

The Palace of Exile

Fragments from the Notes of a Tourist in Prague

By Wayne Spencer



"From time to time I tried to realize my unhappiness. I barely succeeded." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 25 January, 1912)

Work has once again become insufferable. Why? Where should I begin? Interfering managers and infuriating targets? Smiling contempt and "meaningless achievement" (Kafka)? Perhaps the staff cuts that remind me that I am nothing more than a disposable tool of management or the growing insistence that I engage enthusiastically in my alienation? Suffice it to say that being compelled to spend so much time, with so many other people, creating this absurd and unwanted society has left me sorely in need of a break. Not that it will really help. Everything will be the same when I return. All the same, I shall go. We have become used to making these false choices. "Anything is better than working," we tell ourselves. We then take a week or two off in the very world that work has built.

"Of course, to a certain extent this is a belief that I grasp at when I am already on the window sill." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 15 August, 1913)

The alienation of work cannot be softened or escaped, it can only be abolished. Alas, the systematic revolutionary reconstruction of this society, the taking back and transformation of the social, economic and political powers that have escaped us, is not immediately at hand. What is worse, in many time and places, profound dissatisfaction with everyday life has been so deeply buried that it is, for the time being, entirely subterranean. How is one to live in these frozen lands? Amongst other things, we must surely take what pleasures we can, when we can. But the pleasures we are able to enjoy, the tastes they gratify, are so often small, unworthy and imposed. If we are not to shrivel into petty cogs of consumer capitalism, we must, I think, unsettle our pleasures: trip them up, force their shortcomings before our unwilling eyes, poison them even as we swallow them down. If this means that, sooner or later, the permitted pleasures come to be unbearable to us, then so be it.

To the airport by rail. The usual ugly trains and tiresome changes. The usual frustrating crowds. The problem is not the number of people but the void between them: the lack of real social relations. The same ubiquitous dreams of happiness, the same obligations, may draw us to the same spaces. They may even prompt us to exchange money now and again. For practical purposes, however, we are nothing to each other but obstacles. We decide and do nothing together.

In the same way, the repulsive quality of airports is not a matter of their admittedly stupendous ugliness alone. What is most bleak about them is that they are mechanisms for the mechanical transportation of separated bodies and other commodities. All the passengers have in common is that they are being moved for money.

Airports have a habit of looking like warehouses for people because that is what they are.

In this airport, the sole way to reach the waiting area is through the middle of a shop. The marketing of cynicism, brutality and despair has no place here. Everything is bright and supposedly elegant. If life sometimes seems a little drab (and who in an airport could deny this?), it can be remedied, the smiling surroundings imply, by a dash of stylishness. This antidote of style has no substance. In our world, there is no graceful use of life. There are only symbols of sophistication to display in its absence.

The café in which we while away too much time drinking mediocre coffee is, inevitably, filled with background music. What would happen if the music was turned off? Would the profound absence of life, if once laid bare, drag everything and everyone into a singular and paralyzing desolation?

The waitress has a cheerful and pleasant air. It is not hard to allow yourself to be charmed by this. But it is probably deceptive mimicry on her part. At least, I hope so. There is nothing cheerful or

pleasant in her situation. She has no reason to be amiable to me. She is selling a commodity on behalf of her employers and I am buying it. That's all. There is nothing between us as individuals. The quality of the transaction would be the same if I ordered from a vending machine.

In an airport, one mainly waits. It would be tempting to say that life is suspended there, were it not that life is no less absent elsewhere. Outside the airport, our lives may be busy but they are equally passive, in the sense that they defined in every respect by our subservience to the economy and the state. The inertness of waiting makes our position clear. We do not like this. It chafes against our illusions.

The illusion of freedom is paper-thin in an airport. One is rudely and nakedly pushed around by one imposed procedure, one authority, after another.

Turning the old dream of human flight into reality is an impressive technological accomplishment. It has been squandered on shipping, petty games, aerial bombing and air pollution. Capitalism can make no better use of the sky than it can the ground.

I exchange a single word with the person sitting to my right. He sleeps through the rest of the flight. This is a relief. We share no practical project. We have nothing to say to each other beyond trivia. An hour's empty chatter would have been a misery.

