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Most 81/82: An Artistic Demonstration Against the Dehumanization of Society

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Abstract:
The purpose of this paper is to document the background, events, and cultural significance of Jiří Sozanský’s “Most Project.” There has been little research conducted and critical texts written on the activities of Sozanský in the devastated city of “Old Most,” which has provided me with the opportunity to conduct fieldwork and to work largely with primary sources. This study is focused on working with primary documents, mainly interviews with the artist and viewing the original photographic documentation, in order to understand the purpose and details of Jiří Sozanský and his fellow artists’ artistic work in Most. In order to fully understand the “Most Project” the author conducted a comprehensive research utilizing both primary and secondary sources on the Czech art scene in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. It is essential to situate Sozanský’s “artistic intervention” in the historical and political reality of the time. Through extensive interviews the author uncovers how the “Most Project” was conceived, the logistics of the project, and how the artists came together to create a full installation in the decaying remains of the city of Most. The author uncovers the significance of Sozanský’s “Most Project” within the context of the artist’s career, the city of Most, and the Czech art community.
**Jiří Sozanský points with pathos at the dehumanization of modern society.**

*His work is inspired by one of the principal postulates of the art of the ‘70s, namely, that art should leave the seclusion of the studios and galleries and become a part of life.*

Petra Pecinkova, 154

Jiří Sozanský, a central and powerful figure of the Czech art scene during the 1970s and 1980s, defied the laws and censorship of the communist regime by creating environmental art exhibitions in reaction to the violence and suppression of the regime. While the government and union of artists controlled the exhibition and promotion of art during the period of “Normalization”, Sozanský is one of the primary artists that dared to create and exhibit “unofficial” art in thought-provoking, site-specific installations. “He made his entry as artist in the mid-1970s, in a period of culminating normalization and repression of artists’ freedom. From the very beginning with his art he vented his rejection of all forms of violence, arbitrariness and ideological dictates, which encroach on human rights and human dignity” (Kotalík, *Jiří Sozanský: Skelety*, 47).
One of his most famous and successful exhibitions was created in the crumbling and devastated city of Most. Most, an industrial city that was profoundly changed by the expulsion of its original German population was completely exploited and ultimately demolished for its natural coal resources. Sozanský, having an interest in the industrial region of Northern Bohemia visited Most throughout the 1970s and was deeply impacted by the gradual destruction of the original city and inspired to create an installation within the abandoned and ruined buildings. In creating his “Most Project” exhibition, Sozanský and his fellow artists broke the government’s rules controlling the production and exhibition of art and produced challenging works of art that illuminated the apocalyptic state of the city.

Due to the environment in which the exhibition was created, very few people were able to view the original installation. The “Most Project” is largely known through the extensive photographic and film documentation created by Sozanský and Jiří Borl. The duration of the installation reflects the life of Most and thus was destroyed in its entirety with the city in 1983 (Sozanský 2013). The installation in Most has been gaining attention over the last decade but unfortunately is still not well known outside of the Czech Republic. In order to gain an understanding of the events and artistic works in the “Most Project,” I will examine the transitional period of 1981-1983 in the Czech Republic. In
uncovering the inspiration, logistics, and legacy of the “Most Project” I will interview several different art historians including: Dr. Ludvík Hlaváček, Dr. Marie Klimešova, Dr. Jiří Šetlík, and Dr. Jiří T. Kotalík, and the artist himself. I will recreate the events leading up to and the “Most Project” through their voices. It is essential to place the “Most Project” within the proper context of the deterioration of the city of Most and the Czech art scene under the communist regime to understand the importance of Sozanský’s installation.

Through extensive research and interviews, I am uncovering the story of Sozanský, the solitary and non-conformist artist, whose “activities in unusual places enlivened the arts scene in the 1970s by addressing the “normalizing” society, regardless of considerable personal hazards. His paintings, drawings, sculptures, objects, installations, environments and performances invariably respond to a specific milieu and social situation as an urgent warning” (Kotalík, Jiří Sozanský: Skeletoy, 47). From recording and analyzing the personal stories of various art historians and Sozanský, I am documenting the atmosphere of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the history and decline of the city of Most, and the events and art works created by Sozanský and his fellow artists as a reaction to the extreme exploitation and devastation of the environment and cultural catastrophe of Most.

*The Influence of the Expulsion of the Sudeten Germans and the Failed Socialist Engineering of Most*
“You mention the Sudetenland and how the Czech government kicked out the German people and how the communists then moved in the new people, not cultivated people, but people who wanted to do manual work. The country is damaged by this society without roots. There is no history and no people. It starts with the Sudeten.”

