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# Czech Artivism: The Function of Activist Art in Czech Political Culture

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Czech Artivism: The Function of Activist Art in Czech Political Culture

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### **Abstract**

This research endeavors to explore the ways in which activist art functions within the context of the Czech Republic's political culture. In a society where art had such a significant influence during the transition to democracy, the activist role of art is emphasized minimally in terms of contemporary culture. The main objective of exploring this function results in a three-tiered methodology, utilizing secondary sources, direct observation, and interviews with activist artists themselves. The relevant scholarly literature discusses activist art both in the general sense, as well as within the context of post-communist countries. However, individual interviews with local activist artists work were necessary to narrow the scope, focusing specifically on the Czech Republic. Several themes emerge from this data; the results explore the significance of terminology, the quantification of success, the influence of the media, the resulting discussions, the public portrayal of activist artists, and the uniqueness of the Czech context. Through the analysis of these particular examples, activist art formulates a uniquely influential aspect of Czech culture. Ultimately, the research finds that these activist artists, though they differ slightly, are linked through a fundamentally unified essence of Czech activist art.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research would not have been possible without the help from several gracious individuals. Especially within this foreign country where I have no previous connections or established network, the resources and information from members of this community allowed me to better contextualize my research and gain a more extensive understanding of the culture.

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That said, my experiential research would not have been achievable without the willingness of my interviewees to sacrifice their time to talk with me about their work. Thank you to Tamara Moyzes, Leoš Válka, David Černý, Zuzana Štefková, and Pavol Luptak for sharing with me their valuable insight and for their enthusiasm to discuss their personal reflections. Each of these individuals taught me something significant about the function of activist art in Czech culture, and my project was improved considerably with each of their contributions.

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## Introduction

### Background

Vaclav Havel's prevalent role as Czechoslovakia's first president suggests a unique role of arts in the development and consolidation of Czech democracy. As a playwright who became heavily involved in political activism, his candidacy would seem unlikely in any other national context. The pervasiveness of Prague theatres as a meeting place for dissemination of political information, as well as Samizdat underground literature as a means for authors to creatively express themselves in opposition to communist oppression, both further illustrate this concept. Although these artistic methods of activism, along with many others forms, were accentuated surrounding the 1989 Velvet Revolution, the role of arts as a means of provoking free political discourse in the more recent years is often not considered. In political science scholarly research, political culture is cited as a factor to measure the democratic legitimacy of a nation, and unrestricted political discourse that stems from creative expression is a defining aspect of political culture. Although the influence of all forms of political art deserve scholarly attention, for the sake of this study I focus on action and public performance art. In a way, activist art of this form engages the most with society, due to its roots in free speech, expression, and protest.

The topic originally intended to explore the debate surrounding specific examples of politically-charged activist art, including Tomáš Ráfa's "Competition for Czech-Roma Flag" and Marin Píaček's "Vaclav Havel: Washing Out" ArtWall Gallery exhibitions, in addition to the annual Velvet Carnival and Ztohoven's "The President's Dirty Laundry." However, through secondary research, discussions with my advisor, and interviews with artists themselves, a slightly altered series of art activist projects emerged, as well as a new approach to the topic.

### **Research Question**

Focusing on Tomáš Ráfa's "Competition for Czech-Roma Flag," Oto Hudec's "Prague the Day after Bombing," Tamara Moyzes' "Silence is Consent" and "Holocaust Memorial at Prague 7," Póde Bal's "Zimmer Frei" and "Institutionalized Art"; David Černý's "Entropa" and "F\*ck Him"; and Ztohoven's "The President's Dirty Laundry" and "Decentralization of Power," how do these specific works represent the function of activist art within Czech society and cultural democracy?

### **Objectives**

In preparation to answer the above general research question, a series of specific objectives emerge to drive the project's process through the lens of the selected artists and artworks. Firstly, my research aims to explore how these artists define and classify activist art, as compared to other forms of politically-charged art; specifically, this definition of "activist art" includes not just the normative sense of the definition, but also how the artists identify the purpose of their work and how they would measure its success. Secondly, my research intends to analyze the public reaction to these activist art pieces, as well as how the artists are portrayed in Czech culture. Although only from the perspective of those interviewed, the research aims to have these individuals reflect on the general role of activist artists and their work within the country as a whole. The third objective of this research is to explore how the pieces contribute to or spark a larger discussion on the pertinent topic. With these three overarching objectives, as well as a goal to gain a more comprehensive understanding of activist art in the Czech context, my research progressively reached its conclusions.

**Justification**

The focus of this research not only applies to my personal interests of my American education, but also to the overarching art and activism scenes within the context of Czech culture. Personally, I chose to focus on this topic as both an extension of my educational experiences, as well as an probe of previously unexplored interests. In America, I have a particularly dynamic role in activism for numerous different causes; while I have heavily respected art forms with the goal of activism, I have not previously integrated them into my own efforts. For that reason, this study incorporates my interests in a way that honors my standard passions while also integrating my newfound knowledge of Czech society and culture. My extensive experience in activism but lack thereof in art gives me a unique perspective into this specific topic—one that focuses on the art as a means of ultimate democratic consolidation, and therefore one that views this form of art as purposeful and valuable to society at large.

