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ABOUT THE CRUSADERS SCHOOL, ITS DOMICILE AND THEIR MAIN ARTEFACT

The history of the Crusaders in their time

In this article, we introduce some of the complex activities of the Czech collective group of the Crusaders School of Pure Humour without a Joke (Křižovnícká škola čistého humoru bez vtipu, KŠ in short), a group of artists, active in the sixties and seventies, named after the pub where they met. Not only this titular pub U Křižovníků, but also other rooms of hospitality, pubs and taverns became the centre of interdependence of life and art. The members of the Crusaders School, like its domiciles, appeared and reappeared, changed at various stages. From 1963 until the final end of the movement only the Direction remained without a change, the legendary self-proclaimed directors,¹ the sculptor Karel Nepraš and the conceptual artist Jan Steklík. The sixties and seventies became the times of transformation. Radically new concepts of art opened up new definitions, since the sixties there has been no connecting uniform style. Artists used a lot

of intermedia processes in their individual or collective creative activity. The artistic production of the Crusaders introduced new practices that combined existing classical media as sculpture and painting with intermedia as happening, action, events, visual poetry and music. There was a predominant inclination towards corporeality, conceptual approaches, subversive humour and bitter grotesque. In their creative output theatricality, playfulness, vitality, self-irony and uncompromising self-reflection were of issue. The Crusaders, thus became one of the foremost Czech forerunners of the New Media. Their approach brought new forms of reflection and expanded the boundaries of Czechoslovak art.

Research concerning the Crusaders, the project which I pursue since some years,² should eventually lead to an improved understanding of the political and social conditions of making innovative art in a repressive system and to contribute to the history of knowledge of the twentieth century. In the historical sense, the Crusaders connect to both the Kafkaesque tradition of the absurdity of our world as well as to the Jaroslav Hašek's *Party of Moderate*

and Peaceful Progress within the Limits of the Law as general myths. Its aim is to start a new independent critical discourse that will re-evaluate the art of the Crusaders School. The intention is to critically discuss the Crusaders School and its activities as a link between theoretical reflection and creative practice and the presentation of their preservation and cultural products in exhibitions and archives.

A theoretical concern with the Crusaders and their intermedia is a *desideratum* in the Czech humanities. Many questions are posed regarding the position of the Crusaders in the art world of today. The Crusader community as such requires that art and the position of an artist in a dysfunctional society be considered in a way that might renounce common terminology. We discuss the problems posed by the aesthetics: whether the means of use of scandal, absurdity and humour can devalue art. Could the drinking of alcohol, and that not the genteel wine in a noble restaurant, but drinking beer in a sordid pub demote art and invite moralization and disdain of art critics and others? It is understood, that beer is one of the very few products, through which the Czech Republic has achieved world fame. In spite of this undisputable fact, in comparison with wine, beer is still considered to be a commonplace, proletarian drink, all the more, if consumed in a rundown pub. It is important to question, to what extent can such disparaged art, that originated in such a lowly ambience be integrated into the art landscape. The Crusader School's humour was one of the basic characteristics of the group. The major hypothesis is, that this humour, the refusal to take the collaborative activities seriously concealed the aesthetic character of these activities. Perhaps it is this, along with the authentic and absolutely uncompromising stand towards the establishment and the society that did not accept such a moral assessment, that is among the causes why the Crusaders remained to a certain degree outsiders up till now. It is assumed that some of the art theorists of the old school, with considerable influence in the future

writing of art history might have had issues with cultural memory.³ They would not accept such models of self-development and creativity, which characterized the Crusaders community, while the young generation of theorists have only this abridged information at their disposal. Aleida Assman examines the differences and the interrelationship between collective and cultural memory, which focuses on cultural characteristics.⁴ These studies have come forth as essential and central issues of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. The research on the Crusaders School based on cultural memory issues includes exploration of fields such as history, political studies, literary studies and others. How do we approach history to question and contest authoritarian ideologies, revealing alternative narratives and how their practices represent the past while challenging the available memory, which was shaped by those forces.

Political consciousness and civil disobedience in conjunction with a playful state of mind, the encouragement of humour and play in artistic creations evidently generated a cultural environment that refused to make concessions. This was understood in its day, at the heyday of the manifold activities of the group, all kinds of criticism could be heard from its own members or associates but discouraged future discussion. Only recently, since group cooperation as a major theme has been getting increased attention in art history, does it seem that the interest has been intensifying in the Crusaders and their work.

