** (\*1947) in an even more simplified and pure way. His works were created either as imprints of the material realia of Nature, or as installations in which Nature newly entered the context of art. Gradually, his work developed into correspondencies that draw the medium of communication technology – from photographic camera to digital systems of data recording and transmission – into the process of the creative appropriation of Nature. This is exemplified in Šejn's *Magic Fountain* from 1999.





**Miloš Šejn**

GRAND G / SOL, 1993

video sonic installation

on loan from the artist

**Jitka Svobodová** ▷

SUN, MOON, RAINBOW. (1989)

wire, paper, paint, h. 43 cm

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*Editor:* Naděžda Blažíčková-Horová

*Professional cooperation:* Veronika Hulíková, Olga Uhrová

*Authors:* Naděžda Blažíčková-Horová, Milan Knížák, Šárka Leubnerová,  
Zuzana Novotná, Andrea Rousová, Pavel Scheufler, Tomáš Vlček,

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