This topic inevitably engages with the importance of art activism within the Czech context. This project informs the understanding of activist art and how it functions in the Czech Republic, something that is often referenced to but has not been extensively explored in the realm of scholarly literature. Specifically, there is little discussion about the unifying forces of this activist art in terms of the contemporary context—namely, how artists differentiate activist art from other forms and how they measure the success or effectiveness of that work. Additionally, there is a much heavier emphasis placed on activist art in the Czech context as it applied to the Velvet Revolution, but its cultural prevalence seemed to drop off after the turn of the millennium. For this reason, my research serves the purpose of structurally illustrating the function of modern Czech activist art.

As an American student studying abroad in the Czech Republic, and also as an aspiring Constitutional lawyer and civic educator, my research ultimately has relevance to my own aspirations within the American context as well. Although this research focuses specifically on the Czech Republic, the overarching conclusions can nonetheless be applied to my activism practices in America. While activist art would clearly not function the same in these two very different nations, I am still able to learn from this process in the Czech Republic; the proficiency of activist art can inform the various creative forms of activism within America as well.

### Literature Review

Although my research aims to explore the role of activist art within the Czech political culture specifically, a more general review of secondary sources and scholarly literature is necessary to contextualize the concepts. Ultimately these secondary sources serve to develop a thematic framework that will serve as a backbone for my subsequent research. Each of the secondary sources focus on a different aspect of activist art or post-communist society, whether that be defining the concept itself or exploring how the post-communist past influences the creation of contemporary politically charged art. Although my interviews also cover some of these same topics, the insight of scholars allow a more informed discussion and a personal deeper understanding. However, even a general analysis of these concepts could differ from one society to another; it is for this reason that scholarly research cannot independently answer the project's main questions. Although these sources can establish a foundation for the general concepts of the project, first-hand interviews with those directly involved with Czech activist art are necessary to complement the scholarly information.

The final chapter of John Dewey's *Art as Experience* briefly discusses the role of art in a functioning civilization; although particularly general in scope, his work effectively introduces the concepts of both art and activism. Essentially, Dewey's text legitimizes the topic as one that is necessary to the general welfare of any society. He argues, "esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgement upon the quality of a civilization" (Dewey, 2005 p. 326). Here, Dewey does not specify whether this form of art need be strictly negative or positive, in support or in critique; he simply maintains that the very existence of art is inherently intertwined with the existence of civilization. Further, he argues that "resistance and conflict

have always been factors in generating art; and they are, as we have seen, a necessary part of artistic form” (Dewey, 2005 p. 339). Since activist art is presumably provocative in nature, it is necessary to recognize that resistance and debate elicited from art is also inherent within a civilization. In addition, Dewey recognizes that art provides a mode of societal commentary that can be used to provoke culture in a way inaccessible by the classical sciences (Dewey, 2005). In this sense, Dewey establishes that socially-engaged art is worthy of being studied, and the relationship it creates with civilization can serve to ultimately reflect and influence that civilization.

Lippard’s 1984 article “Trojan horses: activist art and power” much more specifically addresses the concept of activist art and establishes necessary operational definitions. Though written five years before the Czech Velvet Revolution, Lippard’s concepts are transnational enough to adequately apply to contemporary Czech activist art. Lippard asserts that “‘political’ art tends to be socially concerned and ‘activist’ art tends to be socially involved... The former’s work is a commentary or analysis, while the latter’s art works within its context, with its audience” (Lippard, 1984). Though still a flexible notion, Lippard’s definition of activist art provides the basis of how the concept will be defined in my continuing research. Lippard also provides a working definition of an activist artist, maintaining that an activist artist must be a member of the community in which they are working, as it “is impossible to just drop into a community and make good activist art” (Lippard, 1984). With Lippard’s insight, activist art can thus be defined as a socially involved project that works within a society rather than commenting on it, and is created by a member of that society rather than an outsider. In addition, Lippard touches upon the common misconceptions about activist artists, something that could very possibly be present in Czech society today; she acknowledges that the common assumption is

“that anyone who wants art to be communicative and effective is either a sappy idealist, a lousy artist, or a dangerous red” (Lippard, 1984). In examining the effectiveness of activist art in Czech culture, this stereotype may serve as a barrier. Lippard’s general discussion about the definition of activist art and the overall role of the activist artist provides a necessary foundation that can be applied to any national context.

