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**Trafačka: Young Artists in an Alternative Space (Life of D.I.Y.)**

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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Trafačka: Young Artists in an Alternative Space
(Life of D.I.Y.)

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Abstract

This paper documents the functions and internal structure of Trafačka, an experimental arts space located in the Prague 9 district. There is very little research on the presence and significance of alternative culture in Prague today, and the term itself is difficult to define. Using personal interviews conducted by the author and some background research on Czech alternative culture and spaces, the study highlights the stories of the residents and artists of Trafačka in light of the debate on alternative culture. The author explains how Trafačka is an example alternative space and describes the complexities of being separated from other mainstream art institutions. The conclusion expresses the relevance of Trafačka for young and emerging artists in Prague today.
Introduction

Tucked in-between a mega mall and a local pub on a backdrop of constant construction is Trafačka, the “temple of freedom”, independent arts community, artist collective, and general “Do-It-Yourself” creative space. “No one can pigeon hole Trafačka,” says current resident Luisa Davies from Australia (Davies 2012). Her point becomes obvious after just one visit to the gallery or one of the many events that Trafačka holds in its main hall and courtyard. At Trafačka you can experience a typical art opening, a graffìti jam, a party, a concert, a music festival, a film screening, a fashion show, a gallery in the gallery, and more. Most important to Trafačka is the community of people living in the artist residences attached to the main building: visual artists, students, musicians, robot makers, graffìti writers, and more all live under one roof. If you speak to any of the residents they will tell you how remarkable it is to work and live in a space where everyone is creating something yet each neighbor is different from the next. These residents work together from different backgrounds and different mediums towards the same goal, to maintain this space of freedom.

Trafačka Background and History

Located in the heart of Prague 9, the main façade of the building is currently covered in a beautiful black, white, and red spray-paint mural done by the famous graffìti writer twins How & Nosm.
Needless to say the building stands out in the neighborhood. The wall on the outside of the main hall has held many different works and pieces over the years from artists both inside the Czech Republic and abroad. As a space for young and aspiring artists Trafačka has multiple parts: it is first a converted industrial building (a former regional power plant) that now houses gallery space as well as 27 artist studios and residences. There is a large hall that can serve a diversity of projects (from concerts, fashion shows to theatrical performances and various art festivals) and connected but separate from the main hall is another exhibition space, Galerie Trafačka. Trafačka has also now moved down the block in the same district where they now have Studio Trafo, which holds more official studio spaces for some of the most prominent artists that have been part of Trafačka since the beginning.
For residents Trafačka is a home, a workspace, and a play space. For artists Trafačka is a place to connect and communicate with other artists, a place to be inspired, a place to work, and a space for them to create their own vision for exhibitions. Finally, for visitors Trafačka is a mecca of all things involved with “young art” in Prague, it is a place to see emerging artists’ work, and a space to contribute to and enjoy through its many events. All in all, it is a place for communication, collaboration, and most importantly freedom of creativity.

I say “Do-It-Yourself” because at Trafačka anyone (not just artists) can meet, explore, create, and be inspired. Without entrance fees or other barriers the gallery is fully accessible to the public. Born from the roots of graffiti writers, the gallery today presents a range of the most current Czech (and foreign) visual art be it on canvas, the walls, projections, or in 3-D objects. Trafačka can be seen as a blank canvas for the curators and artists that come there, the space offers complete freedom of whatever form
one can envision there. The gallery is not bound in regulations and requirements but instead collaborates with artists to create their vision.

Maintaining Trafačka is not always easy though. In her dissertation on *Alternative Spaces in Post-Socialist Prague*, Michaela Pixová appropriately describes the situation of Trafačka’s existence, “During the economic crisis, and concomitant development stagnation, several vacant spaces within these development areas were legally occupied by a handful of cultural and art projects, whose users had to agree with their displacement in case of the redevelopment, or the demolition of the spaces they were occupying” (Pixová 5). Every year Trafačka must reapply for its lease and state grant because the future is unpredictable. Short-term life is both a blessing and a curse for Trafačka. While money is hard to come by and they never know if there will still be a place for them in six months, this life has blossomed a beautiful sense of creativity coming out of very little. Additionally Trafačka chooses to not operate on any commercial means. They do not sell the art they display and are truly not-for-profit, for larger projects associated with Trafačka but taking place outside the original space they sometimes receive funding from external financial sources.