It is important to concentrate on the time of the most significant political and social transitions in the life of the group, on the early stages of the so-called *normalization*, between 1968 and 1974, since I consider these transitions to be formative factors in the development of the group. The specifically Czech political, social and cultural development after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 had an impact on the many shifts in the field of the arts in that country and it is important to compare and interpret the motivation of making intermedia art

in the international and native unofficial art scene around 1968, the year of the student revolutions in the West and the year where the hopes of consolidating the emergent independent art scene in Czechoslovakia were diminishing. But the existing visual cultures in the country generated social and cultural codes that went far beyond the political iconographies. Unofficial art intervened in the dehumanizing situation as a corrective, as spiritual food. The Crusaders School used its intermedia, the ephemeral events, playful dialogues that were often drawn into scandal, nonsensicality or absurdity, to symbolize exceptional situations that freed human action from forcibly established norms. Vilém Flusser saw creativity as an activity designed to create something unlikely, as a definition for deliberate creations of wonderful situations.⁵ According to Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival was a theatre without a ramp, where everything was permissible.⁶ Being between art and life, it enabled flourishing of unusual rules that abolish social distances between the players in a communal performance that had no boundaries. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque shows, that humour and the grotesque in arts is a corrective to repressive forms of power and a way of changing social reality in a positive direction.

The objective of those boldest fantasies with its provocations and trials was to create extraordinary situations in the search for the truth. Unlike some avant-garde groups in the West, the KŠ activities that displayed excess and grotesqueness did not contain elements of political radicalism, but they transmitted the content of general questions about the position of art and artist in society. Their individuality, independence and mobility across such streams in the society, that would refuse to give in, inevitably brought the Crusader School close not only to the underground, but also to the dissent movement. This landed several of the Crusaders in jail, some of them repeatedly, many of the main protagonists became signatories to the Human Rights Charter 77, and were consequently forced into exile by the coordinated efforts of the authorities.⁷

The Crusaders did not try to promote something specific in the arts. They looked for a chance to find a new perspective. Picnics, performances, the concept of a pub as spaces of 'empirical' exploration, many momentary rhetorical and dynamic physical exercises and the music performances of the groups own Midsummer Night's Dream Band⁸ were not considered to be an artistic program as such, but were definitely not perceived as random phenomena. Their significance was taken seriously, and, as postulated by Nepraš, a necessity was felt that they be emphasized.⁹

Steklík and Nepraš met sometime in 1960 and bonded for life. Nepraš broke up with his previous group of artists, the Šmidras' during the second half of the sixties, but he transferred some of their characteristic codes into KŠ - a certain conspiratorialism and a system of collective order and absurd rules. In Steklík he found a master of ritualization, a wizard of diminutive subversion. Thus, the so-called *poetics of weirdness* of the Šmidra group was transformed into a different position with the Crusaders. The parallel society to the contrived bureaucracy of the *nomenklatura*, the Kafkaesque office, appeared in a much more relaxed and playful form, associated with the subversion of pub-attendance with beer as the ideological drink of the community. The School's continuous solutions to non-existent administrative problems relating to pub quality and equipment, beer, staff and member behaviour were written up in the Crusaders *Notebooks* and discussed at pub meetings. Thus, somewhere in the mid-sixties originated the first conceptual action of the Crusaders, *Beer in Arts*. Over many years, KŠ gathered, mostly with the assistance of *secretaries*, students of nearby Colleges clad in white uniform coats, samples of beer in various pubs all over the country. Those samples were 'empirically' evaluated as to its taste, looks, smells etc, encased in resin and exhibited, at times when exhibitions were still permitted. Another frequent series of beer events, the Czech Parnass, were nonsensical contests, for example: who would be able to drink two mugs of beer more

rapidly than other contestants, to become either Alois or Vilem, one of the of the nineteenth century *literatti* Mrštík brothers.

The collective flourished after 1968, with the new formation of the Crusaders community. This culminated in the Spring 1970, after an exhibition of sculptures of Karel Nepraš and paintings of Otakar Slavík in the Galerie Václava Špály, Špálovka in short. This was the most progressive Prague gallery, managed since 1965 by the arbiter of Czech artistic life Jindřich Chalupický. This Špála Gallery showed the *crème de la crème* not only of progressive Czechoslovak art of the time, but also international art, from Duchamp to Beuys. Chalupický showed many KŠ artists in one woman / man shows, for example: Karel Nepraš, Otakar Slavík, the intermedia artists Naděžda Plíšková and Rudolf Němec. The painter Zbyšek Sion and the concrete poet and theorist of happening arts Vladimír Burda participated in major group exhibitions. The Špála Gallery showed several important performances of Czech action art of the late sixties as Brikcius' *Idea na Patření Obrazu* [The idea of observing a the picture] and *Šachy* [Chess]. Brikcius was one of the first action artists in the Czech Republic and his happenings were renowned. Zorka Ságlová's event *Seno, Sláma* [Hay, Straw] was an unheard of gallery feat for Prague of that time (1969). Ságlová, another renowned action and conceptual artist was not KŠ, but her Crusader brother, Ivan Jirous with his wife Věra Jirousová, both art historians and poets, actively participated in her event, together with members of the Plastic People of the Universe group. Naděžda Plíšková showed an acclaimed intermedia performance, offering visitors goulash soup from a series of oversized sculpted metal spoons etc. Characteristically, the conceptual action of the poet Miloslav Topinka and the multimedia artist Rudolf Němec who planned to use the entire space of the Gallery was no longer permitted after 1971.¹⁰

Members of the Crusaders, artists who collaborated with Jindřich Chalupický and his Gallery, enjoyed the privileged position of artistic