Narrowing Lippard’s concepts to focus specifically within the post-communist framework, Pusca’s 2017 article “Re-Thinking (Post) Communism after the Aesthetic Turn” explores how the history of activist art in countries like the Czech Republic contributes to its existence in contemporary society. Specifically, Pusca notes the usage of “concepts such as political art/artist/aesthetics to understand an ongoing politics of resistance both during and after communism” (Pusca, 2017). When looking at the role of activist art in a contemporary sense, it is also necessary to understand how this concept first emerged within the culture. Pusca maintains that this correlation between art and politics stems mostly from the spaces in which revolutionary dissidents gathered—namely art galleries, theatres, or universities. She asserts that this relationship “developed much more organically in these circles, facilitating an intellectual engagement that often saw the two as intrinsically connected, but also an unusual intellectual/linguistic ease of engaging with both disciplines” (Pusca, 2017). However, one would assume that with a background so deeply rooted in the nation’s dawn of democracy, society would not view art activism as negatively as Lippard portrays. Nonetheless, as Pusca explains, “‘political art’ after communism turned to activist or critical art, taking on a much more open advocacy role” (Pusca, 2017). Pusca also explores the identity of an activist artist, and how in this realm, there is an “ability of artists to exist somewhere ‘in-between’” (Pusca, 2017), as they are not strictly an artist or an activist—they are a hybrid form between the two. With

Pusca's scholarly insight on the history of activist art in the Czech Republic, Lippard's definitions are contextualized to specifically apply to the Czech framework.

Piotrowski's *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* continues exploring the narrowed scope of Pusca's arguments while approaching the themes from alternative angles. Piotrowski acknowledges Central-Eastern European art as belonging to unique category caught between European and completely "othered" (Piotrowski, 2012), mirroring Pusca's concept that the activist artist exists in an intermediary space. The scholar also focuses on the debates often arising from activist art, mostly due to the way in which the art form "relies on symbolic language and routinely breaks widely accepted conventions...[which] are sources of conflict" (Piotrowski, 2012 p. 246), specifically at odds with an oppressive power structure. For this reason, Piotrowski recognizes that much activist art faces censorship by the institutions or government in which they work. In terms of censorship of political expression, Piotrowski considers the Czech Republic the most liberal of the Central-Eastern European nations; however, he references its existence in Czech society nonetheless. Specifically, he refers to the censorship of Póde Bal projects throughout the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Piotrowski, 2012). This negative response to activist art projects also queries about its acceptance in Czech society; even with such a prominent history of activist art, Lippard's assertion about the acceptance of activist art may ring true in the Czech Republic. Additionally, the focus on the negative institutional responses to activist art calls into question the societal response, negative or positive; such a controversial art form is likely to spark debate within the culture. Piotrowski's discussion of the censorship and othering of activist art emphasizes this concept.

The concepts about activist art explored by Dewey, Lippard, Pusca, and Piotrowski all cooperate with one another to establish the fundamental theoretic framework for this research

project. Foremost is Lippard's definition of activist art as a form that engages with and influences society, whereas political art only comments on that society but does not implement any change. Also essential is the definition of an activist artist, as Lippard explains, as being an involved member of the community in which their art functions. This concept, joined with Pusca's assertions, also defines the activist artist as someone occupying an intermediary space between art and politics, somewhat representative of Czech Republic's own history. The last aspect of this theoretic framework is the reaction to said activist art, whether from the general society itself or from the governmental institutions through the form of censorship. Though a contested concept between the authors, the general consensus is that due to their "othered" position, the portrayal of activist artists and their work is a negative one. However, what the literature fails to acknowledge is the relative success of activist art; even if portrayed in a negative light by a fraction of society, the art could still serve its intended purpose and spark effective debate within society. Although these concepts continue to be explored by interviews and research experiences, this theoretical framework allows that research to be more informed and backed by scholarly support.

## **Methodology**

To gain a comprehensive and immersive understanding of this topic, I approach my research in a triad of methods, including scholarly research, direct observation, and interviews.

### **Scholarly Research**

This branch of the operationalization consists of secondary scholarly sources that collectively establish the foundational theoretical framework. Essentially, the reading and analyzing of these sources allow me to approach the specific examples of my research with established definitions of important terminology, and thus an enhanced understanding of the topic. By familiarizing myself with the scholarly assertions of those in the global field, I can better analyze whether Czech activist art upholds or diverges from the concepts maintained in the secondary sources.

### **Observation and Reflection**

Although many of the specific examples and exhibitions that I focus on were not on-display or physically accessible at the time of my research, I still observed these projects through internet and catalogue documentation. Additionally, for these past exhibitions, I observed their existence through either positive or negative media responses. The only work that I was able to physically observe over the course of this research was the opening of the ArtWall Gallery's newest exhibition. Nonetheless, my own observation and reflection on the projects and exhibitions that lay at the focus of my research is vital to my personal understanding, and ultimately the depth in which I can analyze the topic.

## **Interviews**

Interviews with those involved in the specific projects are the most valuable aspect of this research. With a previously established question set, altered slightly for each specific individual, I can comparatively evaluate the perspectives of the artists themselves as it applies to my specific research. Each of the five interviews were recorded and later transcribed to text. Through these experiences, I was able to personally engage with those who knew most about my specific examples, and gain insightful answers to the questions that aided in the development of my research conclusions. In total, I interviewed five individuals: Tamara Moyzes, self-identified “artist”; Leoš Válka, former member of Póde Bal and current director of DOX contemporary art center; David Černý, contemporary sculptor and artist; Zuzana Štefková, co-curator of the ArtWall Gallery; and Pavol Luptak, member of Ztohoven. The question set for each of these individuals discuss the role of art and activism, and how they perceive the two disciplines function with one another. Specifically, I asked each artist what they believed the societal purpose of their art was, how they define activist art, and how they measure the success of activist art in Czech culture.