The artists at Trafačka are innovative in a way you would not be able to achieve at a more established institution. Trafačka exists in a “time-gap with an indefinite end” (Pixová 113) yet this short-term nature and unpredictable future is exactly what gives the space its life. As Blanka Čermáková, who is in charge of Trafačka’s fundraising, finances, and gallery program, puts it, at Trafačka “we can do anything, and we can do nothing” (Čermáková 2012).
It is also important to know Trafačka’s backstory to understand the space today. I spoke with artist Jan Kaláb, a.k.a “Point”, a.k.a “Cakes” who was originally offered Trafačka as a space to work after his studies at the Academy of Fine Art in Prague. In 2006 Kaláb and his classmates graduated from the academy, which is when he found the empty former power plant that became Trafačka. When I asked him what the motivation to start Trafačka was he said, “so to say, it was not a plan. I was just looking to have a studio with Jakub Nepraš” (Kaláb 2012). The building was far from ideal and as Kaláb says, “I thought well it’s too big you now, because we are looking just for studios. But we didn’t find anything else so we moved in and asked some friends, and we start to like work there or like hang around” (Kaláb 2012). So the original members, artists and friends, Jan Kaláb, Jakub Nepraš, Michal Cimala, Martin Kaňa, and Roman Týc occupied Trafačka and by 2007 they opened the additional gallery space, Trafo Galerie, and held their first opening. Now there is even a documentary entitled Temple of Freedom (2011) made about these artists, the project, and the evolution of this space yet as Kaláb says, “it was always changing and we didn’t expect anything from it” (Kaláb 2012). Trafačka was built out of nothing and every addition to the space and community has been made not as much purposefully as just a natural growth of the next Trafačka project. For example they did not have the idea to live in the attached residences until 2008 when they produced the graffiti festival Names. At which point they spoke with the property owner about letting some artists stay there for a month of so throughout the festival, after which friends and artists continued to occupy the flats as previous tenants were asked to leave because of the plans for demolition. Today Trafačka takes over the entire property and has intentionally or not made it’s mark for young artists and alternative spaces in Prague.
Motivations

I choose to study Trafačka first of all because I was attracted to the space on a personal level. I first watched the documentary and then took a class visit to see the gallery as an example of an “arts NGO”. I later interviewed Blanka Čermáková at the Trafačka side project gallery show, *Stuck On The City*, taking place at the municipal library. As I continued to attend Trafačka’s art openings and events connected to *Stuck On The City* I became increasingly fascinated by the way that Trafačka was both a typical gallery and a space for many young people to meet each other for recreation or work. The range of events Trafačka has put on even in the short few months I have been in Prague is impressive; I have attended two art openings at Trafo Galerie, one outside of Trafačka at the city library, a panel discussion with world-wide graffiti and street artists, an evening dedicated to women in graffiti, an art walk with one of the most prominent Czech graffiti/pop artists Pasta Oner, and a jazz concert. In my previous coursework in art history and museums studies I have become absorbed in the debate of how institutions assign value to art objects and the ways that the presentation of art controls visitor accessibility and distorts viewer perceptions. I see Trafačka as an in-between to the established cultural institution and an informal pop-up gallery space, and it is therefor an attractive research subject. Because while Trafačka is run-down and operating on D.I.Y. principles, it has also become quite established in the young-art scene and has continued running for six years. As a space I wondered if Trafačka’s inability to predict its future offers the perfect balance of un-institutionalized yet professional art gallery. Hence, my
research became focused on the world of “alternative culture” in Prague and the role and lives of young artists today.

The Debate on Alternative Culture

“Alternative Culture” is hard to define and therefore also difficult to determine its existence. While looking at Trafačka as my main example, my research topic quickly moved from “Alternative Culture in Prague” to “Is There an Alternative Culture in Prague?” Of course you can start by understanding Alternative as something, someone, or action that is separated or different from Mainstream culture and society. However, even though Trafačka is not located in Prague 1 (the tourist center of the city), what determines if what is taking place there is somehow different than what you could find in the more mainstream or known areas of the city?

From talking to people during my research it became clear that one of the main reasons this notion is hard to define is because the artists, residents, or visitors of an alternative space like Trafačka never wished to be seen as “alternative”. These individuals are not per say resisting anything in particular, rather this is natural manner for them to produce and display their work in.

Two main topics also emerged in my interviews that help to define what exactly alternative art is and possibly answer why this culture or environment is maybe not so “alternative” but just less recognized. First is the notion that what one might call “alternative” art is just less established art made by less well known artists, and second that the “alternative art” community is made up of a diversity of young people rather than people necessarily living alternative lifestyles.
The community at Trafačka is not something that you can pinpoint one definition on to. I spoke with final year art student and Trafačka resident, Tomáš Skála, who said, “I don’t see it too much alternative because here is a lot of persons who are really different between each other and they don’t make one solid type of community but it’s really many kind of persons” (Skála 2012). As he accurately notes and I saw for myself, you can be a Trafačka resident in many different ways. Some are young people just looking to have fun, some are visitor, some are more elderly craftsmen who prefer to live there than elsewhere, some are graffiti bombers who are running from the cops all night, some are students, some are known visual artists, and some are artists who do not let others see their work. This complicates the idea of Trafačka being a space for alternative people because all the individuals are working differently. Furthermore Kaláb added the thought that Prague is a small city, so all of the same people who are going to Trafačka are also going to DOX contemporary art museum, and the National Gallery (Kaláb 2012). When I asked him if the thought there was an alternative culture in Prague Kaláb answered, “I don’t see it like this, it’s alternative because it is young you know? So most of the artists are not established” (Kaláb 2012). So one can say that at least in Trafačka’s case, the debate on the existence of alternative culture is actually more about the position of young artists.