Ludvík Hlaváček

In trying to understand the gradual cultural and environmental decline of Most, it is important to begin with the expulsion of the city’s ethnically German population. Located in Northern Bohemia, Most became a predominantly ethnically German city in the 14th century. This area of the Czech Republic falls in the “Sudetenland,” defined as the “sections of northern and western Bohemia and northern Moravia” (“Sudetenland”), which were incorporated into Czechoslovakia’s borders after World War I. The long history of German and Czech military struggles and conquests, as well as their differences in language and traditions, has laid the foundation for the tense division between ethnically German and Czech citizens. The rise of Hitler and the allocation of Czechoslovakia to Germany during the Munich Conference in 1938, was welcomed by many Sudetenland Germans while the Czech nation mourned their loss of independence and experienced the horrors of the Hitler’s dictatorship. With the end of World War II, the Czech nation sought retribution on their German counterparts and the Beneš decrees enabled the forced deportation of three million ethnic Germans from Czech lands.
During the 19th century Most’s mining industry emerged and became the largest industry and supplier of energy in the Czech Republic. Under Nazi occupation, the regime heavily exploited Most’s natural brown coal basin and were successful in both modernizing coal and chemical production and destroying the natural landscape. After World War II, the German inhabitants of Most, which consisted of 2/3rds of the population, were slowly expelled from the city. In turn hundreds of thousands of Czechs poured into the city in order to work in its massive coal industry (Glassheim, “Most, The Town That Moved, 449). The displacement of the native Germans and their Czech replacements significantly altered the culture of Most. The introduction of the communist government cemented Most’s loss of connection to its culture, heritage, and landscape. Professor Eagle Glassheim, a specialist on the deportation of Sudeten Germans, explains, “the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from the Most region set in motion several processes that later came to be identified with the communist rule. First, during resettlement in 1945 and 1946, planners and settlers alike envisioned North Bohemia as a productive landscape more than a historical one. Given the area’s long German history, industrial importance, and recent re-settlement, a new materialist regional identity took hold that stressed labor and production” (Glassheim, “Most, The Town that Moved, 449). The
“transfer” of the Sudeten Germans marks the beginning of the deterioration of Most environmentally, culturally, and architecturally.

The city of Most’s history is a significant example of the disastrous effects of the loss of the German population, socialist urban planning, and the exploitation of the environment and new population under communist rule. After the war, Most became a symbolic focus for the new modern and industrialized landscape. The Communist Party advocated for the role of the worker and the importance of labor and mining for the economic recovery of the country. The communist government created propaganda to recruit young Czechs to Most in order to replace the expelled German workforce (Glassheim, “Most, The Town that Moved, 456). The long held traditions of the Germans vanished and the new population of Most understood it as an industrial city rather than a historical or cultural one. They sought work and wages rather than establishing permanent homes and cultivating traditions and a thriving community.

When the Communist Party took control of Czechoslovakia in 1948, they accelerated the industrialization of Most and its decline. By the 1950’s, Most became the most important source of coal and the government decided to “move” and thus totally destroy the historic town center of Most in order to have a cheap access coal. The destruction of Most, “a decaying and inefficient city
sitting atop valuable coal, promised to rationalize production, housing, and transportation” (Glassheim, “Most, The Town that Moved, 459). The inhabitants of Most, “were witness to an absolutely unprecedented devastation of the cultural landscape, with dozens of towns and villages making way in the name of surface mining of coal. Hundreds of square kilometers were dug up, including dozens of Gothic buildings and original town squares. People living in the region became used to the fact that they could at any time be dispossessed and moved into a panel high-rise a few kilometers away” (Matejka 5). The destruction of Most was met with little resistance from its inhabitants and the majority of the population was moved into “New Most,” an experiment in new modern and socialist urban planning.

The “move” and demolition of the original city of Most enabled the government to build a wholly socialist landscape and further destroy the natural environment. This gradual act of obliteration destroyed not only the historic architecture and cultural heritage of Most but also worsened the severe pollution of the Most area. The combination of open-air dumps and mines, refineries, and power plants, wreaked havoc and continues to cause damage to the environment and the population of the region. The population of Most allowed the destruction of their homes and health because of their belief in the economic importance of the mines that outweighs any negative effects of the over-industrialization of
their city (Glassheim, “Most, The Town that Moved, 461). A majority of the Most population, almost all of whom had arrived in Most after 1945, was in favor of the new housing and urban planning of “New Most.” The moving of Most began in 1965 and the entirety of the population was moved out of “Old Most” by 1967 while the complete demolition of the buildings in the original city did not finish until the early 1980s (Glassheim, “Most, The Town that Moved, 462).

In order to understand the gradual transformation of Most, it is essential to recognize that the foundation for the destruction of the region begins with the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans. Their removal highly damaged the cultural heritage and traditions associated with Northern Bohemia and introduced a wave of new Czech workers with no connection with the environment or historical city. The new workers did not protest against the obliteration of Most and many welcomed the industrial devastation of the land in order to gain a profit. The cause for Most’s decline is not purely the result of the exportation of the ethnic Germans or the Communist re-invention but rather “that the ethnic cleansing, Communist social engineering, and late-industrial modernity were related and intertwined phenomena in postwar Czechoslovakia.” (Glassheim, “Ethnic Cleansing,” 67) The deportation of the Germans was the first step in the gradual devastation of the environment, city, and community of Most.

The transfer of the original German inhabitants of Most reflects the tragic
devastation of the city itself. Their transfer and its impact on the region “is a permanent symbol of cultural uprooting” (Sozanský, “City of Most”). In discussing this controversial moment with various art historians, many agree that the expulsion was the pinnacle moment for the decline of Most. Sozanský references this dark moment in Czech history and acknowledges it as the turning point for Most and the rest of the Northern Bohemian region (Sozanský 2013). The destruction of the city’s history is reflected first in the transfer of the ethnic-Germans, then in the movement of the Czech workers to “New Most,” and ultimately in the destruction of the city itself. The blatant disregard to history, culture, and the environment and the regime’s decision to completely destroy the historic Most, inspired Sozanský to use the devastated city itself as an artistic space to illuminate the injustices towards humans and environment alike committed by the Communist government.