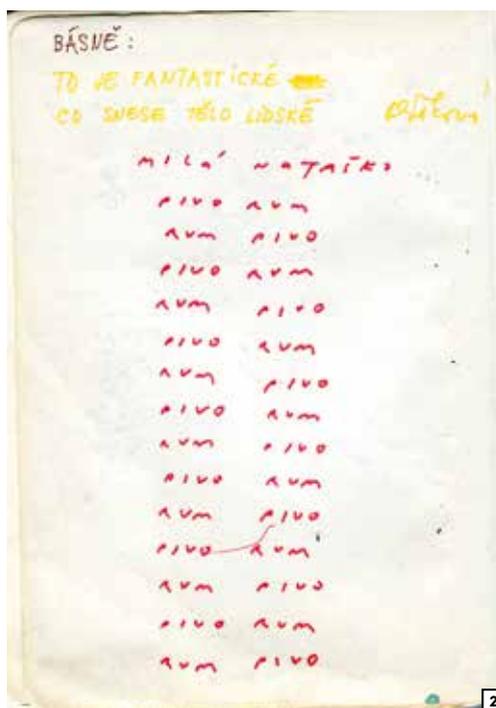
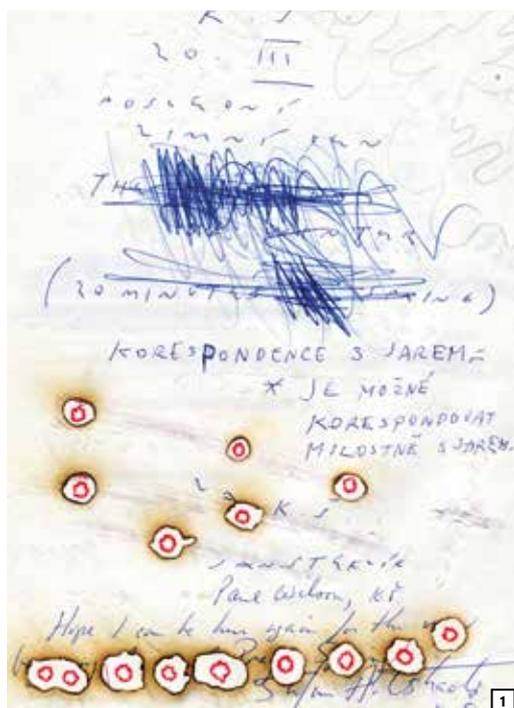
individuals for only a few years, roughly from the mid-sixties to the early seventies. With the change in political, social and economic conditions, their situation was drastically reassessed, as art as such was gradually liquidated by official structures and the privileges and successes that could be achieved in the free art world after the liberation and opening of the political system disappeared forever.

The newly established ruling structures no longer needed art as a propaganda tool, as had been the case in the fifties and early sixties. Nevertheless, they attempted to annihilate creative life. Only the *normalized* art was to be permitted, art that was primarily fraudulent and frequently of poor quality. Art as such had no value to the regime, but it could have become dangerous. According to Horckheimer and Adorno, art has to be ideological, because it is antithetical to the old social conditions.¹¹ Gradually, artists who did not actively collaborate with the newly established political and cultural structures, were prevented from publishing and exhibiting their work. Galleries and free media were gradually closed down, exhibiting, publishing etc. became impossible. Apart from being barred to function as creative artists, writers or musicians, the economic base of the artists, poets and writers was thereby, through a slow process, definitely removed by the early seventies.

The following decree of the Ministry of Czechoslovak Culture dated September 18, 1969 was addressed to all public museums and art galleries. This self-explanatory specimen was received in the Špála Gallery.¹²

According to § 1, it is punishable as a civil offence, unless proven a criminal offence under the Criminal Code, with imprisonment up to three months or a fine up to 5.000 Crowns or to both sentences in case of participating in an event (on the Gallery premises, meaning for example, action art) that might compromise public order.

The same applies to persons who publicizes or supports such an action, who disobeys



1. *KŠ Notebook*, 1971, poems by Naděžda Plíšková and Jan Steklík, 8smička Foundation
2. *KŠ Notebook*, 1971, Jan Steklík et al, 8smička Foundation
3. *Inventory of Říp - Křižovnická škola*, 1970, Jan Steklík with the inventory sample, photography Helena Wilsonová
4. Jan Steklík, *KŠ, Beer Love*, Lemberk 1971, photography Jan Ságl
5. *Inventory of Říp - Křižovnická škola*, 1970, In a pub on the way, photography Helena Wilsonová
6. *Křižovnická škola, Inventory of Říp*, 1970, The pub whose name was not U Tománků, photography Helena Wilsonová
7. *Beer Jugs* exhibition of František Maxera in the pub Chez Lojzya, 1972, with KŠ and the Prague underground, photograph Helena Wilsonová
8. The KŠ Midsummer Night Band playing for the Crusaders, 1975, photographer N.N.
- 9, 10, 11. *Beer Calendar of the Crusaders School*, 1972, Pub U Svitáků, photography Helena Wilsonová



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the demand to maintain public order, or whoever incites others to disobey this demand.