## **Terminology**

Due to the nature of the project, there is a significant emphasis placed on many of the concepts’ linguistic expression. For this research specifically, the pertinent terminology includes the following concepts: activist art/Artivism, activist artist, political art, and democratic culture. Both secondary source material as well as conversations with interviewees collaboratively establish the definitions of these terms within the Czech context. Activist art and the term “Artivism” are interchangeable, both representing a practice that uses visual or performance arts

as a means of advocating for a certain cause. Additionally, art activism or Artivism carries the goal to make a change in the society in which it functions pertaining to that cause. While the term activist artist may seem somewhat obvious in definition, my research has added a few defining factors to this definition. One, activist artists are defined by their transitory position between activist and artist; two, activist artists must be a member of the community in which their art functions. The term of political art carries a connotation much different than that of activist art or artivism. While activist art is attempting to make a change surrounding a specific aspect of society, political art is merely commenting on an aspect of a political situation.

Democratic culture, in terms of this specific project, simply refers to the continuous culture that is produced by a democratic governmental system, and ultimately serves to strengthen that democratic system; it is essentially the culture of free, democratic expression. These established concepts lay at the center of my research, and understanding of their distinction from one another is vital to the research's success.

### **Ethics and Bias**

Within this research there exists a number of ethical considerations that I needed to remain cognizant of. Due to my prior experience with political activism in America, I needed to remain aware of my own bias on the issues or preexisting suppositions of the concepts. When choosing artists and individuals to interview, I needed to avoid selecting only those artists that I personally like, but instead those who played the largest role in Czech art activism, assessed by the guidance of my advisor. Since I am a typically liberal individual that values the ability of art to induce political change, I needed to consciously prevent this bias from leading me to fabricated conclusions of my research. Specifically, when interviewing individuals about their personal experience in the field, I deliberately avoided asking any form of leading questions, instead openly allowing my interviewees to freely express their own opinions about the subject. Through practicing this open method of inquiry, I allowed my conclusions to form organically through my experiences rather than specifically tailoring the interviews to support a preexisting argument.

### **Presentation of Results, Analysis, and Findings**

The combination of secondary sources and primary sources presents an extensive array of findings that effectively explore the function of activist art within the Czech context. Throughout this research a number of common themes inherently emerge, ultimately establishing an intrinsic structure to understanding this artistic form. The concept of *activist art* itself constitutes the most preliminary theme, specifically in its comparison to *political art*. A unified, or at least somewhat analogous, definition of *activist art* serves to set the foundation for what this form of expression encompasses, and how that form finds purpose within its society. Similarly, the research explores the meaning behind *successful* activist art; essentially, interviewees discuss how activist art manifests to fulfil its intended purpose, or potentially an unintended purpose. Inevitably, the influence of the media culture within the Czech Republic significantly affects the status of efficiency, a concept that constitutes the third theme of this research. Due to the controversial nature of most activist art projects, public discussion inherently materializes—both positive and negative. Similarly, the public portrayal of activist art plays a role not just in the conception of the art, but also how it is accepted within society. Finally, the examples through which this research was conducted all suggest certain commonalities about the uniqueness of activist art in the Czech context as compared to that in surrounding nations.

### **Language of Activist Art**

The very term *activist art* sparks discussion among those who identify as activist artists over the essence of its true meaning. As Lippard distinguishes in her 1984 article, “Trojan horses: activist art and power,” “‘political’ art tends to be socially concerned and ‘activist’ art tends to be socially involved” (Lippard, 1984). In this scholarly sense, a distinctive line is drawn

between these two concepts, *political art* and *activist art*, the former merely serving as a political commentary while the latter works to incite change in a society. However, this distinction is made only within the realm of scholarly thought, and does not specifically reference any form of art in the Czech or post-communist context. For this reason, this division cannot be automatically applied to Czech activist art; the insight of Czech activist artists, and examples from their work, is necessary in order to fully understand these concepts within the domestic scope.

The distinction between activist art and political art is explicitly referenced by a few interviewees, one of which is Zuzana Štefková, co-curator of the ArtWall Gallery. This open-air gallery consists of a series of panels, “situated in a buttress wall which was built in the 1950s. Originally they were intended to serve the regime’s propaganda.” (Kukurová, 2016). In part due to the nature of the gallery’s visibility, there have been a series of provocative exhibitions displayed on its panels. As Štefková somewhat echoes the assertions of Lippard, elucidating that “whereas political seeks to sort of amplify some problem or point out that there are problems in our society, and address these problems critically, activist art seeks to move people toward action” (Štefková 2017). Thus, she maintains that these two concepts, though each individually important to some degree, carry with them much different functions and intended purposes.