The Czech Art Scene under the Communist Party

In order to situate Sozanský and the impact of his environmental installations, it necessary to understand the history, politics, and censorship of the Czechoslovak art scene under communism. While the generally “Leftist” artistic and intellectual community broadly accepted the Communist Party in 1948, the terrors committed against their community in the 1950s by the government, revealed that the ideals of Communism and the practice of the
Czechoslovak Communist Party were entirely different. Artistic censorship was instated and “Socialist Realism” became the dominant and “official” style throughout the Soviet Union. Art historian, Dr. Klimešova reflects on the officially approved art style,

It was the time when the influence of Russian ideology was most important and it was also the time when art functioned as an ideological instrument and it was because of these themes and it was because of realism. The realism of the Social Realists, in my opinion, was in fact the “bad” realism of less-skilled artists. With the help of ideological themes, the work of bad, in between the two wars period artists, had the opportunity and occasion to rise to the top of the art scene.

(Klimešova 2013b)

The officials rejected the modern styles such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstraction, which had been popular in the 1920s and 1930s in the avant-garde Czech art scene. The previously established art groups and associations were all banned and the works of the avant-garde were no longer allowed to be exhibited in public (Svašek, 389). All artists who wished to continue to work as artists had to register as members of the communist Union of Artists. Successful, “official” art had to depict and glorify the proletariat’s struggle toward socialist progress or to illustrate a utopian socialist society.

The first central moment for the Czech art scene was the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union held in 1956. This was the first time in which the cult of Stalin and his ideology was critiqued. The critique of Stalinist
ideology decried the “Socialist Realism” propaganda and while this information was not officially published it greatly influenced the Czech art community. Its impact was felt in 1957, when artists began to form artists groups again and create group exhibitions. The artistic community who desired greater freedoms to produce and exhibit their art seized this opportunity. “All people were waiting for this moment and so as our ideology and all events in our country depended from the Soviet Union so they immediately tried to profit from this information. It opened the door for some new organization of the art scene. Before artists were organized on the based of their domicile [sic], where they were living, and now it was possible to organize, to be a member of an art group based on one idea or on the base on visual communication or often on base of common studies” (Klimešova 2013b).

In 1958 the art of Czechoslovakia was exhibited at the Expo ’58 (also known as the Brussels World’s Fair.) As the first World’s Fair after World War II, it was a highly significant moment for the international art world and the artists of Czechoslovakia were officially allowed to collectively exhibit work. As the first official Czechoslovakian exhibition, it was a successful and highly innovative show. Highly functionalist modern architecture and glass sculptures were the focus on the Czechoslovakian pavilion. Not only was it awarded the best pavilion of the Expo ’58 but it was also an opportunity for the Czechoslovak
artists to visit international modern exhibitions, free from the restrictions and
censorship of the regime and were able to draw inspiration from the
international modern art world.

The possibilities to show non-realistic, non-“Socialist Realism” paintings
continued in the beginning of the 1960s. The artists were successful in putting
pressure upon the Union of Artists. The ability to work as an artist and exhibit
work relied on the permission of the Union of Artists. Dr. Šetlík remembers the
dominant role of the various artistic unions,

it was union that made an ideological program that played a big part in
the life of the artist. When you needed to make a program it is impossible
without the union. When you need to sell a painting you could sell it to
only through the Union. You could also sell works secretively. The union
in this way was the first organization where there was the ability to put
pressure on them for more liberty and expression.

(Šetlík 2013)

Pressure came from the young artists of the 1960s who were seeking to exhibit
their “unofficial” and non-realistic artwork. By the end of the 1950s, the Union of
Artists decided that the young artists could create small group shows to exhibit
their “experiments.” Technically, they were not allowed to exhibit finished
artwork but could show their “experiments” in art (Šetlík 2013). This new
freedom enabled artists to work with friends in different groups and create
diverse kinds of exhibitions. The censorship of art by the government continued
throughout the 1960s but the art scene continued to challenge and push for more freedoms in their ability to create “unofficial” art.

During the second half of the 1960’s, artists continued to open the door to other artistic expressions and many intellectuals and artists hoped to reform the Communist Party from within. All of their efforts for reform and their relative freedoms were stripped after the Soviet Invasion in 1968. The period known as “Normalization,” lasting twenty years, brought back the repression of the 1950s but was executed in a more sophisticated manner with the implementation of the secret police. The Union of Artists was disbanded and a new union consisting purely of communists was formed. The majority of intellectuals in the art community was banned from curating, researching, and publishing texts on art and was made to work menial jobs for the duration of the “Normalization” period. All of the small, experimental artists groups were also disbanded. The Union of Artists strictly controlled exhibitions and artists were persecuted and punished for their involvement in producing “unofficial” art. Any “unofficial” art texts, reviews of exhibitions, or catalogues were published as *samizdat*, “underground” texts that were distributed only within a small community of intellectuals scattered throughout Czechoslovakia. Despite the strong surveillance and censorship of Czech art in the 1970s and early 1980s,
“unofficial” art continued to be created and many small and informal exhibitions were conducted in resistance to the government.

