

**Klara Kemp-Welch**  
**Jirí Kovanda's Collisions//2009**

On 3 September 1977, Jirí Kovanda walked around Prague and casually bumped into passers-by. These seemingly unintentional collisions were observed and photographed by his friend Pavel Tuc, standing a little way off. For those whom Kovanda 'contacted', the incident was soon brushed off as an insignificant chance occurrence, perhaps momentarily annoying. For the artist, however, such minor acts of aggression formed part of a systematic investigation of interpersonal relationships under what was known as 'normalization'. The 1970s saw an extended period of repression in Czechoslovakia, intended to secure political conformity and passivity. Forced emigrations and political purges across society had followed the Warsaw pact troops' invasion in August 1968. When dissident intellectuals signed Charter '77, in January 1977, they referred to the Helsinki Accord and to the United Nations' Conventions on Human Rights and expressed their regret that in Czechoslovakia these existed only on paper. The state's response was a media campaign, police harassment, and persecution of the Chartists, designed to force them to withdraw their signatures.<sup>1</sup> In such conditions, it was impossible for unofficial artists to make contact with an audience, beyond a close circle of acquaintances. Instead, the abnormal conditions of 'normalization' provided Kovanda with a highly charged framework for exploring what 'normal' relationships might be like. He called his collisions piece *'Contact'*, in inverted commas.

Kovanda's actions were orchestrated for participants who did not realize that they were participating, and would probably have had not desire to do so had they been informed. This denial of the random pedestrians' agency was significant for two reasons: firstly, because it reduced the chances of anyone realizing that the artist was carrying out an unauthorised public action; secondly, because it can be seen as a metaphor of broader social dispossession of agency. Kovanda engineered a situation regarded as accidental by the passers-by, and recorded without their knowledge. The passers-by whom Kovanda chose to 'contact' were not so much participants as targets or victims. But their faces do not register any response to these instances of environmental aggression, nor do they respond to the cameraman that observes them. On the contrary, the photo-documentation records the process of people going on their way as normal, ignoring the incident and the camera. The unwitting participants instinctively dismiss the possibility of a disguised motive, despite living in a political situation which might have afforded them good reason to be paranoid.

An archive containing almost one million photographs taken by secret police was recently 'discovered' amidst the Czech Ministry of the Interior's seventeen kilometres of box files. Tens of thousands were kept under surveillance by the *Statni bezpecnost*, who are estimated to have employed around 75,000 informers in the 1980s.

Reflecting later on how people had responded to the other action that he had carried out on 3 September 1977 (*xxx. On an escalator turning around, I look in to the eyes of the person standing behind me ...*) Kovanda recalled that they 'responded sheepishly ... they didn't want to have anything to do with it at any cost, be it in a positive or a negative sense'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Kovanda was himself ambivalent about whether or not he wanted to engage with people in a public space. These actions involved pushing himself to the limits of his timidity. He said that they 'arose in a state of tension or a sort of trance, because I'm a timid person ... they involved behaviour that was unnatural to me'.<sup>3</sup> Like the escalator piece, 'Contact' was designed, in the first instance, as an opportunity for the artist to work on himself. Small repeated transgressions of interpersonal boundaries served as exercises intended to develop his own self-knowledge. He insisted that the problem of contact was 'more of a personal matter for each individual and not a social matter'.<sup>4</sup>

Kovanda's commitment to the personal (to personal dialogue, to a personal relationship to reality, to a personal mythology) is symptomatic of the general discrediting of ideas of the 'social'. After all, the 'personal' had remained a category under siege since its official abolition within socialist ideology. Thus, if Kovanda's collisions interrupted, for a moment, the totalising experience of Czech normalization, then it was just when Kovanda claimed to be least interested in society that he showed himself to be acting most clearly in response to his political experience.

Buddhist practices were gaining currency among unofficial artists in Prague in this period, filtered through publications such as D.T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. The opening of Suzuki's anthology reads: 'Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one's own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom'.<sup>5</sup> In the late-socialist context, the practice of Zen, however watered down, offered a way to approach the world internally and to regain a level of control on a micro-level that remained indiscernible from outside. Over on the other side of the Berlin Wall, Roland Barthes had also been reading Suzuki in the summer of 1977.

In his lectures on *The Neutral* at the Collège de France that year, Barthes drew on Zen and Tao wisdom to propose ways to 'baffle' or 'outplay' the (capitalist) paradigm. One of the paths he advocated consisted 'in not being systematic ... a series of temporary retreats not even cyclically organized. But this non-

organization, the lack of foreseeable rhythm that would, that indeed will ensue, will deliver an incomprehensible, "scandalous" image of the subject to the world surrounding him'.<sup>6</sup> Kovanda's actions were certainly scandalous. On January 23, 1978, he vanished from his actions. The caption of the photograph documenting his flight reads: *xxx I arranged to meet a few friends ... we were standing in a small group on the square, talking ... suddenly, I started running; I raced across the square and disappeared into Melantrich Street ...* His escape from contact marked a further twist in Kovanda's *détournement* of the technique of the chance encounter. This time, the victims were his friends.

- 1 Vladimir V. Kusin, *From Dubcek to Charter 77. A Study of 'Normalisation' in Czechoslovakia 1968-1978* (Edinburgh: Q Press, 1978) 381.
- 2 Barbora Klímová, *Replaced 2006* (Brno: Moravská Galerie Brno 2006) 32.
- 3 Jirí Kovanda, 'Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn't need a studio. Hans-Ulrich Obrist talks with Jirí Kovanda', in *Vít Havránek, ed. Jirí Kovanda. 2005-1976 Actions and Installations* (Zurich: Tranzit, 2006) 107.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1949) 13.
- 6 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral. Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier, text established by Thomas Clerc under the direction of Eric Marty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 148.

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