Tamara Moyzes, self-identified Artist, makes similar claims. Artivism, as she describes it, is essentially the equal combination of art and activism, and is synonymous with the term activist art. Like Štefková, Moyzes explains that “political art just comments [on] the political situation. Artivism [tries] to change the situation” (Moyzes, 2017). Moyzes exemplifies this concept of artivism in many of her works, including “Silence is Consent” and “Holocaust Memorial in Prague 7.” In the former work, Moyzes joined an event in Old Town Square commemorating the death of three national athletes, concurrently displaying names of Czech

cities in which anti-Roma Neo-Nazi marches had occurred. Moyzes explains that their “intention was not to undermine the memorial, but” instead to draw attention to the danger impending “when normal citizens march together with neo-Nazis and everyone else stays silent” (Moyzes, 2017). In the latter work, “Holocaust Memorial at Prague 7,” Moyzes organized a performance on Holešovice Triangle in Prague 7, a place that “has a tragic history: it was an assembly point for Jewish people before they were transported to concentration camps during the war” (Moyzes, 2013), in order to protest the building of a commercial building on the site. Moyzes categorizes both these performances as Artivism, because they do not simply comment on the political situation with which they are concerned, but instead spark discussion around those issues and ultimately provoke some sort of change.

Moyzes and Štefková were the only two interviewees to explicitly draw a distinction between this specific terminology of political art versus activist art; however, all the other interviewees discuss concepts with the same essence as the aforementioned. Although Leoš Válka, former member of the activist group Póde Bal, does not discuss the two concepts in comparison with one another, his definition of activist art is constant with those previously stated. He articulates that activist art exists because “art for art’s sake is not enough, and that art should be seen also as a tool for change” (Válka, 2017). An example of activist art as executed by Póde Bal is the 2002 project entitled “Institutionalized Art.” In this project, “a brick, split in two halves, was fixed onto the main front window of the National Gallery in such a way as to create the illusion of it passing through the glass” in order to symbolize the shattering of privatization that had been implemented by National Gallery director Milan Knížák (Póde Bal, 2002). This performance, as Válka explains, classifies as activist art because it incorporates a direct call to action against the National Gallery, rather than simply critiquing the situation.

Controversial Czech artist and sculptor David Černý utilizes different terminology when referring to his works; however, the essence behind this terminology remains analogous with that employed by other activists. He uses the term *political art*, but the meaning he attaches with this term is parallel to the previously established definition of *activist art*. Thus, Černý categorizes political art as art attempting to change a situation, and if the art is not attempting to change a situation, then it is not political art. For instance, Černý refers to his sculpture “Entropa,” commissioned by the European Union (EU) to creatively represent all EU countries. In this sculpture, Černý depicts 26 European Union countries as blatant stereotypes that are associated with their culture (Meyer, 2009). In a separate interview, Černý describes the piece as a “parody of the socially activist art, which balances on the edge between would-be controversial attacks on national character and an undisturbing decoration of official spaces” (Meyer, 2009). For this reason, Černý does not categorize this piece as political art, because it is simply commenting on the practice of activism and not conspiring to change anything about the situation. In comparison, one of Černý’s works that would qualify as genuine activist art would be his 2013 “Finger” constructed in the Vltava as a sign of defiance towards the castle and president. In terms of the prevailing language, Černý’s concepts surrounding activist art, or what he considers political art, are on par with the essence of the other activists’ definitions.

By clarifying how Czech art activists define their work, it becomes evident that the established function of activist is grounded in change to a democratic culture. Despite minor language discrepancies between some of the surveyed artists, the essential concepts they portray remain constant with one another.

### **Measurements for Successful Activist Art**

Since activist art attempts to spark a change in democratic culture, one can assume that there is some sort of measurement or qualifications for when that art can be considered successful. As Lippard explains, “the degree to which an activist art is integrated with the artist’s beliefs is crucial to its effectiveness” (Lippard, 1984). However, an artist’s conviction in their own work cannot alone result in its success. David Černý offers the most primitive definition to the success of his work, explaining that “what I decide is going to be done, is done. This is success” (Černý, 2017). Nonetheless, Černý also maintains that his work serves the purpose to change the minds of others, a purpose shared with most other activist art. In an art form with such a powerful purpose, it would follow that success would also be measured by the fulfillment of that purpose. Due to the fact that purpose differs from one work or artist to another, artists would therefore have differing measurements of success for their work. Through the first-hand interviews, the artists and activists in this study explore the varying purposes of their work and their personal qualifications for successful activist art.

As an activist, Tamara Moyzes recognizes a specific method for recognizing the success of her works or performances. In reference to her “Silence is Consent” performance, she explains that she “wanted to point that okay, it’s really sad that these three hockey players died, but we have here some other problems as well and...the politicians doesn’t talk about it” (Moyzes, 2017). However, simply pointing out this fact to those in attendance of the event is not enough for Moyzes to consider the work a success. She also elucidates that “the main point is always the media. It’s more like 50% of success” (Moyzes, 2017). Through reaching the media, Moyzes’ work reaches a wider range of people, and thus has the possibility to affect more individuals’

mindsets about the issue at hand. Although Moyzes speaks about activism in general when emphasizing the value of the media, this represents her own personal view about activist success.