The most significant example of an “underground” exhibition is the Malostranské dvorky, “Yards in Lesser Town Prague”, held in 1981. This exhibition is a vital moment in the Czech “underground” scene and exists as a rare exhibition to take place in Prague’s public space. Art historian Ludvík Hlaváček recalls the organization of this show, ‘it was about 20-30 artworks installed in yards of houses. It was only exhibition that had a general impact to general public because it had to be organized under the head of communist for young people but it was a formality” (Hlaváček 2013). The artists involved were taking a great risk in exhibiting their work in public and making it available to the general public of Prague. A map of the 30 locations was created and distributed by artists and family members, including Hlaváček’s own sons, and the viewers traveled to random courtyards throughout the city. “The exhibition was a kind of new and unconventional action, which drew both the participants and Prague inhabitants into the game, and for this reason it met with a completely unexpected reception. Also, the instant ban, which was practically impossible to uphold, helped the popularity of the exhibition, and made it an adventure in conspiracy, and an enthusiastic discovery” (Kotalík, Art and Prague’s Public Space, 18).
The art works shown in the Malostranské dvorky consists mainly of the “body art” and abstract sculptural works that were common in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While the exhibition presented strong examples of site-specific artwork, the pieces were not intentionally created for their courtyard galleries but rather were presented there out of necessity. As the exhibition halls were closed to all “unofficial” and experimental works of art, the art then had to leave the artist studios and be exhibited in public. The juxtaposition of the abstract works and the romantic and gothic architecture created a unique and interesting atmosphere for the installations (Hlaváček 2013). While the Malostranské dvorky was officially closed by the first day the police did not take down all of the works and many were able to stay in their sites for viewers to continue to see (Klimešova 2013a). The Malostranské dvorky is unique in its successful run in Prague whereas the majority of “unofficial” art moved to the “country cottages or farmhouses rented for the summer; and they improvise shows in towns or villages that have been abandoned to make way for new technological mega-projects” (Matejka 333). The majority of these shows were censored to some degree by the secret police if not completely broken up. Dr. Klimešova reflects, “the most difficult period in the Czech art scene was the during the period of “Normalization” because it was after Charter 77 and the atmosphere in the society was very bad and it seemed that no unofficial exhibitions could be
organized because the supervision of the secret police and all officials was really strict” (Klimešova 2013a). In the same spirit of the Malostranské dvorky, Sozanský left his artist studio and began to create site-specific works in extreme environments. It was in this challenging and authoritarian environment that Jiří Sozanský created his most influential and important installations in response to the violence and repression of the communist regime.

**Jiří Sozanský**

*I belong to a generation born soon after World War Two – this fact substantially affected my attitude to the world and in a specific context this theme became a standing component of my work. I have always been fascinated but the existence of people in extreme situations, by people – victims of the terror of totalitarian regimes, of war catastrophes, by their lonely existence surviving at the very brink of death. Many projects could not have materialized without intermediaries – without people who had lived some specific experience and could submit their testimony.*

**Jiří Sozanský, Jiří Sozanský: Monologyues, 6**

Jiří Sozanský, born in Prague in 1946, is characterized as an intelligent, self-made, and solitary figure of the Czech art scene. Born into a lower-middle class Prague family, Sozanský trained as a manual laborer and entered the Academy of Fine Arts at the age of 25. Unlike his younger fellow students, Sozanský utilized his “living experiences“ (Kotalík 2013), and experimented with different way of visually expressing his artistic statements. While he studied painting under Frantisek Jiroudek, he was highly influenced by graphic art and sought inspiration from artists outside of the Academy. The influence of Czech
sculptor Olbram Zoubek can be seen in Sozanský’s experimentation with plaster sculptures, which would later figure heavily into his projects at Terezín and Most. Upon graduating from the Academy, Sozanský automatically became a member of the Union of Artists and thus a member of the Communist Party. Despite his status as an “official” artist, Sozanský did not partake in the “official” artistic styles of the party by creating landscapes, portraits, or other “acceptable” forms of art. Instead, Dr. Šetlík describes that Sozanský “began to express how he hated the Communist Regime and began to paint and create works in his studio and conduct many artistic happenings” (Šetlík 2013). He experimented with capturing the human body in a variety of different mediums. Sozanský reveals that he needed to “discard the influence of academic training, thus gaining greater freedom and independence to reflect contemporaneous reality” (Sozanský, 11), and finally be able to find the stylistic language in which to reflect the terrible situations in society.

Sozanský, as a member of the “middle” generation of the Czech art community, was unable to travel abroad or participate in “official” domestic and international exhibitions and thus had to concentrate on himself, his own emotions, and reactions to his world. The influences from the international art world was largely closed off during the period of “Normalization” and thus artists created their work sealed off from international influences and the ability
to exhibit their work in public and receive reviews from art historians and the public (Hlaváček 2013). Sozanský is characterized as a focused and very active artist during this period of the 1970s and 1980s. Dr. Jiri T. Kotalík describes the artist’s focused manner of working, “he knows at any time what the final results of the installation will be and is so concentrated for the final form that he begins to plan the projects two years before, including all of the consequences. He is always professionally prepared and prefers to show his work not in high art galleries but in specific places. In the studio there is all of his the projects, which are always some kind of demonstration or evocation of problems of human being in some kind of limited situation” (Kotalík 2013). Sozansky’s desire to create unique, spite-specific installations reflecting the problems or horrors of society has always driven his creative pursuits.

Another essential influence to consider in the development of Sozanský’s technique and work as an artist is the role of boxing. The artist is an amateur boxer and learned how to box in reaction to the Soviet Invasion in 1968. Sozansky explains that he wanted to learn how to box because he had the romantic idea of being able to fight off the Russians not with a gun, but with his fists (Sozansky 2013). His training in boxing greatly influenced his work with the human form. The artist writes,

The measure of all of my projects has been the human figure and its active presence. I learned to work with the body not as a static model, but as an
active and dynamic element. In this respect my long experience from the boxing ring stood me in good stead. The ring is a delineated stage; boxing takes place within a clearly defined space, which has to be taken into account. In a way boxers are actors and their art is a show for the audience.