Gallery directors shall ensure that paintings and other works of fine art that are in opposition to the important national interests will not be exhibited in galleries and that promotion materials and other printed matter (posters, invitations, catalogues, etc.) as well as vernissage speeches, discussions, etc. are not used against this official demand.

Art commissions, councils, advisory councils, etc., have to ensure when considering proposals for reproduction or other realization of works of art these works correspond to the cultural political line of the state...¹³

The artists, who were previously members of the State Union of Artists, were excluded from the newly created Union (December 21, 1970), with an exclusively regime-compliant, selective, vetted membership, and were automatically re-registered in the Fine Arts Fund.¹⁴ Although this Fund guaranteed the status of a free profession, without which artists would be considered *parasites* and thus liable to persecution, it did not permit artists, who were not compatible with the new rules, to exhibit and they were barred all their official sales. Later, the Crusaders who signed the Charter 77 (apart from them, only two or three other visual artists were signatories), were expelled even from this Fund, lost the status of freelancers, lost the right to keep a studio and the right to buy art utensils like professional paints etc, in government-controlled stores.¹⁵ Since they were under control of the authorities, they had to take jobs like manual labourers, water pump workers, night watchmen in factories etc.

The anthropologist Viktor Turner deals with intermediate states, transitional phases in the course of life, such as the period between childhood and adulthood, periods of sharp changes in social conditions, the dividing lines

between the alien world and the environment with which man is familiar. He calls these threshold transitional states liminality. In these intermediate states, it is possible to create a new society, *communitas*, a community without clear social structures, which can achieve equality for the duration of the ritual or game. Like Bakhtin, using the example of carnival and ritual as a means of social renewal, Turner points to situations where all hierarchical rules for communities that have experienced a serious turning point – a situation of rupture of social norms – are abolished. Such a state of unstable interexistence, a transitional space, was symptomatic of normalization – a completely extraordinary situation, but at the same time, albeit for a very short time, it opened up possibilities for the experiments of the Crusader School, for dancing merrily not on a volcano, but on the edge of a dung heap. Interpersonal communication has become a phenomenon of freedom. Liminality is or can be a part of society, and Turner refers to his other concept, liminoidity, as to an escape from social oppression. *Communitas* allows you to feel and abolish the boundaries that divide individual actors. The Crusaders correspond to Turner's normative forms of *Communitas* – creative subcultures or groups that, despite societal pressures, separate themselves in anti-structures from institutionalized communities.¹⁶ The Crusaders pub society created a carnivalesque community, which Steklík later described as a kind of strange, egalitarian hierarchy. Corporeality and authenticity were constants of both the common and individual being of the members of the KŠ. In the early seventies, various events were created, which exemplify the activities of the KŠ, events in the pub – the Crusader stage – and in the natural environment. At that time, the reduced, compact School lived with a playful, romantic-utopian attempt to avert the shock it experienced when confronted with how the society had fallen apart.

The contemporary attempts to merge life with art, the idea of social rebirth through art appeared in many avant-garde movements.

The maxims that George Brecht maintains about the Fluxus movement¹⁷ can in part be applied to the Crusaders: that there has never been any attempt to agree on aims or methods; that individuals with something unnameable in common have simply naturally coalesced to perform their work. Brecht felt that *this common something* was a feeling that the bounds of art were wider than they have conventionally seemed, or that art and its long-established boundaries were no longer useful. He maintained that individuals in Europe, the US, and Japan have discovered each other's work and found it *nourishing (or something)* and have grown objects and events which were original, and often uncategorizable, *in a strange new way*. Ivan Jirous, the theorist and art-critic of the Crusaders, who was since 1973 six times jailed by the regime, goes even further.¹⁸ He does not hesitate to describe Brecht's *this common something* as love: he holds that the *fantastic situations* taking place in the crusaders domicile - the Czech pub - were creations of a private community of people, who loved each other. Nepraš, the Director of the group, characteristically states that the Crusaders communications may have appeared like happenings, but this was not their intention. "There was no need for a label, since the Crusaders lived what they were doing."¹⁹ Slavík's frequently cited paraphrase of Luke 2.7 "Nebylo pro ně místa v hospódě"²⁰ alludes not only to the sometime phenomenon of being thrown out of a pub, but also to the deprivation of the artist in the *normalized* world, while the regime gradually succeeded in reversing the cultural and social processes that were haltingly but seemingly permanently established in the second half of the sixties.