I also met with Czech sociologist, Majda Rajčanová, who helped to produce the Trafačka documentary. She answered the question of alternative culture along the same lines: “alternative I see in trying to show something that wouldn’t have another way, wouldn’t have another possibility to be show…to make place for things which are not so…successful” (Rajčanová 2012). So perhaps this is exactly what Trafačka does. Skála
reflected a similar notion; “I think I perceive the word alternative as something which is
done, which is made without some big expectation. Without, profit” (Skála 2012).

In her dissertation on alterative spaces in Prague Pixová almost answers this
dilemma of “alterative” spaces versus “alternative” people by saying that, “at the same
time, alternative lifestyles might be pursued without inhabiting spaces that deviate from
the rest of the mainstreams spatial forms, while some alternative spaces might be
inhabited without its users pursuing any alternative lifestyle” (Pixová 33). What I argue is
that Trafačka embodies the second option in her answer. There is no doubt that the
physical set up of Trafačka is no National Gallery, yet I have met individuals there who
live a range of lifestyles from completely non-mainstream to your average Joe. To better
explain why I feel it is still appropriate to name Trafačka as an alternative space
regardless of its community, I will turn to a comment on graffiti by Czech graffiti artist
“Skarf”: “‘The controversial aspect of street art comes from this truth - that it's not clearly
lawful... that's why it's interesting. It doesn't respect the rules of materialistic society
where everything that’s paid for is what’s allowed.’ It’s a free art form that can’t be
controlled, that can stand up to ‘the commercial spam on the street’” (Ratner, Expats.cz).
These are exactly the principles that Trafačka follows, while as Kaláb notes that it may
not have been originally intentional, Trafačka is place of complete freedom because the
“normal” rules of mainstream society are not practiced in the same way in this space.

**Methodology**

In order to understand exactly how Trafačka is an alternative space, a place
“where experimentation, innovativeness and creativity can be fully employed” (Pixová
I attempted to narrow my focus to young artists in Prague. Trafačka’s D.I.Y. circumstances and principles are directly helpful to less established artists who need a place for experimentation rather than regulations. In my research I wanted to understand why Trafačka is important by learning the story of the place as well as the people who live there so I interviewed five individuals, four of who are directly part of the Trafačka community.

I first spoke with Jan (Honza) Kaláb, a prominent Czech artists with roots in street art and graffiti and also one of the founders of Trafačka. Next I met with Majda Rajčanová, who was the only person not directly involved with Trafačka, she is a sociologist who formerly studied alternative culture when she was a student. I also met with “Sany”, one of the only active female Czech graffiti writers and someone frequently involved in Trafačka events and gallery work. To see the Trafačka resident perspective I met with the only American currently living there, Tommy Levecchia; he is a trumpet player who has lived in Prague for five years and Trafačka for one year. While interviewing Levecchia I also met Luisa Davies who is an Australian woman living at Trafačka. Lastly I met with Tomáš Skála who has been a resident at Trafačka for the past four years and is currently finishing his last year at the Academy of Fine Art in Prague. Blanka Čermáková, who is the art manager and general financial supervisor and program director of Trafačka was my extremely helpful advisor for the project who also contributed her opinions and reflections on my research topics during our meetings. These individuals and their stories made up my project and gave me the majority of my data and information on the lives of young artists in Prague and what it is like to work and live in a space like Trafačka.
The main topics discussed in my interviews were: is there an alternative culture, the role of alternative culture, defining Trafačka, what should be the future use of Trafačka, how do you find the balance between an alternative arts organization and an official culture institution, if there were any particularly Czech qualities about Trafačka, understanding the relationships between artists and viewers and the artwork displayed in the Trafačka gallery, and learning about each artist’s background and their work.

The Situation for Young Artists in Prague Today

Currently young artists in the Czech Republic are in a similar situation as in other countries, that is, it is difficult to find a place to display one’s work and even more difficult to simply afford to live as an artist. Globally the art world functions on principles of well-known names and big money artworks, therefore being thought of as important as an emerging artist without any personal connections or money is very rare. What seems unique to the Czech Republic right now is that many young artists (even street and graffiti artists) are being formally trained in the academy. Students are able to specialize in art even at the high school level and almost all of the artists I have met graduated from a fine arts academy. Hence, Prague is a city filled with young artists but not necessarily with more places for them to work or display outside of the schools. AMoYA (Artbanka Museum of Young Art) located in Prague is a museum with a large collection of only young art that is available to rent through the Artbanka organization. As some of the only institutionalized support for young artists and experts in the discovery of emerging creators they say, “every year many artists graduate from fine arts schools, but after a while most of them leave creative arts, as they cannot afford to continue. In general, the
young Czech art receives only minimum support from the state and entrepreneurs alike” (amoya.cz). To understand how young artists and alternative culture overlap we can return to the argument that alternative art is art that is not yet discovered, not shown in mainstream society, or made without profit. When I spoke with Tomáš Skála he echoed similar concerns as a current young art student, when talking about the overlap between “alternative” and “young” he says, “if you are older you must think about your livelihood...you have time to visit events like here, but I guess when I will be older I will be also spoiled by this system” (Skála 2012). As a artist who was been working for many years but is still a student Skála seemed to have accepted that it is not possible to make a livelihood out of art. However, he also later noted that he was not interested in making money off of his work, at least at first, showing that the goals and needs of a young artists often differ than those of more “established” artists.