Válka expresses a much more qualitative approach to the success of activist art, maintaining that success simply means the fulfillment of the work's purpose. In reference to not just Pode Bal's "Institutionalized Art" project, but also to activist art in general, he claims that the main goal is to "change the thinking, and then to change the behavior of citizens" (Válka, 2017). Thus, what Válka would consider success is the changed thinking and changed behavior that results from a specific work. This concept of liberalized thought is mirrored by both Štefková and Luptak in reference to the ArtWall Gallery and the work of Ztohoven. Štefková explains that with every activist art exhibition in the ArtWall Gallery, "there's hope that the society will grow, and people will be demanding more rights and more responsibilities, and there will be more questioning and less passive acceptance of the status quo" (Štefková, 2017). Two specifically activist exhibitions that have been featured in this gallery are Tomáš Rafa's 2013 "Competition Procedure for the Czech-Roma Flag" as well as Oto Hudec's 2017 "Prague the Day after Bombing." The former exhibition features a series of controversial flags combining Czech flag with that of Romania; the latter exhibits illustrations of Czech monuments as they would look after a bombing, symbolizing the irresponsible weapons distribution that takes place in the Czech Republic. Despite the controversy that arose from Rafa's ArtWall exhibit, Štefková explains that its success could be seen by the flags' usage by demonstrators, and that "even if it's just a pocket of people that know about it, it shows that somehow this project was alive and it make sense" (Štefková, 2017). Thus, Štefková does not measure the success of activist ArtWall exhibitions through how many people the project reaches, but instead by how genuinely it affects the people it does reach.

Pavol Luptak, as a representative from the guerilla activist group Ztohoven, provides a peculiar quantification of activism success. Similar to those previously discussed, Luptak does agree that a major goal of Ztohoven projects is to make “ordinary people in society more tolerant” (Luptak, 2017). However, Luptak explains that his personal measurement of a projects’ success is through the extent of backlash the project receives. As John Dewey explains in his *Art as Experience*, “resistance and conflict have always been factors in generating art; and they are, as we have seen, a necessary part of artistic form” (Dewey, 2005 p. 339). This concept, though somewhat cynical, does resonate with the concept of activist art in this context. If the goal of activist art is to spark debate and change the public mindset, it is inevitable that negative criticism will result. In reference to the ArtWall Gallery’s “Czech-Roma Flag” exhibition, Štefková similarly reflects on the often hateful responses, “panels were sprayed over, and vandalized, and of course that might also feel as though we hit the target, or that the exhibition was successful in creating a response” (Štefková, 2017). This philosophy employed by both Štefková and Luptak illustrates an interesting, yet effective, way to measure the success of activist art. Works are not often created with the purpose of causing outrage, but critical responses represent the fact that the works are challenging the public’s mindset, and sparking debate as a response. If no one disagrees with an activist artwork, then its very necessity in society is questionable. Although not all artists involved in this study have unified perceptions of success, the sparking of public discussion and ultimately inciting change is the commonality between them all.

### **Influence of Media**

Media plays an intricate role in how activist art functions in Czech society; essentially, it can serve as both a positive or negative force in the depiction of activist artworks. As Tamara Moyzes maintains, media is one of the primary factors of success in her activism. For instance, in her “Silence is Consent” performance, Moyzes partnered with *Reflex Magazine*, and the story eventually reached upwards of 1.5 million people. This widespread reach of her work, attributed to media coverage, allows the performance to be categorized as successful. Another of Moyzes’ successful activist performances, “Holocaust Memorial at Prague 7,” had a major impact due to the media coverage of the event. This living-sculpture performance protested a private agreement with the municipality to build a commercial shopping center on the historical site; Moyzes takes pride in the fact that in response to her performance, “they didn’t seek this agreement at the time, at this day, because all media was talking about the performance” (Moyzes, 2017). In these examples, the media has a positive influence on the portrayal of activist art as well as the works’ ultimate success.

Despite the beneficial role of media coverage in the examples of Moyzes’ activism, media does not always enhance the effectiveness of activism artwork in Czech society. In the case of the ArtWall Gallery, Štefková maintains that she would prefer “some sort of insightful coverage which is not just cut and paste press release” (Štefková, 2017). However, these examples make clear that banal media coverage is not the only downfall of activist art; instead, media can misinterpret artworks in the public eye. In the case of Tomáš Rafa’s “Czech-Roma Flag” exhibition, the media actually portrayed a “misinterpretation which presented this project as new flag for Czech-Roma... [and] the Roma minority was more bitter than expected” (Štefková, 2017). For this reason, the exhibition was taken as a negative force against the Roma community,

