

MILOŠ ŠEJN

Photographs / Drawings / Books

Municipal House of Art / Brno 4/8 – 5/18 1986

If we would seek a common name for Miloš Šejn's rather diversified creation we might find the term „activities“ most adequate – and these activities are not only in the traditional sense artistic, that is drawing, painting and photography, but also untraditional ones such as wandering, actions and their projects, artist's books or bordering ones, among which probably textual descriptions of trips, natural situations and the like take the most importance place – they have the form of a kind of poems. Into the whole of Šejn's activities also those belong that are in some way connected with his own creation, but which we usually consider more part of his art historian's or aesthetic work, for example studies in the terrain, theoretical analyses of realizations that in an untraditional way reflect the character of a strange work of art (e.g. photographs of strange sculptures in context with the natural milieu by which they were inspired). With all this Šejn is the true opposite to a dissipated author always trying something else – on the contrary, we feel his work as something extraordinarily pronounced and concentrated, but we are aware that just the variety of means, of media, as hinted above, is the condition for a unity of another type. The artist is not interested in the unity of that by which he gives evidence but the unity of the evidence itself. He is convinced of the necessity to choose various media to express as adequately as possible what he considers essential. In this Miloš Šejn appears as a rarely individual author – all the means he uses aim at the statement about nature as phenomenon and about how man can perceive nature, react to it, let it effect himself and by means of momentaneous interferences become its part, enter into it. Therefore he also has been for many years always returning to the same places, most of which he has known since his childhood – to the hill Zebín near Jičín where he lives, to the nearby Prachover Rocks (The Bohemian Paradise), to the waterfalls of the Giant Mountains and to some Slovak caves. Thereby the author's fascination is not in the first place aesthetic – it may seem a paradoxon for an artist who so consequently insists on the perfectness of the final artefact, but this, too, is evidently the consequence of a much deeper intention. In short: as the statement is „correct“ (i.e. really reflecting something relevant from the totality of the natural world), it can also in the most traditional sense of the word be beautiful. Photography has an extraordinary place in Šejn's works, not only thanks to the number of realizations, but above all it has been literally running through all his work up to now. Šejn's first photographs

date from his childhood – their motivation was of course not artistic, but exploratory. With a certain simplification we can say that the starting point of Šejn's work was his interest in nature, living creatures, plants, the environment in which they live. Already from the end of the fifties we know a series of his photos for which methods he uses also later are characteristic – the serial character of several sequences, the change of the viewing angle, observing the same motive from different distances... About 1960 the serial *Way across the Průhonice Park* arose, where for the first time wandering is the theme; the way itself delimits the character of views, determines the visible and the hidden. Since his earliest beginnings Miloš Šejn has been using the means characteristic for conceptual photography at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies; in the course of time he enriched these methods by a series of others, but it is evident that already in his earliest works – at least in a rudimentary form – the way of reflecting the perceived world, characteristic for his work up to now, was present. We might consider as the most essential features of his oldest photographs his relation to nature, the effort to understand its own structural qualities and bindings, the active presence in it, realized by wandering about, the intense feeling of the natural milieu (different views, concentration etc.) and at last perceiving or seeing nature through the medium of photography. Photography allowed to fix the changeable structures, existing in one single moment, maybe the form of flocks of birds on water or in the air, or to register the metamorphoses in time (*Two views of the setting sun*, 1962). Later, during the sixties the interest in details of natural structures (seaweeds on water, for example, which thus could become part of a larger whole (*Across Mácha's landscape*, 1967), a three days' trip during which a series of photos of the ways themselves and different natural details from their surroundings was realized. The author himself emphasizes that in his works till the end of the sixties he did not in the first place consider the artistic quality of the result, but the experience of the natural milieu. In nowadays we are fully aware of their artistic relevance it is certainly also the consequence of a changed „enlarged“ conception of art. In 1970 Šejn began also to be interested in the film-picture – from these considerations and from the influence of contemporary films, from the character of „film seeing“ arranged trips in nature resulted, in which probably for the first time purely aesthetic qualities prevailed. In the seventies the scale of Šejn's photographic realizations widened; from 1972 dates the first unrealized project for the *Dragon's Ravine – Fire and Water*, where invited onlookers should watch a burning flame lighting the space between the rocks and at the same time hear the sound of water source from