What Young Artists Need and Are They Alternative?

Working at the Academy of Fine Art in Prague and serving as a manager of Trafačka has given Blanka Čermáková a unique perspective on the lives of young artists. In one of our meetings she explained to me the four main requirements for an emerging young artist to become active outside of the academic setting. First, they need a place to work; any artist cannot accomplish much without a studio space or workspace and the physical qualities of this space can seriously impact the use for the artist. A larger space allows for larger projects, a table or easel allows for drawing, a building with heat allows for work in all seasons, a sink allows for switching paint colors, etc. This was after all Kaláb’s original intentions for the Trafačka building; he and his classmates simply need a
space to work in. Next, the artists need money (perhaps from an alternate job) to continue buying supplies, using their workspace, and bringing their art to galleries. Once they have a place to create and money to support themselves, emerging artists need someone to discover or see their work and recognize their talent. This may be the most key step in establishing yourself as a young artist because it leads to the fourth requirement, which is finding a place to display one’s work.

There are slight alternatives to this plan of establishing yourself as an artist, for example, once Kaláb had other friends involved with Trafačka and therefore more money, they were able to turn their workspace simultaneously into their display space. However, he notes that this process in no way offered instant stardom at the beginning: “We were thinking we don’t have anything else so we do it here, you know. And by time it became to have credit. You know? Like we were the first ones to do first exhibition in the gallery and nobody gives a fuck about it. But over many years there were more friends, and after the years there is bunch of people and they want to exhibition in there” (Kaláb 2012). Although Trafačka allows for some bending of the four requirements previously mentioned, even the gallery space there exists under the same bounds as the rest of the mainstream art world. That is, an unknown gallery with unknown artists is not much of a gallery. Today Trafačka is well known amongst a specific, and quite large, audience, hence many artists established or not ask to display their work there. So even a renovated D.I.Y. space needs some fame to become important, does this change the level or definition of “alternativeness” at Trafačka? The debate on how alternative or not Trafačka is continues when looking at the needs of young artists. Although emerging artists need a place to experiment and display new and
different work, meaning therefore a somewhat “alternative” space, if the site of display is completely unknown, then there is practically no benefit for their work. Again Trafšaška is balancing on the borderlines of alternative and mainstream, official and unofficial.

Yet what is almost more intriguing to realize is the role of art education. Because so many young artists are formally and traditional trained art students, their artwork itself is often quite far from what you would call “alternative”. In a paper she wrote entitled “Alternativa? Ano i ne” (Alternative? Yes and No), Majda Rajčanová explains that “alternative” can be in the form, style, or content of an art piece. She continues with explaining that the work, presentation, or event can create the alternative nature (Rajčanová 2002). With this definition we see that even stylistically traditional work can be displayed at Trafšaška and in some way become alternative because it is hanging from a nail on a cement wall in an unheated old power plant. Tomáš Skála is the perfect example of this phenomenon as a sixth year (final year) art student and Trafšaška resident. He has been making art since he was six years old, has been trained in an academic setting, and much of his work uses realistic representations of the traditional human form, yet he lives at Trafšaška. Skála’s work itself is not alternative but he brings us back to the connection between young art and alternative art when he told me “I perceive the word alternative as something which is done, which is made without some big expectation. Without, um, profit” (Skála 2012). This is exactly what Trafšaška does because they do not sell any work and make no profits off the space. Therefore it makes even more sense that young artists begin their work as artists there. Emerging artists cannot expect much from their shows and usually cannot work for profit until they are more established, does this make their work alternative? No, but it does reflect on the profile of Trafšaška.
Trafačka is a place that focuses on unknown artists, which in itself if not done in mainstream culture except for at the academy and specifically in Prague, at AMoYA. Therefore what is most important to understand about the needs of young artists in light of my research is that Trafačka offers these emerging artists a space to work and display. Trafačka offers a meeting point for artists and as a result a way to show one’s work to others and the public without having to go with around to galleries with a portfolio asking to exhibit. For the artists who come to Trafačka there is already a community of viewers, critics, and collaborators because of the many residents. Additionally the D.I.Y. principles of the space are productive for innovation and experimentation.