when in fact it was intended to be empowering for them. A similar media misinterpretation interfered with one of Ztohoven's projects, as Luptak mentions in his interview. In the recent Ztohoven project "President's Dirty Laundry," members stole the presidential flag from the roof of Prague Castle; in a subsequent project, "Decentralization of Power," Ztohoven cut the flag into more than 1,000 pieces and sent them to different blockchain locations throughout the country (Ztohoven, 2016). The latter project was blatantly misunderstood by the media, and therefore by the general public. Luptak explains, "Most people think that like cutting the flag to more than 1,000 pieces it was act against Milos Zeman, current Czech president, and against the government... our goal was to show that... we should move to fully decentralized society" (Luptak, 2017). In fact, Luptak also mentions that no Czech media source accurately specified that Ztohoven's true goal was "just to show there are some alternatives, and we should trust for this alternative system some non-authoritative, decentralized system" (Luptak, 2017). It is due to this misinterpretation and inaccurate portrayal by Czech media that the public also had a skewed understanding of the groups' goal. For this reason, the media actually inhibited the success of the project rather than benefiting it. Although Moyzes emphasizes the valuable role of media in the success of activist art, these prior examples demonstrate that the media coverage must be genuine and accurate in order to advance the goal of the project.

### **Role of Public Discussion**

As previously suggested, a significant function of activist art in the Czech context is its ability to spark debate and infiltrate political discourse. Clearly, the ultimate goal is to change the opinions of viewers; nonetheless, negative reactions are not necessarily a negative reflection on the artwork itself, but instead a negative reflection on the public mindset. In contemplating the

reactions to his 2013 finger sculpture, Černý estimates “that like 30% is positive and the other 70% is negative” (Černý, 2017). Similarly, Luptak reflects on the most recent “Decentralization of Power” project by Ztohoven in saying that “90% of all reactions were highly negative” (Luptak, 2017). However, as Luptak explains, those who agree with a project are more likely to stay silent, while those who disagree are more likely to speak out in opposition.

The other artistic activists portray both positive and negative experiences in reaction to their works or performances. In terms of her “Silence is Consent” performance, Moyzes explains that at first, people at the event were angry that the performance disturbed the memorial; however, after asking questions and discussing, some individuals began to realize that the anti-Roma demonstrations should be publically discussed (Moyzes 2017). In response to his “Entropa” sculpture within the European Union, Černý recalls “when we were leaving the office of Alexandr Vondra, that Prime Minister, in Brussels, he was booing with a pile of the facts and emails from Merkel and Sarkozy” (Černý, 2017). This somewhat negative reaction from the sculpture’s audience, including the Prime Minister, represents the realization of the sculpture’s provocation. Válka depicts a similar concept as it pertains to a particular Póde Bal project entitled “Zimmer Frei.” Roughly translated to “room for lent,” the phrase was printed on banners and next to pictures of the Czech Sudetenland, representing the “post war deportation of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia and the enormous controversy and emotional charge these historical events retain into the present” (Póde Bal, 2002). Due to the controversy around this historical event, as well as the publicity of the project once a banner was installed in Prague Castle, the project garnered an abundance of negative reactions. However, as Válka asserts, it is “extremely unpopular in Czech Republic to remind Czechs that there were times when we behaved in an atrocious way” (Válka, 2017). This concept can be applied to the topics of other

activist art projects—almost all of them pertain to an area where Czech society is inadequate or unjust; the natural initial response to this critique would plausibly be anger.

Despite these negative reactions to the specified activist artworks, Štefková recognizes the benefit to these oftentimes frustrating debates. In response to Rafa's highly controversial "Czech-Roma Flag" exhibition, Štefková recalls that she often found herself having to explain its message repeatedly to those who opposed the notion. However, she claims that these conversations still felt meaningful to her; she reasons, "even if I don't persuade these people, at least we're able to engage in a meaningful exchange" (Štefková, 2017). In this respect, Štefková maintains that those involved in this project are "happy to provoke people who identify themselves as racist" (Štefková, 2017), because those are the people whose opinions they hope to alter. Essentially, it can be assumed that the targeted audience for activist artwork is those who disagree with its message, since those are the people whose opinions are intended to be changed. For this reason, negative feedback is not necessarily a bad thing; it simply indicates that their opinions are being effectively challenged.

### **Public Portrayal**

In addition to the public response to specific activist artworks, Czech society also reflects a certain attitude towards activist artists themselves and their general practices. Lippard theoretically establishes this approach by depicting the common assumption that everyone must "choose between art and social action, that anyone who wants art to be communicative and effective is either a sappy idealist, a lousy artist, or a dangerous red." (Lippard, 1984). Although this scholarly source is dated almost 40 years and written about activist art on a global scale, this idea was still exhibited through the interviews in this research. From his personal experience,

Válka explains that “social activism in the Czech Republic has quite a bad name because it seems through the eyes of communist experience where all agenda, ideological agenda, was seen clearly as bad or inadequate” (Válka, 2017). These roots within Czech communism present one viable explanation for the negative portrayal of activist artists in Czech culture. Activist art could also have a negative depiction due to the occasional legal problems associated with them. For instance, in response to his ArtWall exhibition, Rafa faced charges from the Prague 7 Municipality and was eventually “found guilty of committing a misdemeanor, specifically, of abusing state symbols of the Czech Republic, and has been fined” (Romea, 2013). Ztohoven has faced similar legal charges from the government; the state has charged individuals from the group with “personal harassment of the state” in response to their “President’s Dirty Laundry” project (Luptak, 2017). As Luptak explains, the state prosecutor strived to punish them with a much more severe sentencing than the one they received, specifically to use them as an “exemplary case” (Luptak, 2017). Although the lesser sentence prevailed, the state desired to worsen the representation of activist artists within the Czech context. Activist artists’ true dedication is evident through their perseverance despite their widely negative portrayal.