Jiří Sozanský, Jiří Sozanský: Monologyues, 8

Sozanský’s figurative work is highly skilled and reveals his years of studying the human body in action. His pieces respect the immense power and physicality of the human body. In his works at Terezín and Most, he is able to illuminate the weakening effects of totalitarian society’s on the human body and psyche. While his technical skills were improved during his time at the Academy, Sozanský shed most of his training in order to develop new methods of artistic expression and infuse his work with the influence of streets of Prague. Dr. Kotalík describes Sozanský’s experience with the city of Prague, “it was Franz Kafka’s town, dirty, black, and strange streets of Old Town with miraculous Baroque churches and monumental statues with hands, colors, and forms and the Charles Bridge with its expressive characters” (Kotalík 2013). The combination of these different influences and the vacuum in which Sozanský created his work enabled the artist to have a very distinctive and monumental artistic expression. His works are full of emotion and explore existentialist themes through the use of mixed mediums and found objects. Working most often with large-scale pieces, the artist is able to achieve a monumental effect in all of his works due to his use of materials,
seriousness of his subject, and conviction of his pieces. Sozanský relies on his strong instinct as an individual and artist to create his dynamic, deep, and stark visual representations of the darker side of humanity.

His first important site-specific installations were created from 1976 to 1980 at the Small Fortress at Terezín. Sozanský reflects on the project, “I realized for the first time that with my art I was able not only to enliven a place, but to totally change its atmosphere and to endow it with a different content. Again and again I could transform an environment of total destruction into a dramatic scene, which endowed a specific place with a new dimension” (Sozanský, Jiří Sozanský: Monologyues, 8). The artist realized the significance of the Terezín Fortress and used the site to draw parallels between the totalitarian regime of the Nazis in the 1940s and the current totalitarian rule of the communist government. On the surface the installations of Sozanský and his fellow artists demonstrated their stance against the Nazi regime, violence and the Holocaust. On another level, their pieces worked as a demonstration against the contemporary politics in Czechoslovakia.

The environmental installations of Sozanský only lasted for a limited duration at Terezín and exist only in the form of photographic documentation and films. In this site he experimented with different plaster forms and the relationship between figures and the environment, in both scale and content
The audience was confronted with an overwhelming vision of the horror of violence against humanity committed within the cells of Terezín. Some were critical of Sozanský’s installations and felt that the work was too heavy in the actual space. Dr. Klimešova reflects upon her visit to the exhibition,

His project in Terezín was hard for me to accept because it seemed to me that the space had its own history, which was enough, and that it is not possible and it cannot be successful to add Sozanský’s interpretation. It was not necessary and I feel that no single work of art can be so expressive as the space itself. But I understand that Sozanský worked with the deepest intentions and it was really important for him to create the work.

(Klimešova 2013a)

While the success of the art pieces is debated by some art historians, the intentions of Sozanský and his determined commitment to execute his ideas in the specific space is respected. This period of artistic exploration significantly prepared Sozanský for his work with the city of Most.

The Terezín Project also cemented Sozanský’s relationship with the highly influential art historian Jiří Kotalík. Jiří Kotalík Senior was a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts and became the director of the National Gallery. As an art historian, Kotalík was very active in the contemporary art scene and came to support the very active and experimental Sozanský when he was a student at the Academy. His interest in Sozanský continued after the artist graduated and
Sozanský appreciated their growing relationship. Dr. Jiří T. Kotalík, Junior, remembers, “he asked my father (Jiří Kotalík) to visit and was greatly excited by Sozanský’s workshops at Terezín. The next year my father wrote some notes for Sozanský’s Terezín catalogue” (Kotalík 2013). Sozanský credits the elder Kotalík’s interest and support of his artwork for his ability to carry out the Terezín and Most projects without serious clashes with the political powers of the regime. “Without his influence my life would most probably have taken quite a different turn. He helped, directly or indirectly, many of his colleagues and many artists with their professional and personal problems” (Sozanský, Jiří Sozanský: Monologues, 8). This relationship of “protection” would enable Sozanský to carry out his “unofficial” projects in Terezín and Most without police intervention.

*The “Most Project,” 1981-1982*

*Can people do without traditions, art and culture? What is the meaning of art and what is its mission... With the outcome of our work we turn to the people. But now, facing the total destruction, doubts about the meaning of artistic effort arise. Inevitably, responsibility leads us to the description of presence and the way it looks to us judged by our experience.*

Jiří Sozanský, *Most 81/82*, 1

Sozanský’s interest in the city of Most began in his teens when he was training to become a mason and became aware of Most as a major coal-mining region in Northern Bohemia. Sozanský visited an exhibition in 1962 featuring
works of art that captured the changing industrial landscape and inhabitants of Most. As a young artist, he was particularly interested in the portraits of miners and connected with their experiences as a manual laborer (Sozanský 2013). During his time at the Academy, Sozanský and his fellow friend and artist Jiří Novák traveled to Northern Bohemia to paint landscapes of the industrial region. Their interest in the region continued throughout the 1970s and the two artists returned to Most in order to witness the slow destruction of the city. Sozanský reflects that, “the North Bohemia seemed much more militant than the rest of the country. We felt as if we were in an area of enemies, we didn’t feel comfortable there. Most of the people agreed with the invasion. The majority felt comfortable with the Husák’s regime” (Sozanský 2013). Sozanský and Novák, troubled by the changes they were witnessing, explored their interest in the area through landscape sketches but were not satisfied with their experimentations.