What People See in Trafačka

To continue the discussion and examination of emerging artists working in Trafačka I would like to talk more about the people I interviewed who are involved with Trafačka in various ways. Understanding what they see in Trafačka is a way to make sense of the importance of the space. Everyone I spoke with that is directly involved with Trafačka either is currently a young artists or, mainly Kaláb, was a less known artist not too long ago. Trafačka is made up of a diversity of individuals who’s work and mentality may be different from each other but what I came to understand is that they see similar purposes for Trafačka even if they are approaching the space in different ways. Be they artists in graffiti, music, sculpture, robots, or traditional painting what they have in common is an appreciation for the unique place they call home. As I said previously, my main purpose in talking with these individuals was to learn their stories of being involved with Trafačka and hear their perspectives on the role of the space and in connection to
alternative culture. While many were reluctant to try to define alternative culture and mainly stressed that it was not so straightforward, they all expressed that Trafačka is important and different than other spaces in Prague. The three main themes that emerged in defining just what is distinctive about Trafačka were **energy**, a **diverse community**, and the **natural process of creativity**.

**Energy at Trafačka**

Trafačka has been built off of waves of enthusiasm. It takes a lot of work to maintain the space and there is practically no money to pay people so the motivation to help Trafačka evolve must come from personal will. As Kaláb said of the early days it was a natural growth “because in the beginning we put a lot of energy in it, and then came other people and in certain time there is someone who put a lot of energy in it. And then come some other guy and he put his piece of energy in it. So it is still growing” (Kaláb 2012). Čermáková also spoke about how it is only when someone new comes to Trafačka that passion for the space is regenerated. Because Trafačka functions really as a collective, energy is key to its survival. There is no external financial or creative source keeping Trafačka afloat and encouraging its existence, instead the energy must come from within, from the people that live and work there. Resident Luisa Davies also used the word energy when describing Trafačka. When I asked about if she though that Trafačka would survive for much longer she said she had faith that it would “because people want to give it energy” (Davies 2012). She continued to explain Trafačka’s role or purpose in similar words, “it has a big role in bringing these people together, and like this energy getting people together can actually create more energy” (Davies 2012). The
energy that Trafačka provides and cultivates is a means for collaboration. “Sany” voiced how for her, her art itself is the energy; she says, “graffiti for me is energy” (Sany 2012). It is through graffiti that Sany has been able to connect with others and create projects such as the Girl Power movie she is now working on. People who come to Trafačka do the same in that space and all bring their energy in different modes. When you spend a couple of hours in one of the flats it is impossible to not notice at least five different artworks and meet five different people, and from these interactions you can feel the energy yourself. Places such as art galleries or museums may hold energy but it is an isolated relationship between viewer and artwork. At Trafačka energy is about brining together the individuals to create a collective. To describe this phenomenon Čermáková used the analogy of cooking, she says at Trafačka “everyone is cooking together and everyone brings different ingredients to make it edible” (Čermáková 2012). In Trafačka’s case it is livable not edible but the point remains sound, individual and collective energy is key to Trafačka’s success. The process of everyone coming together to cook offers the residents and artists a sense of enthusiasm and creativity that is not found in other settings, and this is born out of energy.

A Diverse Community

Thinking about Trafačka through the metaphor of cooking brings up the next main theme of my interviews, that is, community. At Trafačka community is an obvious part of the space because the twenty-seven residencies are physically connected to the larger hall and exhibition space. The residents sometimes do cook together as well as work together to maintain the building. Skála told me about how they recently created a
new water pipe system because they used to just use a garden hose to get water to the top floors but in the winter it freezes (Skála 2012). Hence, the D.I.Y. culture is not only about the gallery and the art but is the way that they work as a community to solve problems. Where the collaboration of the community is most significant for young artists though is in the mutual inspiration that occurs at Trafačka. As graffiti artist “Sany” puts it, “they are talking but in the end they go to do it in hall, so it’s good. Before artists were just speaking and blah blah blah and in the end they didn’t do much, and now they are living together and working together, so that’s really fine” (Sany 2012). Because living as an artist and especially an emerging artist is difficult to sustain, this communication is vital. Trumpet player and Trafačka resident Tommy Levecchia expressed a similar thought, and even compared living at Trafačka to being back at arts university. He equated how at university he lived amongst a range of artistic people working through varying methods but all with the same goal to express themselves artistically (Levecchia 2012). He adds, “I’m king of inspired when I see other people doing work or work that other people have done” (Levecchia 2012). Levecchia explained how special the moments were when he was able to see someone’s work that he hadn’t before and it was that interaction that encouraged him to go back to his own room and play music. In the academic setting artists can often work with each other and communicate their ideas but once outside of that community it can be difficult to find a place to both work and discuss ideas and creative collective creativity. Trafačka has created a space where creativity is shared and this creates huge benefits for artists living there.