"I am more and more unable to think, to observe, to determine the truth of things, to remember, to speak, to share an experience; I am turning to stone, this is the truth." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 28 July, 1914)

A tunnel, such as a passenger cabin, often intrigues. You are surrounded on all sides by surfaces in close proximity. The atmosphere is also, perhaps, a little charged by claustrophobia. What might we do with this? Within an aircraft, light, sound, temperature and air pressure could all be varied. So too could the characteristics of the surfaces that bear upon us. What could be brought to life in this way? The answer of the current designers of passenger aircraft, whose conclusions are imposed upon us, is nothing. Nothing is meant to happen on their jets. Isolated units of humanity are quietly and passively carried from one place to another. The décor reflects this drab function. It settles for a reassuring intimation of technological modernity and as much of textbook elegance as can be conveyed by white pre-moulded plastic.

The cabin attendants have largely given up the appearance of cheerful care they are paid to project. They seem to prefer the reserved air of competence associated with the professional. Perhaps this

keeps at bay the unhappy thought that they are, to a large extent, airborne waiters. Not that there is any especial shame in being a waiter. It merely appears so to those who are concerned about their status in this society.

From time to time, one musters a little interest in the land and sea to be seen from the window. It is hard to sustain. It is not our world. We soon tire of what we only see.

A carton of salad, mass-produced in a factory and chilled to the point of tastelessness. Its plastic wrapping enjoins me to "Be Invited." Pseudo-language for pseudo-food.

The stewardess gives me a half a cup of coffee. She promises to return with more but doesn't. I don't complain. There is no more terrible thing than expecting someone to do his or her job properly. As with other forms of murder, it should not be indulged in lightly.

Air travel contains its share of the paltry privileges this society extends to those it values most. The pallid elite in business class board the plane just a little before everyone else. They sit behind a small curtain that separates their seats from the identical ones beyond. They are entitled to a different set of equally mediocre goods. On arrival, the demands of the economy drag them away first.

"Security with a smile" a sign at the transfer airport promises. The grim-faced official who snarls at me at the X-ray machine does not feel the need to act out this insincerity. He is not yet required to disguise his irritation and contempt with upturned lips. He should not be consoled by this easement. The corners of his mouth may be his own. During working hours, however, everything else is his employer's.

"You will see that you are nothing but a rat's nest of miserable dissimulations." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 7 January, 1915)

At Frankfurt airport, as the plane taxis across the runways, we are briefly surrounded by a lattice of multi-coloured lights laid across the tarmac. This saturation in colour is as lovely and unusable as a firework display seen over prison walls.

The desolation of Ruzyně airport at Prague spreads into the surrounding area. Warehouses, light industrial estates, car parks, business parks, roads and other antitheses of human life cluster around the airstrip like secondary cancers. A merchandizer of masochism such as Will Self may find it

profitable to walk through such wastelands, but for most of us the view from the 100 bus to Zličín metro station reveals all we need to know about the calamity that has descended.

A five-star hotel (cheap during the off-season). A luxurious appearance, a calculated display of the emblems of the upmarket. There must, it seems, be expensive-looking fabrics and ostentatious padding behind the bed, even though they offer no practical benefits; and a very wide television, even though there is nothing to watch on it. Also, the bathroom must have marble-like surfaces, even though marble would serve no function in the room and the material actually used only looks like marble. It is a matter of pride that the entire building is so hot that one never feels the chills associated with poverty. No matter that this makes it all but impossible to sleep.

The modern hotel breakfast buffet is an example of a consumer cornucopia. The guest is reduced to rummaging amongst a large array of rather poor goods indifferently prepared and presented by paid strangers. All you do is eat and perhaps exchange a little desultory conversation with the one or two people with whom you are sharing your isolated passivity. And as you are largely confined to eating, you typically eat too much. A true, wider satisfaction is impossible. You graze in vain until your stomach complains.