After the experience of the Terezín project, Sozanský felt confident in his abilities to carry out a similar “environmental project” in the crumbling city of Most. In 1981, Sozanský and Novák decided to try again and to fully commit to creating installations within the now abandoned buildings of Most. Sozanský describes his inspiration for working with the devastated city as an “irrational feeling of being indebted to the land and city of Most” (Sozanský 2013). The city of Most that Sozanský and Novák encountered in 1981 was in a completely
different situation to what they had previously witnessed and the volume of destruction was unfathomable. They were confronted with a ghost-city. All of the inhabitants had been moved to the paneláks of “New Most” and Sozanský notes that the new inhabitants of Most had accepted the devastation of the town. After the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, the workers who had moved to the region to find work and had no connection with the history or culture of Most and did not protest or demonstrate against the destruction but rather welcomed the demolition and accepted their new homes in “New Most.” By 1981 the deserted city was on the verge of being wholly demolished.

To begin their artistic practice, Sozanský and Novák explored the area, mapping the exteriors and interiors of the damaged, bombed-out looking city (Sozanský 2013). After their initial mapping and planning phase, the artists returned to Prague where they began to create art works to install in the Most buildings. Sozanský mediated on what he witnessed in Most and drew from his experience in Terezín to create the “Most Project.” He decided to utilize some of his half-finished pieces of work from Terezín and to install them in Most (Sozanský 2013). The artists then returned to the city with some friends to help with the physical installment of the various pieces. The actual installation process had to be executed quickly and efficiently because the exhibition was technically an illegal activity. The artists had to obey the rules of the industrial zone and
avoid the attention of the guards. Despite the intense nature of the environment, Sozanský insists that he was not troubled during the installation process and felt that the risk was necessary to carry out his ideals to be actualized in the space. When questioned about the level of danger he was taking in creating the exhibition, Sozanský believes that the greatest threat would not have been imprisonment but rather that the installation would have been destroyed.

Sozanský did not find it difficult to work in the destroyed environment of the buildings. He remembers that “the interiors, all the interiors, were emptied but had not been emptied for long as the people had just left shortly before so there were items left in them. There were thieves that moved from one house to another stealing things they could sell. Some of the things were stolen so I was limited to the use of what was left there. Eventually I found that there was a lot of material there for me, which was useless for the thieves but perfect for me” (Sozanský 2013). Sozanský utilized many found objects in his installations ranging from abandoned shoes to curtains to old appliances. The effect of his recycling of objects gave the rooms a haunted feeling and served to remind the viewer of the unnatural disappearance of the inhabitants. The effect of the found objects and ghostly installations is also reminiscent of the propaganda at the time. The Communists spread fear about an American atomic bomb that “destroys the people and not the things” (Sozanský 2013). The installation rooms
were successful in conveying a chilling sense of the apocalypse and serve as a foretelling of the imminent total destruction of the city.

Several artists contributed to the construction of the art works in Most ranging from sculptures to paintings and performances. While all of the artists worked together to create their visions, Sozanský maintains that he was the leader throughout the two-year project. He describes that their working relationship, “was based on mutual understanding of human relations. The only rule we had was that we had to get on. The people who cooperated helped me to reach and realize my vision. We worked out of sympathy and interest” (Sozanský 2013). The artists participated in the project out of their desire to help Sozanský and to contribute their artwork as a form of demonstration against the destruction of Most. They were all willing to take the risk in creating their pieces of art. No one was paid for his or her services and there was no profit involved in the finished project. They all took their work outside of their studios and created site-specific pieces that expressed their outrage with the Most situation and to communicate with the public.

*Visual Analysis of Sozanský’s Installations*

*The happening in each room was outlined by wires that both separated the situations and connected the five rooms together. The work at this place took ten days, the conditions and circumstances commanded the final expression and form. There were random and natural encounters with viewers whose target was to get to their job, not to see the art.*
The weather, water and dust changed the appearance of the created objects so they directly connected to the environment and began to share its destiny.

Jiří Sozanský, Most 81/82, 1

The main installation entitled “Environment, “Process,”” created by Sozanský and Jiří Novák in 1981 consists of an entire floor of a deserted building in Prague. The installation comprises of five separate rooms with distinct installations, wall drawings, and object sculptures created from plaster and found objects. One room, Fig. 1, consists of an abandoned room with two windows that have been covered in barbed wire and a solitary ladder with broken plaster legs attempting to climb up. The interior immediately creates an atmosphere of suffocation with the windows covered in barbed wire. The wires also suggest a prison, whether Sozanský is drawing a parallel to Terezín or rather just a regular prison, the sense of entrapment is plain. The interior reflects the destroyed exterior of the building and the city of Most. The room is cast in natural light from the windows, which draws the attention to the windows and the sculpture installation in the center of the room. A regular wooden ladder is propped in the dead center of the room and a pair of ghostly white human legs attempts to climb the ladder. The human legs like everything else is the room are covered in a film of dirt. They are not pristine but rather they are used and would appear to be left over from the building’s pervious inhabitants. The
disembodied legs have the feeling of being recycled. While being the center of the space they are not a beautiful art object but rather a ghostly reminder of those who once occupied this room.

The broken legs imply that they are trying to climb the ladder to escape from the room and achieve freedom. There is no fresh air or freedom as the ladder hits the dirty ceiling. Just as there is no freedom or salvation for the building and the entirety of “Old Most,” there is also no escape for the broken human. The disembodied figure reflects the break down of society, culture, and heritage in Most. The sculpture climbing the ladder to nowhere illuminates larger existential themes such as the meaningless and absurdity of life, especially under totalitarian rule. The figure also reflects the break down of the individual under Communism and the plaster sculpture, without face or any signifiers, symbolizes the loss of individuality and self under the regime. Not only are the natural environment, city, and inhabitants broken by the destruction of the city and exploitation of the land but also the entirety of the Czechoslovak population under communism. The installation is stark, heavy, and conveys the deep sense of oppression that defines Sozanský and company’s installations throughout the city.