The Domicile

In his article on the Crusader School, one of its members, the psychologist Vladimír Borecký sees the original Crusader pub as a fusion of a pub and a temple. He describes the Heideggerian *in der Welt sein* by paraphrasing *im Gasthaus sein* as

a dimension of being that anticipates the pub and places it imaginatively around itself in any place and, according to the philosopher Ivan Dubský, a Nietzschean scholar, who was associated with the Crusaders, in a specific time, the time of the drinker (*tempus bibuloris*).²¹

The time of the pub, says Bakhtin, passes in carnevalistic time, when historical time is turned off. This time takes place in an unlimited number of radical transformations and metamorphoses.²² The time of the Crusaders did not take place in the normal time of the thwarted Czech culture, it unfolded in a carnivalized time. What is the concept behind the time of adventure - time in the pub - and what are its social implications? What role do fate and chance play here? Bakhtin asks questions about the formation of time. The duration of adventurous time is only a substitute duration, but at the same time it also contains fundamental sociological narrative or existential dimensions. The time of adventure is connected with the negation of progress and development, because adventure leaves no traces in biographical time.

The pub was an integral part of the existence of the Crusaders, its generating medium. The space of the pub became the domicile of the KŠ, which substituted it for the non-existent other shelters. The pub played the role of a habitat, a living space and a home in which people created, lived, drank beer, sometimes even ate and slept. The pub provided the fragile security and safety of a home in precarious existential conditions. Creative individuals took refuge in this pub society, where the pub took over the role of a theatre stage in the middle of life. The pub as a social construct worked, at least temporarily as a space for therapy and (mostly) friendly communication, as an oasis for KŠ performers, defined by an attitude of similar values and principles with collective consciousness. The principle of 'necessary stupidity' was defined by William Kentridge as the ability of an artist to function simultaneously in different forms. According to Kentridge, 'this necessary stupidity or foolishness' – an activity that cannot be explained rationally – must

be practiced by the artist all the time.²³ This disposition was completely fulfilled by the KŠ in their life in the pub.

Michel Maffesoli, a sociologist who in his youth was associated with group collaborations with Guy Debord's SI,²⁴ and with its German artistic offshoot, the SPUR group,²⁵ considers the pub to be a stage, an epiphany of the Dionysian, a space for disinhibition.²⁶ Being in the pub 'relaxes languages and connects bodies.' The pub is a place par excellence for creative sociability and a call for integration. Everyday life in a pub deals with social phenomena that cannot be reconciled with the postulates of rationalism prescribed by standardized social orders. In the sociology of everyday life - i.e. the daily playful stay in the pub - this *everyday* became a means for creative activity. These Crusaders activities transmitted the content of general questions about the position of art and the artist in society through play. In group work, theatricality, playfulness, vitality, self-irony and uncompromising self-reflection were appreciated. In the ritualization of everyday life, the pub became a metaphor for being, an infrastructure of artistic and cultural expressions - with beer as the foremost artefact. A meeting place has been elevated to art. The pub environment, notwithstanding whether it was comfortable or aesthetic, played a central role in the group's communicative community. Here, a subversive laughter culture was cultivated, which arose when political and cultural power systems asserted their domination by means of restrictive control and restriction mechanisms.

The search for survival in a difficult time resulted in a utopian settlement of another world, in a pub as an alternative home for another life. Bakhtin's *Menippea*, Menippean satire, which always contains various genres, is intrinsically motivated by a basic philosophical goal, the search for truth in the play, in fanciful situations where carnivalesque existence and its culture of laughter allow for the temporary abolition of the social order and thus the existence of a the cathartic role of laughter ensured

emotional survival. Before laughter there was first a subversive thought.²⁷ The laughter of the Crusaders was creative, liberating and reflective. The humour and laughter in the pub had a socio-positive effect. They strengthened the cohesion of the group, opened up spaces for community and equality among laughers. This is how a different understanding of openness, overcoming distance, laughing at oneself was created. With this laughter, invention and courage, the pub became a scene of liberation, in which a symbiosis of body and spirit was found.

Beer-Works of the School

Before Nepraš and Steklík created their continuous event *Beer in Arts* in the second half of the sixties, their first cooperation began with publishing of cartoon humour, frequently with the beer leitmotiv. Steklík's drawings were formally perfect, intelligent, inventive and exceptional. He experimented with the medium from free representational drawings to cartoon humour. His playful subversive drawings were congenially complemented by drawings of Nepraš, one of the greatest Czech sculptors, who was a draughtsman able to connect, as in his sculptures, the tragic with the comical. Those grotesque drawings were neither caricatures, nor jokes, rather a black humour, an elevation of a cartoon humour to a reflective, subversive existential instrument. Steklík was passionately committed to beer as to a tolerant principle of existence. It was significant, that the Crusaders in their *Beer in Arts* never criticised or differentiated between the kinds of beer in their game, in their beer inspection. It was the empirical, cool, if subversive assessment of the beer culture as a sign of the cyclical and symmetric model of the interhuman communication. Jozef Cseres maintains in his Steklík's monography that Steklík became beer in the sense of the Deleuzian concept of becoming, and turned his coexistence with beer into a work of art.²⁸

