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WHO ARE THE CZECH NUDES?

The person who motivated me to write my conference contribution was Vladimír Havlík, a Czech artist often performing at the FNAF. He said that the Festival of Naked Forms is the one first bringing nakedness into the Czech visual art.

It would be very bizarre and misleading to say that the Czech scene found courage to work with nakedness in art only after 2015 when FNAF was founded. The Czech Republic, especially for its Polish neighbours, has a reputation as a very liberal and open society, whether this liberalism is explained by its atheism, its disinterest in public affairs or the absurd and stupid behaviour in the style of Švejk.

Thinking a little bit about these provocative questions, I considered our history from the view of creative or actual work with nakedness and I found a few historic examples which in fact – although anecdotally – curb our imagination of Czechia as a large-minded paradise.

Who were the first world famous Czech naked ones? We are not going to look for them at the nudist beaches but in the centre of the religious reformational movement at the beginning of the 15th century. These were Adamites, a sect that was part of the radical movement of the Hussites. Nakedness was one of the most visible outer

features of this chiliastic religious group, who was first banished from the revolutionary city of Tábor by the political and military leader of the Hussites' movement Jan Žižka, and later, in 1421, slaughtered to the last man in their refuge on an island in the river of Nežárka in Southern Bohemia.

The nudity of the Adamites originated in their conviction that the Descent of the Holy Spirit had already happened, and they lived in the Kingdom of God. Their island became a depiction of Paradise and their nudity related to the nudity of Adam before he succumbed to the Temptation. The Adamites believed that if man is as naked as Adam, he rules over the elements and animals just like Adam. This heretic haughtiness, which was symbolised in the nudity and followed by negative phenomena resulting from the belief in being the chosen ones (adultery, murders and thievery) was so provocative that it justified Žižka's cruel raid.

The Adamites' tradition has experienced varying explication in the course of time. What Catholic authors considered absolute heresy, the Protestants cleared, highlighting the innovative approach to the Eucharist. The Adamites are beloved by the Marxist historians who see them



František Ženíšek, *Záhuba adamitů - Adamiti*, 1903, oil on canvas, 265 x 464,5 cm, photo © National Gallery Prague 2022

as avant-garde in their fight for a classless society. Some considered them as sinful fornicators, others for an example of sexual purity, as they wrongly interpreted their teachings of children being born without sin and pain.¹

Although the nudity itself was not the reason why the Hussites' slaughtered their fellow-believers, it became the most specific sign of their religious ecstatic extravagance and in its uncontrollability was a threat for any system.

We can say that the trauma of non-acceptance suffered by the Czech nudes through the slaughtering of the Adamites lasted in the Czech culture until the 1990s. There is not another mention of an organized group that exposed itself *en masse*, except for the end of 1960s with the onset of nudists and naturists. Just like the heretic influences from the 14th and 15th centuries, the spirit of nudism came here from the West, especially from Germany. Some parallels can be seen between the historical heretic movements and the ideology of the *Freikörperkultur* which is based on naturism. The men and women who wanted to put aside covering textile elements while bathing travelled to nudist beaches on the Baltic coast of the German Democratic Republic, to Hungary or Poland.

Czechoslovakia was the last country of the Eastern Block to allow legal nudist beaches in 1983, when it stopped hunting nudists for being naked. Nudists then didn't have to take complicated measures to find hidden places away from prying eyes. An example of such place is the deep quarry of Velká Amerika in the Bohemian Karst, where nudists had their private paradises just like the Adamites. Unlike the Adamites, in the end, the Czech nudists were accepted by the political regime and majority of the society.

The Adamites and nudists have in common, although to a very different degree, the explication of nudity as a specific spiritual element. A naked person in their point of view demonstrates a connection with a higher power, be it God or simply nature and spontaneity. The long tradition of suppressing of public nudity from the point of dominant or totalitarian institutions relates to the political nature of the gesture of nudity. In totalitarian regimes any public nudity, however tiny, was understood as a political gesture of freedom, as a ghost of the uncontrolled and uncontrollable body.²

Since I am convinced of the "political nature of nudity," this brings me to another stop in history. I want to investigate if the

Czech underground worked with nudity, if they ever tried to use its rebellious capacity. And to my – not so strong – surprise I found that the subversive authors didn't raise the flag of nudity. In the half-legal visual art, the nudity of the author appears only very rarely (Tomáš Ruller). Milan Knížák doesn't take his clothes off in his radical *Walks*, Soňa Švecová does this instead of him at the *Second Manifestation of Actual Art* (2. Manifestace aktuálního umění) and only into her leotard.³ In the Czech tradition of body action art, it is the male body that appears (Jan Mlčoch, Petr Štembera), but this is mainly as an existential gesture and in a situation that ignores nudity. Some rebellious capacity of the nakedness can be seen in spontaneous nakedness of some artists, e.g. Martin Magor Jirous or Václav Stratil, where this was present at parties, openings and social events.

