

THE WEIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Martin Vongrej represents perhaps the most structured form of visual arts in Slovakia. His work strives to contain liminal space between the speculation of thought and conceptual-minimalist aesthetics by combining visuality and a subjectively conceived philosophical level. Issues of visual perception, the limits of the depictable, causality and consciousness are among the themes which he develops in his individual works but also within his comprehensively conceived spatial installations. These themes concern human as well as natural elements. This latent monism provides him with a surprising reflection of reality in which the notion of gravitation corresponds with the “weight of meaning”, while motion as a change in the mutual position of objects takes place “from thought to thought”.

Vongrej’s installations gather within themselves various media such as texts, photographs (staged, collaged, manipulated, for example by drawing), light and objects operating from the principles of mirror reflections, transparency and opacity. The sources of his inspiration can be found in Minimalism and Conceptualism, but also physics-based theories and hermetic tradition. Vongrej transposes diverse territories of thought in his own specific experience, which spans from the occultism of Robert Fludd and his geometric mystics of overlapping circles through the painter of “transcendental abstraction” (Lee Mullican) up to the contemporary parapsychological theories of Rupert Sheldrak concerning cosmic consciousness and “morphic resonances”. The work of conceptualist Stano Filko is closest to his heart from the Slovak environment.

Vongrej intuitively reacts to many stimuli which he repeatedly contemplates and transfers in his artistic visions. The relationship between the visible and the invisible is a crucial part of his artistic research, which he also refers to as “delving into the inside of a virtual point.” He finds this virtual (invisible) point in nature (for example in the notional center of tree growth rings), in geometric objects (torus, Möbius strips) and in linear perspective constructions (a vanishing point as the virtual point of convergent lines). The surface of a round rotating mirror, whose rotation, which in an ideal case is unnoticeable, can serve as another example of an “invisible spot.” The rotation of a circle and its mirroring along with the virtual center of linear perspective comprise the absolute principles of symmetry. They symbolize “one direction in space” within an artist’s subjective ontology, hence rendering it impossible to step out of one’s own visual field to take a look back.

Photographs modified by drawing or in some other manner constitute a substantial part of Vongrej’s work. They form a kind of universe of fragments, from which with the help of visual interpretation, he selects the elements which differ from those which we can see in so-called outer reality and which help us to navigate safely in the world. Vongrej does not work with photography in the usual way; for him, it is simply a medium for acquiring images, which can best be understood in the sense of the term *image* and its difference from the word *picture*. English, as opposed to Czech and Slovak, differentiates between image as any optic counterpart of a given object - a mirror reflection or a projection of rays of light on ground glass, and picture as a specific representation of an object through painting, drawing or photographing, just as in our case. Vongrej utilizes that difference between the theme and the picture itself which communicates only what is taking place in it. Moreover, the photographs are completed by drawing interventions or the collage-like insertion of picture fragments. Neither the dimensions nor the materials he uses are essential; he doesn’t care about technological precision or the hierarchization of composition and meaning. Motif and its inner hidden (occult) structure which he reveals are important. He intentionally works with

digital print imperfections such as toner failures causing strips of light in order to achieve an element of contingency – a randomness arising from non-personal interventions in the final appearance of the print. At the same time, this process of fading, a kind of subtraction of the visual statement, represents a symbolic act of the return to the indifferent white, the “zero level” of statement. Thus, certain photographs comprise a content whole with the white sheets of a book as their counterparts.

At first sight, Vongrej’s photographic series appear to be heterogenous, as if they contain elements which escape from the whole which then makes (intentionally) an elusive impression. It is not easy to get close to the photographs because they are exhibited from situations which allow for double reading. The artist interrupts the original composition links and semantic relations of a given visual communication and changes the logic of its spatial organization by interventions in the picture’s surface in the form of a line or a circle. He uses this hidden reading to point out possible metaphysical spaces which could be formed here. What is implied by this? We can use the term metaphysical space in a sense similar to the way we usually use the expression metaphysical painting. Simply, it is a playful and inventive violation of the traditional laws of perspective, resulting in a space corresponding to specific topological qualities, as in topology, as opposed to classical perspective construction; the geometric characteristics of objects are independent of distance and curvature, among others.

A note related to this: the Möbius strip is one of the most famous topological objects with absurd qualities which became part of one of Vongrej’s installations. Its attractiveness lies in the fact that it contains only one side, in other words, the reverse and obverse of the strip merge one into each other, they blend. And this surface is lined by a single continuous edge running “simultaneously” on both sides of the strip. It is also a “non-orientable surface” which turns into a three-dimensional object. So, it is a three-dimensional structure with one wall – lacking an outside and inside. Not surprisingly, Vongrej isn’t interested in the strip as such, but primarily in how this object, created in his case from a mirror sheet, reflects light and when rotating casts variable light patterns on the wall.

But let’s return to the photographs. As previously mentioned, the essence of the transformation which Vongrej carries out lies in the fact that he looks for such transformations of spatial organization which also intervene in meaning-related realities. He shifts the meanings of captured things with a certain objectivized inaccuracy. Sometimes these transpositions are distinct, while in the case of aesthetic, less distinct themes the shift is more discreet. Within the visual “joke” (i.e. a distinctive motif, such as the repetition of the shape of pupils in a detailed photograph of an eye) the artist never goes beyond the limits of banality or straight and obvious narration. The possibility of another spatial vision is demonstrated in such a way that it makes an unexpected, unpredictable (non-intelligible) and at the same time self-evident impression. In a certain sense, it is in the logic of natural perception, as if Vongrej uses special moments in reality which unexpectedly and yet discretely allow it.