Steklík began to create the documentation, the reflection on the beer ethos of the School through the only existing record and archive of the ephemeral art of the Crusaders, the exercise book, the school and work-book, the *Notebook*. It originated on the pub table and always offered a forceless possibility of its activation. In the surviving *Notebooks*, the atmosphere of belonging of the Crusader *communitas* has been preserved to this day. From their reservoir of action, the spirit and joyful mood of the participants shine through. Steklík *et al.* wrote down all spontaneous ideas in the Crusader Schools *Notebooks*, Steklík burned them, fed them with beer and food (especially sauces), with art, artefacts, kept and lost them on the way. The booklets run like a red thread through the existence and history of the Crusaders. The *Notebooks* are both an archive of the KŠ and its in-between space – something between a notebook, a concept, a school or class cooperation and, last but not least, a collection of playful crusader follies. The *Notebooks* created nonsensical information and entertainment with specific codes that were optimal for maintaining the dialogic structure of the Crusaders Symposium. The more the participants differed, the richer the pseudo-messages obtained, which led to consensus and discourse. The world of these texts - figurative and of pictorial codes, sketches spread on the surface of notebooks, took place in the world of a pub, where the experience of space was synchronized with imagination, with various concepts and foolishness. The *Notebooks* contain a multitude of beer work-events or projects, for example *Project of Beer Mushrooms* (Steklík was a dedicated Cage fan), *Mushrooms in the Form of Beer Foam*, a request of a *Patent for a Beer Thermometer*, a request for a *Psychological Research of Beer*, joint drawings of *Beer Foam Formations*, a patent of a *Beer-time*, several haikus-limerics on beer etc.²⁹

In this article there is no space to enumerate all Steklík's beer-works of the sixties and seventies, his drawings of beer mugs in various stages of fullness, drawings of kegs, the

taps, the countless drawings on beer coasters etc. He instituted a conceptual beer-work, using the prints of the real beer tab markings as symbols, thus creating a poetic convolute of a *Beer Calligraphy*. His *Cosmic Brewery* was an event where the random structures in beer foam are correlated to astronomic constellations. A concept of the *Říp Pilgrimage*, Říp being the mythological mountains of the Czechs, originated in a tavern and took place instead on the peak of the mountain, in a pub not far from the start of the quest. The photographic documentation from the KŠ photographer Helena Wilsonová shows, that notwithstanding the fact that the action was aborted, the Crusaders were satisfied with the outcome.

From the interview of Ivan Jirous with Karel Nepraš: ³⁰

KN: For example, the main event, or the only collective one that went on throughout this year, was the Crusaders Calendar. November and December are actually left, so you can say that it's practically finished. I think that this is the event that describes the Crusader School properly. Similar was the taking of the beer samples - because that's something we do always and normally. We're sitting in a pub - and we're drinking beer there, and to capture it in this way, to photograph it, I think that's the height of absurdity. This is really absolutely mundane, the everyday, taken out of context by emphasizing the last day of the month, although it doesn't matter at all, because we would be there at any time. I think this goes deeper - through the surface.....

IJ: The most important thing about the Calendar seems to be that there is actually a complete cancellation and denial of the event, it is no longer there as anything of substance.

KN: yes, that was my dream, my events were just these. That's what I wanted, that's

what I did with Honza (Jan Steklík) - the beer samples. Registry-mere registration that this and that, and that, and that, and no one can take it. It is not important whether things are brought to an end. A thing that's evolving, or too alive, can't worry about documentation—that's not the point. Nowadays, it often happens that a complete stupidity is properly documented and presented as something far more significant than what it originally was. I really like the way Honza is doing the *Beer Calendar*. With that simple approach. I'm just an enemy of the big photo shoot of all the events, because then it leads to the pomp we were talking about a moment ago, it's actually being made again.....

This part of the interview concerns Steklík's the Crusaders action of the *Beer Calendar*. At the end of 1971, Jan Steklík commissioned Helena Wilsonová to document the *Crusaders Calendar* - an event he had just conceived. From the beginning to the end of 1972, starting in January, the members of the Crusaders who were free that day were supposed to meet on the last day of the month in the pub U Svitáků, and do what they always did. Helena was supposed to capture the events of that day photographically. The everyday life of the Crusaders, sitting around and drinking beer, a common event with unplanned procedures, was to be mapped. By photographing the *Calendar*, the participants became conscious participants in Steklík's event, which characteristically represented the blurred line between art, documentary and life, when the everyday was elevated to an event. In this *Calendar*, the members became participants, sitting in the pub became a visual representation that gave a different meaning to everyday spontaneous encounters. The *Calendar* is the essence of the Crusaders' documentation, the deception of iconic images and at the same time a reflection of their reality.³¹

Steklík made various sound art concepts with beer, assembled many beer collages. Famous were his actions of *Beer Orgasm* (with Finnish artist Outi Heiskannen) or his frequently repeated actions of *Beer Loves*, where the mugs (not the human carers) kiss and embrace.