"It has meaning but is weak; its blood flows thin, too far from the heart." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 27 May 1914)

At the centre of the city, Prague becomes a parody of itself, a fantasy of historical fragments and national stereotypes projected for the benefit of tourists. Despite this, one can still, amongst the back streets and courtyards of Staré Město, come across a few resonant places of promise. In his 1844 book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels excoriated "multitudes of courts, back lanes, and remote nooks," "the irregular cramming together of dwellings in ways which defy all rational plan" and "long narrow lanes between which run contracted, crooked courts and passages, the entrances to which are so irregular that the explorer is caught in a blind alley at every few steps, or comes out where he least expects to, unless he knows every court and every alley exactly and separately." Of course, Engels was rightly outraged by the poor sanitation and flimsy construction of the rookeries of his time, but his hostility to the unmethodical layout of these warrens was misguided, as we can see from the desolations subsequently created by the architectural partisans of imposed regularity. It is precisely to the irregular, the intricate, the labyrinthine, the enclosed, that I am drawn. It is there that a few intimations can be found of a potent and poetic architecture, an urbanism capable of sustaining adventure, liberation and free social relations. There that the desirable city and the city of desire tingle in the distance.

One of Prague's more attractive features is its old doorways, with their statues, decorated panels, carved arches, trellis ironwork and house emblems. The question these enticing portals pose is

“what lies within?” The answer, under capitalism, is “nothing much.” There is only ever work, commodity consumption, domestic life, or parking.

In general, Prague at eye level is insufferable. It has been despoiled by commercial relations and vulgarized by commercial publicity.

*“Happy of heart I climbed the hill
To contemplate the town in its enormity
Brothel and hospital, prison, purgatory, hell.”
(Charles Baudelaire, Paris Spleen, 1869)*

The tower at Petřín. The cold and misty day has covered the 299 steps in ice, which adds just a little excitement to my ascent and descent. It also ensures that not much can be seen from the top. There is a better view across the city from the Žižkov television tower. From such points of vantage, the tourist passively consumes a panoramic image of a city from which he or she is separated. It is the quintessence of tourism, one could perhaps say. The views are also popular with residents. They too consume images of life in Prague. As workers and good citizens, they are also required to produce them.

A number of large crawling babies have been attached to the television tower. This empty incongruity gives tourists something to photograph. It also helps to market both the tower and David Černý, the celebrity artist.

Made jottings on the trip in another notebook. Began things that went wrong. But I will not give up in spite of insomnia, headaches, a general incapacity.” (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 29 July, 1914)

One of the pleasures of visiting another part of the world is eating new and different food, and reacquainting oneself with not-easily-found pleasures, such as goulash. Commodification corrodes this pleasure. It spreads the standardized mediocrity of chains, converts a subset of the local cuisine into a stereotyped ‘tradition’ that is petrified or adjusted to the tastes of tourists, and fosters the pseudo-innovations of fashionable restaurants. It also typically ensures that the diner has reified relations of exchange with the staff and proprietor and no relations at all, beyond simple physical proximity, with everyone else in the establishment. Even on the busiest and most raucous of nights, a restaurant is occupied by the solitary.

In Prague, as elsewhere, takeaway pizza is ubiquitous. It frees us from cooking, promises intensity, and always disappoints. It is yet another false liberation.

I see almost no rowdy drunks in the streets and bars, despite the fact that the Czech Republic has the beer consumption per capita in the world. The bellowing sub-adventures that many of the British associate with free and intense living do not appear to be a large part of the local alienation. The two quietly-unsteady men next to me in the Restaurant Zlatý klas have perhaps been drinking and smoking at their table, without a break, since around 1968.

The dream of the tourist is to enter local culture. This is impossible, for the tourist is a pure consumer who is excluded from the other roles the culture contains. It is also the dream of the local to possess what this culture promises. This too is impossible, for the culture is a collection of false promises: the lies of the commodity and the state.

Who can deny the charm of an evening stroll through the upper reaches of a quiet and misty Malá Strana, “a small town apart within another town and even more dead” (Georges Rodenbach)? For just an hour or two, the ordinary dreariness of space and time seems to be suspended. And yet, what does it say about this society, and about us, when the city appears at its best precisely in the absence of other people? What does it say when the receding enchantment of Radnicke schody, with its winding stairs, shimmering stone and occluded air, leads only to an absurd ‘Mystic Pizzeria’ and a gallery of unapologetic trash?