another place in The Bohemian Paradise. Two years later he realized macro photographic series of various details of grasses, their „architecture“, which he also recorded in large cycles of drawings – analogically before that drawings had for example accompanied photographic studies of birds‘ colonies. Sequences of the metamorphoses of the waterfall Mumlava (1976) represent a further form of the artist’s interest in the permanent and thereby changeable natural structures. A whole series of realizations from the last ten years has been motivated just by this impulse – photography proves to be the most adequate means of testimony about nature’s character. For Šejn nature is a great unity from which an artistic work can tear out only some detail representing it for our perception. He is not interested in visually attractive situations, he concentrates on the relevant ones – and more and more often they are either elements, above all water and earth, mostly represented by stones and rocks, or cosmic bodies. The Sun, the Moon and the stars enter into mutual relations with details of nature on earth. Changing light allows him to register the eternal flow of time. Man’s presence is permanent, but inconspicuous; it is given by the character of seeing by means of the photographic picture, but it can also manifest itself by the active human participation in natural happenings. This is evident especially in the last years – the cycles Zebín and the Moon, Zebín and the Sun (1982) are in fact correlations of the movement of cosmic bodies in a limited view through a crack in the rocks, actions with fire realized on the Zebín and in the Mažarná cave (Delimitation of the Space by Fire, 1982) enrich the repertoire of elements by fire and for the first time stress the importance of the human presence. The fire gestures penetrate the cave, react to the shapes of the rock walls, circumscribe them and at the same time light them, make them visible. They associate relations to archaic cultures, to man’s catching hold of fire and making concrete use of it in the space of caves and rocks. Šejn’s gestures also remind us that the prehistoric hunters reacted to the shapes of the rocks and further interpreted them in their first works of art. Lately this conscience of the connection with prehistoric cultures has become more urgent in Šejn’s work. He begins to watch the Sun from important archeological localities and thus confronts today’s spectator with the natural experience of a long vanished culture (Sunset at the summer solstice, photographed from the Neolithic settlement Čertova ruka – Devil’s Hand – in Bohemian Paradise, 1985). The character of an active interference into natural environment is also to be found in manipulations with stones – first (since 1974) chosen as found sculptures, later (since 1978) displaced in their own milieu, then since 1982 recorded on paper by a sort of elementary constitutive

gesture, pointing to the human activity as well as the natural character of the material (artist's books and recordings *With Stone on Stone*). In the last years Šejn's drawings have fundamentally changed – for many years they had been technically traditional studies registering the shape characteristics of natural details, plants, animals, stones, details of rocks or the shaping of the whole countryside. Permanent returns to one motive, the effort of recording it – similar to the series of photographs – in its various changes, at the end of the seventies led to books drawn with pencil, later with lead, variations on the theme of the ravine. These books were further varied by the author by untraditional means either in his studio (blind-prints and perforated drawings) or direct in the open air. There were drawings with stones found at the drawn place – they stand at the beginning of a nowadays already very large series of drawings and drawn books that react direct to material found by Šejn in nature. Now he does not any longer draw nature, he draws by nature – with the edges of stones, but especially with natural pigments, leaves and blossoms of plants and trees, smashed lichens, mineral paints. The drawing does not describe, but it immediately contacts a natural situation, points to it in form of a shortened recording, sometimes accompanied by a textual commentary. Sometimes there is the direct natural material – the flower itself is the recording of the colour, it evokes the situation of a certain place (*Books about the garden*, 1985). His collection of natural pigments, beginning in the year 1979 gets the character of an autonomous work of art; the single specimens, completed by precise local and temporal data can be considered the most elementary form of pointing to a certain natural situation, its reflexion. Large frottages of rock walls are reproductions of stone reliefs and at the same time a means of collecting natural pigments in the original situation, the frottage becomes the „picture of the rock“. If the same place is also recorded by photograph we can confront two ways of the author's seeing, two possible forms of how to catch the changeable. This is certainly above all the testimony of the natural situation, but it is also the testimony of the specific possibilities and characteristics of both chosen media. The author himself sometimes draws with natural paints on the spot where be found them – thus for example he emphasizes the shape of a rock crack or establishes relations with an already existing colour accent, that came about without human help. The natural and the human are thus connected, there is a new unity that allows us to think about the character of the human and the natural, about their mutual relations. Again we consider the connection with primary creative human gestures, the first active contact of the paleolithic hunters with the environment they lived in, which probably were the beginnings of the