But Steklík was, of course, not the only Crusader, who worked and lived with beer. Jindřich Chalupecký said about Eugen Brikcius, that he has only beer and radishes in his head (after taking dislike to his visionary concept of *Roof Terrace Gardens* where radishes were to be raised). Chalupecký hated beer culture, the Beer Boheme, he held that beer is the death of the Czech nation.³² Although he respected members of the Crusaders as individual artists, he detested the group with its tavern activities. In 1967, Brikcius created the happening *Still Life with Beer*. It took place on the Prague Kampa island. The basis was the artists inspiration with pub conditions, where the guest optically overshadows the beer mugs, which, however, should excel, and that not as a drink, but as a subject of aesthetic evaluation.³³ The happening was perceived as a mysterium, a ritualistic mystification, where the filled beer mugs were carried out of the pub and deployed in the terrain by the participants, who had to kneel on the sidewalk, with the forehead to the wall. A beer environment on the street transformed the function of the beer mugs to an aesthetic view of shapes and colours, transposing customary pub scenery into a different setting, creating a glittering still life in a free space. The action, as usual, was dispelled by the police. In 1970 Brikcius created another beer action, the anthropometrical exercise *The Homage to Master Horský*, originally designed for the London Arts Lab. Horský was Brikcius' childhood friend, who liked to drink beer (or rather was a drunkard) and at the time of the performance was not in England. Brikcius served as his substitute, although he showed in the background some photographs of Horský, emptying his mug in one go. This was accompanied by the famous song *Roll Out the Barrels*. The Horský substitute (Brikcius)

had to empty ten beer mugs on the stage, relieving himself behind the curtain, with an amplified sound of the urination. This exercise was repeated in a theatre in Czechoslovakia, in Ostrava a year later with considerably less success.³⁴ Rudolf Němec, another Crusader was blowing into the bear foam, creating various shapes, which he sketched and later cut into cardboard cutouts, creating solid *Beer Clouds*.

Naděžda Plíšková, an exceptional printmaker, draughtsperson, ceramist, sculptor and poet created numerous beer-works. Her graphic art contained inspired drawings, dry needles and prints on the beer theme - mugs in various stages of filling with beer, comics of beer, small beer mugs, big beer mugs, a *Case for Beer*, *Ten Gentlemen and One Lady* etc. Plíšková coined the term of the *Pub Romanticism*, one of her Poetry Collections was published under the same name. She created a ceramic and textile assemblage of a *Beer Hamper*. In print as well as later in sculpture she created a funereal *Monument for My Husband*,³⁵ where she placed on the top of the tombstone two bronze beer mugs, one of them standing, the other partially overturned.

Jindřich Procházka, a creator of concrete and visual poetry included beer in his typograms, his narrative poems. Otakar Slavík painted in his oeuvre several *Men with Beer*, amongst them a portrait of *Ivan Jirous in a Hat with a Beer*. One of his beer paintings was reportedly shredded by his then wife, because of her antagonism to beer. In the taverns, the group members played many severe battles with beer coasters, Ivan Jirous made sometimes a small event of devouring a coaster. The Crusaders collective sometimes poured beer over each other, as a homage to the wine libations of the antique Symposium.

The beer-works of the Crusaders were by far not the only arts output of the *communitas*. In addition to many other topics and activities, there were big actions trips (with active participation of the Midsummer Night Dream Band) taking place in the seventies, mostly away from Prague

that had become dangerous for such activities. The everyday life in the pub as space for creative community was intertwined with the ritual of existential nonsense, which led to creativity, but also contained the basic tragedy of existence. Social changes and personal experiences of people who found themselves in the unexpected situation of losing even the precarious security of being, sometimes escalated into an open crisis. But this is another story, where, of course, beer still plays one of the major roles.