All of the residents I spoke with also emphasized how diverse the Trafačka community is. It's important to realize that although Trafačka functions very much as a
collective, “no one is the same, there’s no one thing running through it all” (Davies 2012) says Davies. Levecchia explains to me why they still enjoy living together even if they are doing contrasting types of work. Because there are “different concept[s] that everyone is going for, but I think that in the end their goals are the same. To just learn and to grow and to you know, to work if you work on your art, it comes back to you” (Levecchia 2012). This is what is so unique about Trafačka, that as the residents work on their art they create connections with each other and therefore expand their own creativity and the imagination of Trafačka as a whole. So Trafačka is made up of a community of people that have sometimes similar lives because of where they live but in art they are painters, graffiti writers, students, expats, Czechs, musicians, sculptors and more. In some ways this variety complicates the question of what is alternative culture because as the Skála, says, “I don’t see it too much alternative because here is a lot of persons who are really different between each other and they don’t make one solid type of community but it’s really many kind of persons” (Skála 2012). However, I argue that it is exactly this diversity that makes Trafačka alternative. When these individuals come together artistically to recognize their common goal amongst differences they are creating a space for free and encouraged creativity that is hard to come by in mainstream culture. In “official” culture there are masters of talents and there are everyday people, but at Trafačka it is the young artist who have a space to practice their talents regardless of lack of experience. And an element that is crucial to the practice and growth of the emerging artists is the connection, communication, and collaboration with a range of other artists. Additionally, a point that Majda Rajčanová emphasized in her paper on alternative culture was that for new experimentations people must come from different and diverse
fields of creativity to find new ways to go about creating a performance or art piece (Rajčanová 2002), hence it is not just connection in community that is needed for these artists but a community that is full of varying talents and interests works to expand their experimentations and creations.

Natural Creativity

The last common theme from my interviews, the natural process of creativity, is also connected to the people who live at Trafačka and the ways in which they function as a community. Returning to the debate of alternative culture I asked all of the artists that I spoke with what their motivation was for making art, and of course if they had responded that they wanted to take a stand against mainstream society by producing alternative visual art, my research question would have been easily answered. However that was not the case and what I heard instead is that art is simply natural for them, they expressed that they almost have no other choice but to create what is in their imagination, they must shape their expressions visually. Skála explained, “it’s actually only thing I am able to do…it is somehow natural for me to make art, it’s natural for me. And maybe I’m chained on doing this. And yeah, I’ve had full of various ideas and for me it’s an adventure to bring it to real or trying to make it real. And I see it as the experiment, making art, this experiment for me” (Skála 2012). For Skála the artistic process is a natural way of life as well as a way to explore new fields. This is why he is a perfect resident for Trafačka, living amongst art and artists seems appropriate for Skála and additionally he wishes to experiment and expand his ideas.
Jan Kaláb or “Point”, also expressed, specifically in regards to his street art, that in his art, “most important it was for me. That I pass this place and I will see my work. So that’s the motivation, you know? And I see the space and I image something, ‘Ok, here something could be this,’ and I decide to create it and then I did it” (Kaláb 2012). Again he spoke of his work as an inner-necessity and a personal interest rather than some form of protest or expression even for the public. In her essay Rajčanová argues that this natural expression of art is actually what often creates the alternative nature of the work. Alternativeness can come from process and Rajčanová suggest that in alternative culture it is not a priority to fight against something but the goal is instead to find your own journey of creative freedom (Rajčanová 2002). This is how the artists I spoke with approached their work, as a means for self-exploration that leads to experimentation and expansion of creative horizons. Trafačka encourages this kind of natural artistic lifestyle, because freedom is an integral part of the community and function of the space. So the alternative nature of Trafačka is about “creative freedom” rather than resistance.

There is one more element of the natural process of creativity that Rajčanová touches on which is the matter of borderlines becoming clouded and unclear (Rajčanová 2002). She speaks of how in the alternative world art is a natural process because everyday life and artistic work are blended together until it is unclear which is which. For example Rajčanová was speaking more on “alternative” theatrical performances where the lines between the actors and audience would become obscured. This type of experience presents obvious questions of who is acting and who is not, as well as what is art and what is real life? I see this characteristic of obscured borderlines as another alternative quality of Trafačka because the lines between art and life, individual and
community become easily blurred. Blending of borderlines creates an environment where art can be created naturally because the flow of time and space is not divided into work and recreation or creative and non-creative. At Trafačka you can bring creativity into all spheres of life. This is an ideal environment for young artists because art can be brought into any setting, meaning there is much room for experimentation and exploration.