Exiting the previous “ladder to nowhere” room, the viewer would be confronted with a floor installation and several wall paintings. Two different
views of the same room, Fig.2 and Fig. 3, showcases the amount of objects and ideas that Sozanský and Novák explored in their work. The use of wires is continued in this room and dissects the room into different sections making the access to the room difficult for the viewer. The wires cut across the room and divide the air into zones and providing a deeply technological sense as if the viewer were caught inside the wires of a telephone or some other machine. The dirty and crumbling walls, ceiling, and floor further create the sense of unease in the room. The feeling of abandonment in the room reflects the reality of the abandoned building and city. All inhabitants have left, but random belongings such as a shoe remind the viewer of their unnatural absence.

Covering a large area of the dirty floor lies a piece of cloth resembling an old curtain or sack and upon it are two disconnect feet. Upon the soiled floor are the clean white footprints from the individual feet. They suggest the missing presence of a human body. The plaster white feet are of the same material as the disembodied legs and are successful in conveying the weight and presence of the missing body. The image of the naked feet upon the cloth is reminiscent of a deceased body. Sozanský achieves a full sense of physicality with the sparse and simple objects and the missing body looms over the room. The foreboding room is further detailed with several black paintings on the walls. They are painted peering behind the door and throughout the room as sitting figures. While their
sex is not directly specified, the figures are either male or genderless. Sozanský insists that the gender of the silhouettes is of no significance and that they should simply be interpreted as human bodies (Sozanský 2013).

The direct silhouettes on the walls conjure an audience watching both the feet on the cloth and the audience. The figures sit in profile with their heads in the wire zone and stare into the mess of wires and crumbling interior and exterior. They have no expressions or facial features and again conjure the empty shells of humans. No individuality or personality exists for these silhouettes. Under the totalitarian regime they have been reduced to shadows of their previous humanity. Some of the figures have actual chairs planted beneath their torsos where their physical bodies would exist. Again Sozanský utilizes readymade, everyday objects in order to illuminate the lack of physical life in the space. All of the elements within the room work together to create an eerie and foreboding consciousness that reminds the viewer of the human life that is missing in both the interior of the room and Most at large.

From there a room occupied by a large desk with disembodied arms and hands confronts the viewer. This typical office scene is placed within the wires and continues to convey the feeling of being locked in a cage. The wires block the viewer from interacting with the desk and its various objects and works to present the disembodied arms as if the person at the desk were an animal at the
zoo. The white plasters of the arms are of the same material as the legs and feet and suggest that they are all scattered body parts of a single person. The absence of defining characteristics in all of the physical representations enforces the lack of individualism under the communist regime. While the desk at first glance may appear to be typical upon further inspection the viewer realizes that everything upon the desk is broken. The mess of wires and broken telephone and cables also signifies the surveillance of the secret police and the larger breakdown of communication in society. The ability to communicate between humans is mangled and confounded by the surveillance and control of the people by the Communist party. All of the readymade objects are broken or abandoned throughout the interiors and reflect the collapse of society and culture in Most. Everything has been left to rot in the wake of this apocalyptic environment. The viewer is confronted with the stark emptiness of the room, which permeates the entire installation. The installations of destroyed and abandoned objects and the silence left in the aftermath of the removal of all inhabitants signifies the imminent total destruction of the rooms and Most and the breakdown of humanity under the regime.

Sozanský’s artistic intervention in the city of Most successfully “combines naturalistic drawing and painting with photographs, castings of parts of the human body, assemblages, constructions in plaster and wise mesh, iron gates
and other structures, action painting as well as performance. He depicts man in extreme situations, not only as a suffering victim but also as the perpetrator of evil and brutality” (Pecinkova, 154). Through the specific example of Most, Sozanský explores the philosophy of existentialism and seeks to be rid of the superficial world and to illuminate the dark themes of life. The site of the empty city enables Sozanský to create extremely graphic and monumental works exploring the ideas of life and death, the violence of humanity, the oppression and destruction of totalitarian regimes. Dr. Jiří T. Kotalík and his father Jiří Kotalík were invited by Sozanský to view the installations in Most. Dr. Kotalík remembers visiting the site,

it was something unbelievable to see the complete project in the tumbling down city. It looked like it was some kind of disaster zone. We took in this destroyed civilization in the middle of this destroyed city. Sozanský puts paintings and sculptures throughout and it was really unbelievable and very emotional.

(Kotalík 2013)

The Legacy of the “Most Project”

“Five artists, four photographers and one poet created work that gave expression to their experience of the strange area of the deserted and vanishing town, and the effect was underscored and enhanced by this very transience. At their disposal was a historical town, an area where the lives of many generations had taken place, a town condemned to its doom by the will of bureaucratic power, and all in the name of “progress” and consumption. The Most event already had to take place without the public, followed only by a group of well-wishers and friends of the participating artists.”