“Bitter, bitter, that is the most important word. How do I intend to solder fragments together into a story that will sweep you along?” (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 20 April, 1916)

Gambra, on Černínská, is a museum of surrealism. It is supposed to be open at weekends during November. On the Saturday on which I visit, it is closed. This seems appropriate. Surrealism itself has long been reduced to rummaging through the vapid effusions of the unconscious, or the physical detritus scattered around the margins of cities, in search of the inconsequential incongruities it considers to be “marvellous.” *Surviving Life*, the English title of the latest film by Jan Švankmajer, seems to sum up the limits of the movement’s aspirations. A locked building is a fitting epitaph.

Further down Černínská is the Hotel U Raka. The door was locked. A notice said that visitors must ring the bell. I did so. For some time, nothing happened. Just as I was beginning to suspect the entire street was unoccupied, the door was opened by what seemed to be the sole member of staff on duty. The narrow courtyard beyond was scattered with art works, including a number of wooden birds, and the walls of the café were lined with old items of household equipment. The employee explained, no doubt for the umpteenth time, that the house was perhaps the only surviving timber dwelling in Prague and was decorated with material created or inherited by the proprietor. This deliberately-contrived image of the “romantic” and the “unique” is sold to tourists in search of the

uncommon and the sense of distinction that comes with its consumption. It is also an excuse for high prices. Still, its refreshments and open fire did not go amiss on a chilly and somewhat tiresome day.

Prague is relatively free of surveillance cameras. Their absence makes little difference to the quality of everyday life. The problems lie elsewhere.

In Prague, if you find yourself being observed from above, it is probably by one of the numerous statues that stand on the facades of the city's buildings. Almost no-one now knows who these figures are or what they symbolize. They are relics. This society spreads its objects of admiration and desire through media other than stone.

One place in which statues receive a certain fleeting attention is Charles Bridge. The tourists who cross the bridge know little or nothing about the 30 statues along its length. But they have been told that the bridge is special and somewhere they should visit, so they go. They have also been told that touching the statue of St. John of Nepomuk is part of the experience, so they do. While they are on the bridge, it may all be a bit of a blur, as they are too busy consulting their guides and capturing the experience on camera. Later, however, they and their acquaintances can watch the recordings of what was hardly seen and barely done.

Stepping into the shopping centre next to Národní třída metro station in search of a toilet, I come across a bustle hardly found elsewhere. I almost said excitement, but that would not be the right word. Some of the shoppers are animatedly chasing the brightly-lit dreams of pleasure and modernity. Others, however, seem devoid of enthusiasm. Ecstasy is hardly on their minds. What propels their harassed and grim accumulation of commodities is, I suspect, an image of normal life and the consolation of ordinariness it promises.

Glancing around an underground train, I am struck by how familiar everyone's attire is. Compared to West Yorkshire, there may be more padded jackets and fewer mini-skirts but the differences are insignificant. As elsewhere in Europe and America, everyone converges on the same handful of current styles. It is the same in many other areas of life (architecture, work, etc.). For all its eddies of pseudo-individualism, the main currents in contemporary capitalism foster the crudest forms of uniformity and homogeneity.

"Immediate contact with the workaday world deprives me – though inwardly I am as detached as I can be – of the possibility of taking a broad view of matters, just as if I were at the bottom of a ravine, with my head bowed down in addition." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 19 January, 1915)

The old Jewish quarter of Josefov supplies the tourist with a consumable image of a vanished past. After the walls and gates of the old ghetto were removed in the early nineteenth century, wealthy and petit-bourgeois Jews gradually moved to other parts of the city. The remains of the old ghetto were then almost completely erased by a process of redevelopment that between 1896 and 1912 destroyed all but a dozen of the 260 or so stone structures that previously stood in the quarter. The Jewish population of Prague itself was decimated by the Holocaust (only 3274 of the 35,000 pre-war Jewish inhabitants of the city returned from the Nazi concentration camps) and post-war emigration. It now stands at around a thousand. In Josefov, all that remains of the former ghetto are a few physical fragments spared by the redevelopment: six of the nine synagogues that stood in 1895, the Jewish Town Hall and the old Jewish cemetery. These vestiges serve no function outside of tourism, and every glimpse inside must be paid for (even the view of the cemetery from the adjacent public toilets is blocked off). Around them throng streams of bewildered and bored tourists struggling to see what cannot be seen and feel what cannot be felt. The stallholders of U starého hřbitova, vendors of vulgar mementos, await them. Perhaps they know the tourists better than they do themselves.