**Trafačka as a Place of Purpose**

The ultimate commonality of my interviews, excluding Rajčanová, is that all of these individuals through one means or another are co-organized within Trafačka. Whether we spoke of personal motivations, artistic inspiration, or the existence of alternative culture, what these individuals have in common is the backdrop of Trafačka. The people I spoke with all benefit in some way from their association with this place. Trafačka offers inspiration, a place for creativity, community, home, a place for exploration, and a space for emerging artists to build their repertoire and grow as artists. Returning to Pixová’s dissertation on alternative cultures the ideas of community and space can connect through the “alternative” qualities they both share. Pixová explains that in alternative communities people “refuse the rules and constraints imposed upon them by the dominant societal order, and their spaces of resistance provide them with an alternative refuge that matches their authentic lifestyle, values and taste, enabling them to discuss and co-operate with other like people, and pursue creative and experimental activities” (Pixová 26). While Trafačka is not a space of resistance and rather an open space for free expression, what is impactful is the correspondence of place and community. Trafačka does “refuse the rules and constraints” of mainstream even if not on
purpose, because the space is both communal and make-shift. Therefore the profile of the building attracts a certain type of person who then finds like-minded members of the community inside its walls. As Levecchia explained to me, getting a room at Trafaka goes through friends first. He describes his first interaction with the building and says, “I went there and it was cold and dirty and uh, I fell in love immediately” (Levecchia 2012). Someone is only going to live at Trafaka if they want to live the Trafaka lifestyle. It attracts a certain type of person who may be looking for a place off of the beaten path or with more room for freedom of living. As Levecchia says, “if you want to live in a place like Trafaka, that it’s because you have work that you want to do” (Levecchia 2012). Therefore, all of the energy, and community, and appreciation of the space is obvious for the “like-minded” residents who share the space and use it for their various creative needs.

All of the previously mentioned topics of the debate on alternative culture, the needs of young artists, and what my interviewees see as most important about Trafaka are crucial to my main research topic: how Trafaka functions as a space and its purpose. I spent three weekends “guarding the gallery” while the exhibition Tune The Eye was up in Trafo Gallery. Guarding the exhibition involves sitting inside the gallery during the four hours it is open for visitors and answering questions as well as making sure that no one tries to steal or damage the artwork. The most aweing part of this experience was seeing how open the people at Trafaka were to letting in a total outsider. I am American, a liberal arts student, and speak very little Czech; although I may appreciate Trafaka on a personal level I am an outsider to their world in many ways and after my first day at the gallery I received friendly hellos and the chance to collaborate with others. Through this
time at the gallery I quickly realized how Trafačka is much more than a place to just look at art; I felt as though I was there to communicate with others, recreate, and work. Although I was only a short-term member of their community I still wanted to do my part by keeping the gallery clean and making sure to converse with all visitors. It was not just that I felt a strong urge to help out but what is unique it is that I felt I was allowed to use my own perspective to support Trafačka. Many art spaces are so regulated that only professionals can contribute to the space, Trafačka is communal in spirit and practice so even my point of view was easily welcomed. It is this spirit that inspires more than just observation but action, communication, creation, and connection amongst artists. In other words, this is the purpose of Trafačka.

The Physical Space

It is impossible to understand the way Trafačka functions without seeing the physical space. Although I have already described Trafačka on the surface level I would like to revisit the most important parts of the space. Again you must acknowledge that the building was originally a regional power plant and is therefore now a type of industrial warehouse space. As Rajčanová describes in her essay, these spaces are converted in a way so you can fiddle with the original purpose (Rajčanová 2002). Even using this building as the space for Trafačka demands a level of innovation that is not required in a more official building. The main elements of Trafačka are the resident flats, which are directly connected to the main hall; the gallery space, which is most visible from the street; the main hall, which is the largest space for projects; and the courtyard, which is the heart of Trafačka where all the other pieces connect. Each off these spaces is unique
because of the size or the setup. The size and shape of the exhibition spaces allows for a level of creativity that is not easily accessible elsewhere, and the setup of the flats over the courtyard creates a landscape as communal as the lifestyle. Skála described the balcony over the courtyard as one of Trafačka’s main attractions; “I think it’s not so valuable a building but it has some charm because uh, it’s quite unique that we have some courtyard and we have some I don’t know what it’s called, balcony, and everything here is like very connected because you can see your neighbor two floors downstairs” (Skála 2012). The balcony allows for the residents to constantly be in contact with each other, reciprocal to the tendencies of the residents to be frequently collaborating. The borders of the building create a circle around the central courtyard, which is indeed truly unique because a small center for Trafačka that is created separate from the rest of the high-rises and offices that surround the building. Trafačka is an example of form and content expressing the same intention. It is hard to tell if the communal lifestyle influences the space or vice versa but what is important Davies emphasis is that “Trafačka is here” (Davies 2012). She was referring to how the gallery is actually quite different than the rest of Trafačka. For outsiders they may only ever get to see an exhibition at the gallery or a concert in the main hall but for the people who actually live at Trafačka it is their rooms and those residents who make the space what it is. She also mentioned the courtyard as the main space for community, especially in the warm weather when they can have barbeques and beer in the shed they built. While some visitors who do not live at Trafačka will be never have the chance to see the inner courtyard, the culture of the balcony and courtyard still influences the parts of Trafačka that are more open to the public. For example the way that I was immediately invited in
to meet the inner workings of Trafačka or how at an art opening in the gallery the residents will always come down and be part of the general crowd.