Jana Brabcová, Baroque and the Present, 14
In considering the “Most Project” and its legacy within the Czech art community and the community of Most, it is essential to consider who had access to the site. Sozanský reflects that a very limited group of people was able to visit the actual exhibition. He explains, “I didn’t organize any visits on purpose because I knew if I had, there would have immediately been an intervention from the secret police, and I wouldn’t be able to create anything else because they would have stopped the exhibition and I wouldn’t have been able to create any of the documentation. Then the members of the crew wouldn’t be able to go back to the site and would have been in trouble. I decided not to organize anything and anyone who was interested could choose to visit the site” (Sozanský 2013). Sozanský insists that it was more important for him and his fellow artists to complete their work rather than receive visitors to the site. The full completion of the project was always the main objective of the project. Dr. Kotalík’s personal story of visiting Most is rare and Dr. Hlaváček confirms that the project did not have a general impact on society at the time. Due to the censorship of the government, information or an official catalogue were not able to published or widely circulated. So it was only the small art community of Prague that knew and accepted the project and some individuals were able to travel north to visit the site at their own risk (Hlaváček 2013). Many of the art historians had not been able to visit Most during the exhibition and were unable
to speak about the impact of the art installation on the inhabitants of Most.

Sozanský reveals that 20 or 25 years later he discovered that some of the locals had learned about the project and visited the site before the total demolition of the city and art (Sozanský 2013). The “Most Project” existed and was destroyed with the city of Most. It has always been predominantly known in its documentary form and can still be experienced through photographs and a documentary film.

The legacy of Sozanský’s artwork is debated amongst the leading art historians in the Czech art scene. Some of his projects such as Terezín have been criticized for being too heavy and that the art works compete with the environment for the attention of the viewer. All of Sozanský’s works are existential, heavy, and dark and this is both a strength and weakness in his art. Dr. Klimešova explains, “He is obsessed by these heavy themes and with this he leaves no space for you. There is no metaphor. Everything is set” (Klimešova 2013a). Sozanský’s vision is so strong and heavy-handed that it does not allow room for the interpretation of the viewer. The messages of his projects often outweigh his artistic endeavors and produce an overly dense sentiment. Dr. Hlaváček reflects on the works at Most and observes that the work “produces this feeling of destruction, catastrophe and death. This is very typical for him because his work is usually about the boundary between life and dead. In my
opinion it is ideological. It is not expressed in art and the art is not as persuasive as it should be or like Sozanský wanted it to be. You know what he wanted to show but I’m not persuaded that the attention is produced by these “skelets” [sic] of bodies” (Hlaváček 2013). While Sozanský’s projects are criticized for not being as artistically strong as the artists’ intended message, they all confirm that the “Most Project,” as a whole is a successful site-specific installation.

The “Most Project” is effective because “Sozanský takes us to totally destroyed places, he shows us the mirror and face of Man’s helplessness” (Langerová 14). The artist creates a strong and dynamic relationship between his artwork and the environment to create an emotional and demonstrative installation. In this project, Sozanský exposes the gradual decline of the city of Most and also illuminates, through his oppressive and stark installations, the destruction in process. The viewer is able to experience the physical reality of a city being destroyed and the works of art help to express the larger oppression and violence towards the environment and humanity that is occurring in society.

Dr. Klimešova reflects that,

the intentions of the Most Project are more successful because he doesn’t battle with such a powerful and heavy history. It seemed to me a much more interesting project because it touched on our situation and the problems of unnecessarily destroying something which exists and all this aggressive actions against the country. So it seemed much more successful but I believe I wasn’t able to accept the pathos of Sozanský until now because of his difficulties in structuring his work. I think that the process of his work in Most is very important.
The crumbling environment of the “Most Project” instills Sozanský’s installations with a fateful atmosphere and natural sense of abandonment and uprooting while the artwork serves to activate as a reflection and demonstration against the impending total destruction.

The artwork of Sozanský acts as a mirror to society as the artist time and time again returns to his central theme of, “people in extreme situations - in many forms and in a topical context: a warning against violence and its consequences, against the indifference to suffering in all its possible aspects. He takes his viewers to most unexpected environments and irritates them with his frank statements, enhanced by the atmosphere of a given place and context” (Kotalík, Jiří Sozanský: Monologyues). It is Sozanský’s “bull-like” conviction and determination to portray these horrendous moments in society that makes him one of the most powerful personalities of the 1970s and 1980s (Šetlík 2013). Despite the criticism of his technical approaches to convening his often heavy-handed messages, Sozanský is regarded as one of the central figures of his generation. Sozanský succeeds in leaving the studio, and creating active and dynamic “unofficial” artwork in extreme locations. His art exists outside of the museums and high art galleries and instead comes alive in locations such as
Terezín and Most. His unmistakable multi-media, a combination of drawings, paintings, spatial installations, performances and environmental happenings, renders his existentialist explorations of human society in a dynamic and monumental style. The “Most Project” serves as a testament to his deep convictions and belief in his role as an artist, which is to examine, react, and demonstrate against the injustices, violence, and inhumanity in society.
Appendix 1: Works Cited


Hlaváček, Ludvik. Art Historian, Prague, Czech Republic. Interview by Hope Fried, 16 May 2013.


Klimešova, Marie. Art Historian, Prague, Czech Republic. Interview A by Hope Fried, 25 May 2013.

Klimešova, Marie. Art Historian, Prague, Czech Republic. Interview B by Hope Fried, 9 May 2013.


Šetlík, Jiří. Art Historian, Prague, Czech Republic. Interview by Hope Fried, 2 May 2013.

Sozanský, Jiří. Artist, Prague, Czech Republic. Interview by Hope Fried, 7 May 2013.


Appendix 2: Visual Images

Figure 1.

Figure 2.
Figure 3.

Figure 4.