The drawing interpretation of the photograph is directly based on the elements contained in the original composition or, on the contrary, violates and manipulates the space. He shifts the manner of interpretation from the ordinary and stereotypical to a new occult statement. A paradoxical state, in which we find ourselves without support in the form of a provisionally constructed experience framework is the result. The term “found psycho geometry” (Andrew Witt) is also used to describe Vongrej’s manipulation with the possibilities of the non-sense perception of space and the use of accidental similarities. We must add that its basic premise

is that perception oscillates between a two-dimensional surface and a three-dimensional space. This oscillation is hidden in the definition of the drawing itself. Drawing (in the spirit of Stéphane Mallarmé) can be characterized as an “empty surface” through which traces open into an in-existent place. Or as a complex summary of several vanishing marks, traces, and lines whose existence is not bound to the background (surface – material base – paper), but creates an empty (non-existing) surface as its open space.¹

Vongrej’s approach can be likened to a specific type of phenomenological research. Sometimes it seems as if it was indeed a kind of applied phenomenology carried out by artistic means. Within the framework of ambivalence between surface and space, he works with the term “consciousness” which, as mentioned before, represents human consciousness as well as an independent entity. Consciousness lies between the perception of surface and space, i.e., between human senses which decide how an object will be looked at and its autonomous facticity. Thus, consciousness fills the imaginary gap between what appears to people as deception and delusion (phenomenon), and what exists as a thing-in-itself (noumenal realm). In the last-mentioned case, it is the real existence of a modified photograph independent of our knowledge. The artist strives to point out the difference between seen and thought of space (between the space of perception and abstract geometrical space) through the transformation of spatial relations. The inscription “it is”, which accompanies the photograph of a circle interpreted by drawing, and which is placed at the very beginning of the series, is the (noumenal) representation, which is not deformed/relativized by the presence of a perceiver or spectator. “It is” refers to the absolute experience, the geometric object of thinking that stands in opposition to what just appears.

Brief historical excursus: Our perception is always selective and all sorts of shifts and perspective distortions which an image undergoes when one looks at it from various angles are automatically corrected. Thus, the seeing of an image always includes a certain interpretation. We do not see it as such, as it directly is, but we include it in the context of our overall spatial experience and thus we give it its characteristics. The dependence on our angle of view presented by the artist like the ambivalence of a circle (ideal form) and ellipse, in which the “real” circle changes when looking at it from a certain angle (or possibly the fixation of a given angle by photography), may raise cosmological themes connected with a circle or ellipse as symbolic forms. This is not unlike the issue of anamorphic images, which have their roots in the early modern age and represented one of the most typical expressions of Baroque imagery development. They presented paradox perspectives revealing certain substantial features of visual perception. They can be understood in two ways, as technical rarities, as well as objects of meditation over the hidden nature of reality and the futility of the human ability to look at it. Anamorphic games, in which mirrors also played an important role (see, so-called catoptrics) with the magical power to evoke phantoms, pointed directly at the essence of the relationship between the seen and thought of. Just as the titles of Vongrej’s works indicate, for example, the “consciousness of surface” and the “center of perspective”, which may evoke an impression of some romantic contemplation of the beginnings of scientific rationality connected with an emphasis on the virtual component of the statement. The creators of anamorphoses dedicated significant effort to proving that perspective is not an instrument of exact visual representation but a lie. The question of the divergence between the real and evident also troubled philosophers such as René Descartes. His philosophical deliberations concerning the scepticism towards the ability of our perception had a period

¹ See Alain Badiou. Drawing. In: *Lacanian ink*, 2006, Issue No. 28, pp. 43 – 48.

parallel in experiments with perspective which he understood primarily as a result of thinking and not seeing.² The passage on copper engravings in his work *La dioptrique* is particularly well-known. In this treatise Descartes argues that “in order to achieve greater perfection in the quality of an image and to better depict a certain object, the image may not look like the object.”³ Depicting reality in fact lies in its deformation: “circles are frequently better depicted by ellipses than by other circles; and squares by rhomboids than other squares.”⁴ Vongrej’s statement: “The size of a circle filled with consciousness is still the same.” may thus sound like the development of this rudimentary and direct deliberation, as if this sentence again referred to the research of the physiology of perception, albeit a specific one. Such research prevents the tendencies of the contemporary world from reducing all psychic manifestations to statically describable and causally interconnected empirical phenomena. The size of a circle which you perceive is still the same, only different things are happening in it every time. That depends on the angle of view...

In conclusion: Vongrej’s photographic pictures represent a certain testimony about the multidimensional world which appears by the possible reading of certain indications of solutions for recorded space. This points to the fact that we do not live in a world which is defined by a single given way. The artist strives to find different coordinates which exist in reality and in whose optic reality itself he offers his subjective perception. He does so playfully, knowing that this is logically thought through error, which nevertheless calls into question our “normal” ordinary vision and possibly indicates that this “normal”, consensual vision is also a certain form of error. By questioning our vision of the world, he also broadens it by another dimension.

Petr Ingerle

² See Jurgis Baltrusaitis. *Anamorphic art*. In: Cambridge 1977, pp. 64 – 65.

³ René Descartes. *La dioptrique*. *Dioptrika*. Praha: Oikoymenh, 2010, p. 69.

⁴ Ibid.