The previously mentioned vast amount of space is another distinctive quality of Trafačka that affects the work of the artists. The main hall allows for imagination because it is a truly empty space with a ceiling two stories off the ground. In the hall you could easily create a moving piece, an installation, or organize a festival or concert. Again this amount of free space is not easily accessible outside of the walls of Trafačka. Skála expressed the importance of Trafačka in the uniqueness of the space, “you can have kind of events that it’s not possible have anywhere else. You can invite some noisy bands, nobody will complain because it’s not heard from this big hall too much. And it’s, it has a lot of space for experiments” (Skála 2012). The physical space of Trafačka only expands the freedom of the open mentality that is encouraged amongst the artists there. It is not only that the building is expansive but also the way in which the residences are directly
connected to the exhibition space that influences the artists’ work. At Trafačka artists are constantly working and presenting within their own space and community. This impacts the artists as well as the public in the sense that working at Trafačka already implies a certain profile of work and process as well as makes it easier for the emerging artists to not have to leave their work space to find an exhibition space. Visitors are aware of the implications of Trafačka’s space because they know the community these artists are working in. Most importantly being part of that community gives artists a background of support and a gallery to associate themselves with.

How it Functions

These spaces are not often found in a more official institution mainly because they cannot be regulated in a formal way. This is key to how Trafačka works, as Čermáková put it, “we can do anything and also nothing” (Čermáková 2012). The short-term life of Trafačka allows for extreme experimentation. There is no long-term plan for Trafačka that must be followed, hence if you have an idea for a project and have the means to pull it off then you are able to do it. This is not to say that Čermáková and others do not work hard to have a formal program for the gallery but as Kaláb says when I asked about Trafačka’s future: “Trafačka it just grewed from nothing, from zero and we did everything by ourselves…you know we never, you cannot think about it like this. Because we also never thought about like what will we do next year” (Kaláb 2012). Official cultural institutions who receive large grants must present a formal long-term plan in order to receive and use the money. Trafačka is not unofficial by choice in the sense that they have never been given the choice, the building is still planned for demolition, they just do not know when. Sany explained why Trafačka is a successful
place for graffiti, it’s “good for us because nobody care what we do with it” (“Sany” 2012). This is the kind of freedom that Trafačka thrives off of. At the heart of the functioning of the Trafačka is the blessing and curse of the short-term life. Artists are able to create freely without many regulations, yet there is very little money to support these projects because the space cannot be regulated. Regardless of the future of Trafačka the current method of operation is in many ways alternative from mainstream art galleries.

**What Trafačka Offers Young Artists**

This brings us back to the lives of young artists and how Trafačka caters to their needs. Even if there is not money to be made Trafačka offers emerging artists a workspace and a display space all in one. Most significantly, these spaces are completely flexible hence fostering authenticity, creativity, and experimentation. While as an art student Skála says that he prefers to work at school for convenience and inspiration, for many young artists Trafačka meets their needs more than another space available to them. As another example Levecchia notes that this was his initial attraction to Trafačka, “as soon as I walked in I said, ‘I could do work in here, I can play music’. I’m a trumpet player so it’s important for me to have a place to play which isn’t always really available in uh, living in the center, in official buildings” (Levecchia 2012). Again, probably the biggest difficult for emerging artists is bring their work around to exhibition spaces asking to display their work at Trafačka they are able to skip this step. Not only is their room for exhibition and a community to view the work but because the space is unregulated in many ways their visions can come to life rather than having to control
their work to fit into another spaces needs. Put more simply, Trafačka is able to put the artist’s needs above the institution’s needs.

**Freedom**

Ultimately what Trafačka offers is freedom; freedom for work, freedom for creativity, and freedom for emerging artists to make a mark in the art world. Trafačka gives people the chance to experience what Rajčanová explains as “your own journey of creative freedom” (Rajčanová 2002). The physical space, communal space, living space, and public events are all open to experimentation and innovation. This makes Trafačka an alternative to many constricted mainstream spaces and most importantly a supportive environment for artists. I see Trafačka as an escape from the parts of society where imagination is restricted. Jan Kaláb said it best when he explained, “Trafačka is like free space where you can do whatever you want, like no limits” (Kaláb 2012). A free space is very hard to find today where there are regulations and approvals and requirements everywhere you go. Trafačka is key for artists and other young people today because this type of environment fosters a creativity that is crucial to the growth of the contemporary art world.
Further Research and Concluding Questions

A few topics to consider in concluding this paper as topics for further research are: is there any connection to the former underground in alternative culture today? This topic is difficult because young Czech people are very indifferent to politics today but this history was indeed the beginning of many alternative movements. Secondly, is alternative culture really just made up as Levecchia voiced, from the “people who go to the parties” not the artists? This is a topic that it is important to be aware of when looking at alternative art. Many young people are more drawn to the look and feel of the scene rather than the role of the art, but it is hard to understand which is more critical. And lastly, Kaláb mentioned that the perspective he has gained from traveling the world is that “everything that is here is somewhere else…so everywhere is the same, every town has its own Trafačka which looks a little different but everywhere is the similar space, similar people, they do similar stuff” (Kaláb 2012). How does this global world affect the significance and purpose of a place like Trafačka in Prague?