### **Uniqueness to Czech Context**

Clearly the examples discussed within this research are all unique to the Czech Republic in that they take place within the country and deal with national issues; however, there remains the question of whether this practice of activist art has any ties to Czech history or if it has developed differently within this national context as compared to others. In discussing activist art in the post-communist context, Anca Pusca emphasizes how society used “concepts such as political art/artist/aesthetics to understand an ongoing politics of resistance both during and after

communism” (Pusca, 2017). Despite this influence of activist art directly surrounding the transition from communism to democracy, its prevalence in modern activist art cannot be automatically implied. Nonetheless, Černý argues that activist art is indeed somewhat unique to the Czech Republic due to its historical experience with communism (Černý 2017). However, the other interviewees look to other methods of differentiating the role of activist art in the Czech Republic. Štefková actually references the Póde Bal “Institutionalized Art” project as an event that added a layer of uniqueness to Czech activist art, recalling that artists and activists alike “were returning to periodically because it...had such a massive influence on Czech contemporary art scene” (Štefková, 2017). Despite this assertion, Štefková recognizes that Czech activist art deals with many of the same issues as similar European countries because it is “part of a globalized reality” (Štefková, 2017). Although its prevalence is not paramount and the Czech context remains similar to others, the role of the country’s history permeates the discussion of activist artists.

In a logical comparison, Luptak argues that activist art functions much differently in Czech society than it would in that of Slovakia. Luptak hypothesizes that if Ztohoven executed their last two projects in Slovakia rather than the Czech Republic, they would have been immediately persecuted and jailed; he attributes this to “the fact that Czech people are definitely more tolerant about Ztohoven and artists” (Luptak 2017). His reasoning behind this argument incorporates both the lack of religion in the Czech Republic, whereas Slovakia is widely religious, as well as the lack of corruption in the Czech legal system compared to Slovakia’s (Luptak 2017). Though this is simply the assumption of one individual, his perspective as a member of both communities is valuable nonetheless. Additionally, Luptak claims that his work in activist art “has much more impact definitely in Czech Republic than in Slovakia” (Luptak

2017). There is no question that the Czech Republic is unique when compared to surrounding nations, and this uniqueness inevitably plays a role in the function of activist art within its context. Although these examples depict only a small sliver of Czech activist art culture, the concepts associated with them are representative of the practice in a more general sense.

## Conclusions

A number of conclusive suppositions inevitably emerge from this research process in supplement to the initial overarching enquiries. Firstly, the terminology associated with activist art is instrumental to its function; a mere substitution of the word “political” in place of “activist” implies a completely different concept with an alternative set of goals. Thus, activist art specifically aims to not just comment on a political situation, but instead spark a form of change within that situation. Although the specific terminology slightly differed from one artist to another, the essence of these terms inherently united them all. Additionally, the role of discussion was found to be paramount in the quantifiable success of activist art. Despite alternative methods of measuring success discussed by some interviewees, the unifying factor is the extent to which a work sparked discussion or controversial discourse within Czech society. Further, this discussion need not always be positive. Since those who innately disagree with the message of the project are essentially the targeted audience, negative feedback is representative of those peoples’ ideas being effectively challenged. It is through this that the effect of activist art is evident.

The influence of media in the function of activist art is similarly complex. Since a major goal of activist art is to reach as many people as possible, media coverage would seemingly be a proponent to its success. However, palpable through the examples studied in this research, media not always serves an advantageous role to activist art; in fact, these examples depict just the opposite. Nonetheless, the role of media can be twofold; it has the potential to be a beneficial factor, but also has the potential to misrepresent the essence of an activist artwork. The general portrayal of activist artists within Czech society is somewhat disheartening but can be logically understood. In a broad sense, the attitude towards activist artists and their work is negative; however this understandable when thinking about how the form works to challenge the status

quo, a practice that often faces resistance in any society. This society specifically does offer some unique aspects in terms of activist art's functions. Although the country's history of communism is not dominant in the sentiment of all the artists studied, it still plays a marginal role in the function of Czech activist art. Due to indiscernible aspects of this unique society, the influence of activist art does have a significant effect in the Czech Republic.

The individuals interviews and the activist artworks studied throughout this research differ in many ways; artists express much different attitudes towards their work, while the projects endeavor to spark discussions surrounding varying issues. Nevertheless, these surveyed activist artists within the context of the Czech Republic are threaded together with the same essential sentiment to spark positive change within their community. Politically involved discussion lies at the essence of a legitimized democracy; the ways in which these activist artists strive to trigger this type of free discourse ultimately contribute to the legitimacy of the political culture.

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