The buildings created by the redevelopment of Josefov, with their ornate profusions of cornices, columned windows, caryatides and sculptures, friezes, colours, entablatures, and other rich decorative elements, speak of the confidence of the bourgeoisie of the time. Yet their world was not to last. The sense of history that permeated their culture, their self-image as the refined developers of a civilization rooted in the classical era, has been swept away by the very economy they nurtured. Ironically, the whorehouses, disreputable bars, conmen and sellers of junk that congregated in Josefov after the ghetto dissolved seem somewhat closer to the spirit of our age than the high-minded pedants who later evicted them. The commodification of intoxication, pleasure and delusion for the masses is at the heart of contemporary capitalism. The classics are not. Even when it presents a return to tradition as an antidote to the ills that it has itself created, it is to the images of non-western or peasant practices that it turns. There is no market for togas, it seems.

The inner ring of nineteenth and early twentieth century apartment houses that surrounds the historic centre is remarkably intact. It is possible to walk for hours within it. To someone from outside central Europe, the distinctive architecture makes a refreshing change. The handsome and ornate buildings also set me pondering about what a systematic modulation of space in the directions of play and liberation might achieve. It all soon wore thin. Merely walking and watching is enervating. And the buildings themselves, which in the end are nothing more than rather monotonously tasteful containers for the terrible poverty of family and commercial life, eventually pall.

It is easy to see why inter-war functionalist apartment blocks have so few admirers. They reveal too starkly the ugly function they serve. They are too obviously hutches for confined people and diminished lives.

The most recent buildings in the city provide further evidence of contemporary capitalism's inability to build anything not deserving of immediate demolition. As the combined horrors of Nový Smíchov, Zlatý Anděl and Anděl City in Smíchov show, when the world of waged servitude, commodity exchange and policing builds for itself, when every aspect of the terrain is designed with those ends in mind, what results is a landscape of unparalleled barrenness: a perfunctorily gilded void.

In Smíchov, an ugly flyover connecting two sections of the Strahovský traffic tunnel passes above a rotating advertising hoarding and an expanse of weed-infested ground. On nearby Grafická and Holečkova, trams and cars flow incessantly down the canyon formed by the tall apartments on either side. It is something often seen in cities today: the abolition of the street. That such abominations exist condemns this society. That we permit them to do so condemns us.

There appear to be relatively few birds in Prague, so much so that in the centre of town one finds more jackdaws in the bookshops than in the sky. I saw only one cat in Prague, sitting on a window ledge in Palmovka. I doubt it is responsible.

After walking down several descending streets in Žižkov to Koněvova, I come across the entrance to a long pedestrian tunnel that runs under Vitkov Hill to Pernerova in Karolin. Echoing footsteps, bands of light: it's an intriguing place. By varying the sounds, colours, materials and light levels, one might make it something more. But first a life that is capable of properly using such an intensified space, a life that does not settle for the trivia of art and fun, has to be created.

After leaving the tunnel, I could go left, right or straight ahead. Right is entirely unfamiliar, so I walk in that direction. It's fairly dreary. A tram passes. I get on. It doesn't help, and the stops don't even appear on my map. I get off, take bearings, then, more or less at random, board another tram. This meanders through dark and uninteresting streets. It's getting late. I get off in what seems the middle of nowhere. Nowhere turns out to Palmovka.

Open, enthusiastic and candid encounters with strangers are far from common in our fearful and deceptive times. If I had one in Prague, it was perhaps with two delightful and frolicsome border collies I met in the Globe Bookshop. Even they, however, have their roles to play, as their dutiful performance of silly tricks later showed.