fine arts culture of mankind. In his investigations of the natural Miloš Šejn aims to the most fundamental - and thus his creation from the reflexion of nature more and more becomes the reflexion of relation between nature and man. It was not by chance that the repertoire of his photographs was gradually enlarged by photos of the most simple interventions in nature, not only natural ones, but also artificial, human ones. They are example the traces of corrosion in stones, but also the traces of living beings and incisions, scratches or signs made by man. The book, this most important bearer of information in the history of human culture, takes an always more important place in the artist's work and it seems that in the last years it has become for him as important as the photograph. He keeps the traditional form of the book, but it serves him for a new message, in direct connection with his other works. From a series of monothematic drawings arose books (Ravine I – VI, 1981) enabling the spectator to follow the changes of a single motive, different possibilities of perception; from actions (With Stone on Stone, 1982) followed sequences of various recordings, interpreting haptic and gestic characteristics of an action passed; from wanderings result books in which drawings and texts freely intermingle; natural pigments sometimes immediately evoke a natural situation, another time they are transposed into finger touches when pointing to the original place where the pigment was found is connected with the new, shaping gesture of the author whose aim it is no longer to describe but to create a new unity between two places and temporal moments. Miloš Šejn is an artist of rare sensibility who is capable of reflecting the actual relation of man and nature intently, but without sentimentality, with the knowledge of correlations. The author's beginnings anticipated the methods and intentions of concept art, but he never quite identified himself with them. His creation is near to those isolated authors who in some way actualized the human perception of nature, be it in form of the visualization of wanderings (Karel Adamus, Jaroslav Anděl), of a photographic or textual hint, evoking in an only sequence something essential of the experience of the landscape (Hamish Fulton), direct collecting natural material and presenting it to the onlooker as a certain semantic and visual quality (Wolfgang Laib) or evoking the relation to primeval cultures and their rituals (Barbara and Michael Leisgen). Among the authors of this orientation it is the range of Šejn's activities that arouses our interest, but above all the urgency of his message.

Jiří Valoch

Index of plates

- 1 Two Views of the Setting Sun, 1962
- 2 Action Fire and Water, 1972
- 3 Boulders / On the Way through the Prachover Rocks, The Bohemian Paradise, autumn 1974

- Fracturing Rock, 1976
- 4 Metamorphoses of Waterfall / Mumlava-River, The Giant Mountains, 1976
- 5 Along the Věžice Valley 18th and 20th August 1983 / The Bohemian Paradise

18th August

a cave near a dam, in front of the entrance
moreover a rock gate
a more recent engraving

scratches – the simplest record
in some parts they pass into hewing
structure of hewing

to the left a view opens
into the grassy divergence of a canyon
a foot-bridge
clear water and water crowfoot

a cluster of water-arum in counter-light
tendency to circle

a whitewashed cross

to the left an outflow-cave
in the window a charcoal drawing using
the natural shape of the rock
water flowing quite still in the small channel
at the bottom
of the cave
above the entrance a single vertical line
engraved
in some spots further simple archaic incisions

also on the opposite wall
a spring, a detail of light-green
fragile plants

the valley towards the Věžák
swamp
structures of plants flowing on the surface
at the end to the right a wonderful
narrow canyon
with green walls

above the Věžice-pond
the setting sun, calmness
the whole valley disappears in whitish fog

in a fog circle on the meadow
above me the moon
fires
the dark ravine upwards
to the right water

20th August

Věžice-pond
two photos of a green abyss
stand shifted slightly to the left upwards
three photos of sandy ripplemarks
at the bottom of the brook
in the swamps
shiftings of light

on the wall a natural drawing
to the right amazingly crumbling rocks

at the entrance an engraved incision

blooms of ferric pigment

at the outflow-cave to the left several
prints of hand and line

- 6 Through the Maple Brook 9. 7. 1985, book, finger drawings with red sorrel leaves picking during the way
- 7 The Way toward Tlstá-Hill, Giant Fatra 1983
- 8 The Advancing Sun and Shadow, Zebín-Hill 1984
- 9 New Sun / Winter Solstice 1983
- 10 The Zebín-Hill and the Moon, Vista at the firmament with the orbits of the Moon, Jupiter and Arcturus from the quarry on the Zebín 6/2/1982
- 11 Setting Sun / Mažarná Cave, The Grand Fatra 7/9/1983
- 12 Found Stone Reading the Time / White Rock, The Giant Mountains, 1974

With Stone on Stone / Zebín-Hill 6/4/1983

- 13 With Two Stones on the Top of Zebín-Hill 5/25/1983
- 14 Mažarná Cave / Delimitation of Space by Fire, record of a drawing with flame and of the shapes of the cave, The Grand Fatra 7/10/1982
- 15 Rock and Body 5/28/1983, state touches after one year

Print of Rock Wall, The Grand Fatra 7/16/1982

- 16 Touches, 1983, 1985, found pigment on rock and paper
- 17 The Maple Brook / Signs, 7/13/1985