What I wonder about is that Czech female artists didn't work with nudity. The visual language and essentialist aesthetics of the second wave of feminism called for this. The questions of woman and the body are met by Czech female artists only by detour and via historic connotations and aestheticizing land art, e.g. the sculptor and painter Zorka Ságlová. While looking for their own art territory, the female artists turned most often inside, into their emotional world. Their works then were fragile and autobiographic, as we can see mainly with Eva Kmentová or Adriena Šimotová.

I couldn't find any female representatives in the exhibition *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* (Feministická avantgarda 70. let), which was aimed at innovative approaches to work with female corporality including nudity.⁴

The Czech Republic in the 1990s, like other countries whose regime was freed from totalitarianism in the late 1980s, opened its public space widely to nudity. At first sight, it might seem that we had finally reached the relaxed liberal approach. The flood of (female) nudity was enormous, but oriented very narrowly. It almost entirely aimed at the fields of commercial image, popular entertainment, and pornography. The Czech streets looked like the 1970s in the West, mainly in the USA's era of porn chic, when the

mainstream entertainment was pervaded by the pornographic industry.⁵ This boom of nudity did not mean that the body was free, that we could now embrace tolerance and self-acceptance, this was merely a huge publicizing of power or erotic and sexist images. Public space was attacked by large-scale sexist billboards and a torrent of pornographic magazines in newsstands. Nudity was everywhere, one couldn't miss it, but this nudity was stereotypical and too much connected to the criminal economic milieu. The fact that not every picture of a naked breast is proof of liberality and modernity of our society, had yet to be slowly learned. Beth Lazroe, American photographer tried to open the eyes of the Czech public, when she only in 2005 had a photo exhibition *As a slap* (Jako facka) where she documented the nakedness of the sexist atmosphere of Czech streets and cities.⁶

From this point of view, we can also interpret the art production of Czech female and male artists at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the millennium that related to body, nudity, and sexuality (including my own work). In most cases, the starting point of the inspiration of these works was not intimate experiences, a need to express one's approach or an aesthetical interest in the body. Mostly, it was a work inspired by porn industry – whether the artist approached this in the sense of parody or critically. An example of how much the area of intimate and body art was and still is influenced by the pornographic surrounding is the installation of the exhibition *Sexism?* (Sexismus?) in the Václav Špála Gallery in 2008. The curator stylized the gallery as an erotic club including boxes - and it was similar in many other exhibition projects.⁷

The mentioned set of historical moments speaking of the Czech (non)relationship towards nudity says, that Vladimír Havlík and his statement from the introduction of my text is true. It is possible that FNAF is the first really focused act to work with the art of nudity. FNAF is a platform that doesn't want just to show the foreign and Czech performative work involving nakedness. This platform wants to show, on the ground of many examples, information and sharing, that work with nudity has myriads of

forms and contents. The latent political nature of the work with nudity can be delivered by female and male artists in various forms – appellative, kind, or very aesthetic ones. The festival is trying to make this profusion clearer with help of various tools. One of them is organizing other sections besides the art performance, as in the organization of the theoretical conference, the Eskort section, which is oriented at commercial performance or even a fashion section – FNAF fashion. The thematic orientation of each year shows nudity as an integral part of other social streams, such as gender issue, ageism or environmental problems.

I hope that the festival supports Czech female and male artists in a non-violent way to find a positive relation to work with nudity and to try to conduct this work in the safe surrounding of the festival.

Notes

- ¹ Jakub Jiří Jukl, *Adamité, historie a vyhubení českých naháčů* (Praha: Dokořán, 2014).
- ² Zdenka Badovinac, ed., *Body and the East. From the 1960s to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- ³ Pavlína Morganová, *Akční umění* (Praha: Nakladatelství J. Vacl, 2010).
- ⁴ Gabriele Schor, ed., *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* (Vienna: Prestel, 2016).
- ⁵ Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- ⁶ Beth Lazroe, „Jako facka: vizuální útok v pražských ulicích, regionální dimenze a mezinárodní platnost pražského projektu.“ *Gender, rovné příležitosti a výzkum* 8, 1 (2007): 52-55.
- ⁷ Lenka Borovičková, „Nahota, sexualita a pornografie jako kurátorský projekt“ [Nudity, sexuality and pornography as a curator project], MA thesis, FF MU, Brno, 2012.

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