Notes

- ¹ The myth is, that the one proclaimed the other.
- ² With exhibitions of the KŠ individual artists, group exhibitions, publications, lectures I am currently completing a PhD on the topic in the Philosophical Faculty of the Brno Masaryk University. Last but not least, I am (was) a member of the group since 1970, as titular professor of decorative frames.
- ³ Marie Klimešová, "České výtvarné umění druhé poloviny dvacátého století," In *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945-1989*, edited by Josef Alan et al. (Lidové noviny, 2001), 385, 395-397.
- ⁴ Aleida Assmann, *Der europäische Traum. Vier Lehren aus der Geschichte* (München: C.H. Beck, 2019), 132.
- ⁵ Vilem Flusser, *Die Revolution der Bilder. Der Flusser Reader zu Kommunikation, Medien und Design* (Mannheim: Bollman Verlag, 1995), 215.
- ⁶ Michail Bachtin, *François Rabelais a lidová kultura středověku a renesance*, translated by Jaroslav Kolár (Praha: Argo, 2007), 136 ff.
- ⁷ Charter 77 was a Czechoslovak civil rights initiative document, which arose from a background of solidarity of an informal association of persons, who asked the government to respect civil and human rights.
- ⁸ Named after the incapable mechanicals from the Shakespearean play. The group played together with several underground groups, like Plastic People of the Universe, DG 307 etc., thus becoming one of the first occasions when KŠ merged with the underground and later with the dissident movements.
- ⁹ Duňa Slavíková, *Křivožnická škola čistého humoru bez vtípu*, Catalogue of Exhibition, edited by Duňa Slavíková (Roudnice nad Labem: Galerie umění Roudnice nad Labem, 2015), 12.
- ¹⁰ This and further, see note 9 and Duňa Slavíková, *Křivožnická škola I-III*, as well as Jirous, *Zpráva o činnosti Křivožnické školy*, 1-7. Copy of the Topinka/Němec Gallery concept in the archive of the author.
- ¹¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt a. Main: S.Fischer Verlag, 1986), 117.
- ¹² Document in the archive of author.
- ¹³ Edict of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture No. 12.494/69.
- ¹⁴ Jiří Mikeš, "Svaz českých výtvarných umělců v době normalizace" (Master Theses, Masaryk University, 2013), 2.
- ¹⁵ This concerned following Crusaders, who were interrogated, harassed and persecuted: artist Eugen Briekcius jailed 1973, forced into exile, artist Olaf Hanel, forced into exile, artist Jan Šafránek, forced into exile, artist Otakar Slavík, forced into exile, musician and poet Vratislav Brabenec, jailed 1976, forced into exile, Ivan Jirous, art historian and poet jailed six times, Věra Jirousová, art historian and poet jailed, Jaroslav Kořán, writer and translator, jailed, Jiří Daníček, poet, jailed etc.
- ¹⁶ Victor Turner, *Vom Ritual zum Theater: Der Ernst des menschlichen Spiels* (Frankfurt a. Main: Campus Verlag, 2009), 84-89.; Victor Turner, "Variations on a theme of Liminality." In *Secular Rites*, edited by Sally F. Moore and Barbara C. Meyerhof (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1977), 36-37, 40.
- ¹⁷ George Brecht, "Something about Fluxus," *Fluxus Newspaper* no.4 (June 1964): 5.
- ¹⁸ Ivan Jirous, "Zpráva o činnosti Křivožnické školy," in *Magorův zpisník* (Praha: Torst, 1997), 125-133. This article was the first attempt to establish and critically evaluate the Crusaders as an art collective. It came out as samizdat issue in 1972; then published in the samizdat paper *Vokno*, no. 80 (December 1979); and several times after 1990; official publication was in 1991 in the Catalogue of the KŠ exhibition, edited by Věra Jirousová, Středočeská galerie Praha and Galeri umění Hradec Králové, later in *Výtvarné umění* 3-4 (1995). However frequently in a slightly changed wording. See Bibliography.
- ¹⁹ Ivan Jirous, "Zdá se že v současné době používáš," interview with Karel Nepraš from 1972, remained in manuscript as samizdat issue. Published together with another interview of Jirous with Nepraš under the common title Karel Nepraš, *Život jde přes nás* in the catalogue of the Nepraš exhibition *Sitting, Standing, Walking*, Prague Belvedere, 2002. I am referring to a text published in: Ivan Jirous, *Magorova Oáza* (Praha: Torst, 2019), 205-221. See bibliography.
- ²⁰ There was no place for them in the inn.
- ²¹ Vladimír Borecký, *Odvracená tvář humoru* (Liberec Praha: Dauphin, 1996), 79-81; Ivan Dubský, "Čas pijáka," samizdat 1972, published 1991, 65-7.
- ²² Michail Bachtin, *Chronotopos*, translated by Michael Dewey (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 2016), 140-141.
- ²³ William Kentridge, *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures. Six Drawing Lessons: In Praise of Shadows*. Harvard University Press, 2012., *You Tube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdKkmSqYTE8>, accessed 10.4.2014.
- ²⁴ Situationist International (SI) was a neo-avantgarde movement based on the theory of the concept of the spectacle, a strong societal criticism, originated in the fifties and sixties in France, reference see Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.
- ²⁵ SPUR was a revolutionary artistic collaboration of artists, 1957-65.
- ²⁶ Michel Maffesoli, *Der Schatten des Dionysos. Zu einer Soziologie des Orgiasmus*, translated by Martin Weinmann (Frankfurt a. Main: Syndikat, 1986), 140. Maffesoli has rather in mind the wine then beer taverns, however, the principle remains the same.

- ²⁷ Bachtin, *François Rabelais a lidová kultura středověku a renesance*, 136 ff.
- ²⁸ Jozef Cseres, "Pivní Jan od Kříže," in *Steklik*, Jozef Cseres and Tereza Petiskova, eds. (Brno: Host; Dum umeni Brno, 2022), 182.
- ²⁹ Some of the *Notebooks* still exist, and, since some were appropriated, they found their way as the first (and probably the last) Crusaders artefact into the art trade. Thankfully, they were bought by a friendly, albeit private Gallery, so they can be researched.
- ³⁰ See note 19.
- ³¹ See Slavíková, *Křížovnícká škola II*.
- ³² This was reproduced by several friends, remark by author.
- ³³ Eugen Brikius, *Můj nejlepší z možných životů* (Praha: Pulchra, 2012), 67.
- ³⁴ Ibidem, 87. The author witnessed both performances, the Ostrava intellectual Ivan Binar witnessed the expectations of his city. The public in Ostrava was starved for high culture and expected something totally different.
- ³⁵ This being no other, than one of the Directors of the Crusaders, Karel Nepraš.

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