The Vyšehrad Fortress was recreated in the nineteenth century as a tool of Czech nationalist propaganda. As ever with nationalists, the Czech ideologues sought to portray the hierarchical national structure that they themselves proposed to create as an ancient and organic entity. To this end, the old local rulers who had used the hill for their own military purposes from around the 10th

century onwards were redefined as Czechs, and the archaeological fragments they had left behind were reconstructed and represented as shrines to national piety. At the same time, the cemetery at Vyšehrad was established. The purpose of this Pantheon of the great and the good was to associate the achievements of the deceased with the nation and encourage a submissive reverence amongst pilgrims. It probably still has its intended effect on the pious nationalists who visit it. Whether it speaks in the same way to the many dog-walkers and weekend picnickers is more doubtful. Certainly its original mystifications go largely unheeded by the dogs and the tourists. The latter are content to consume the general appearance of history and romance, and enjoy the views over the city. For them, the rest is a half-read and soon-forgotten entry in a guide book.

One of those incarcerated in Vyšehrad Cemetery is the surrealist, Vítězslav Nezval. In 1938 he applauded the Moscow show trials; later he wrote poems in praise of Stalin (other Czech surrealists, such as Karel Teige, were not so craven). He deserves to rot in such an ignominious place.

The Cubist architecture by Josef Chochol in the streets below Vyšehrad Hill is a complete failure. It adds a few superficial prismatic touches to buildings whose basic form and function is unchanged. They remain very ordinary bourgeois homes. A similar poverty afflicts the House of the Black Madonna in Staré Město and the cubist lamp-post on Jungmannovo namesti. If the tourist guides did not point them out, they would not even be noticed.

And a church [...] I forlornly and reluctantly went into, only because of the slight compulsion of duty that a tourist feels, and the heavy compulsion of a man expiring of futility." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 4 November, 1915)

The interior of the Church of St. Peter and Paul at Vyšehrad is decorated in a somewhat pallid Art Nouveau style that at least has the virtue of leaving no surface uncoloured. The indifference of the Czechs to religion has rendered most of Prague's churches redundant. What should be done with these relics? In *Proposals for Rationally Improving the City of Paris (Potlatch #23, 13 October 1955)* Debord, Wolman, Bernstein and Fillon respectively recommended total destruction, stripping them of their religious content, partial demolition, and transformation into houses of horror. Undoubtedly it is a matter of determining whether, in any given case, these potent mechanisms for the mystification and mutilation of the human spirit can be reconstructed to serve better ends. Would the appropriate replacement of overt religious imagery, for example, create within some former churches a beneficial atmosphere of secular calm and meditation? Such questions cannot properly be posed outside of the liberation of society and the reconstruction of individual life by and for ourselves. When we have our lives and the resources of society in our hands, then we can experiment with the churches that remain. The redevelopment of churches (into art centres, homes, etc.) by the existing society merely reallocates them from an old form of alienation to a new one.

One evening, a few wrong turns take me to a church on Ječná dedicated to Saint Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit order. After the defeat of Protestantism in the seventeenth century, 23 medieval houses were demolished to make way for this church and a Jesuit college. Today it testifies more to the decline than the ascendancy of the church. A handful of worshippers, huddled in the half-light, mumble their way through a call and response that appears to be led by a tape-recorded voice. An imaginary communication conducted through an unreal dialogue.

The passages of Wenceslas Square: tunnels as concentrations of commerce and commercial publicity. An upside-down horse cannot save them.

Where am I? What's the name of that street? Which end of the street is this and how do I get to there? Where on earth does that diverted tram run? In the course of too much painstaking navigation, the city recedes behind the map.

In advanced western countries, the consumption of art is an important part of the ever-expanding commodity economy and the dreams of sophisticated life that appear in its catalogue of the good life. The National Gallery's collection of modern art is housed in Veletržní palác (Trade Fair Palace), a seven-story functionalist building from the 1920s that previously hosted trade fairs and the headquarters of various foreign trade companies. When I visited, it was almost empty. The short distance that separates it from the centre of the city discourages tourists.

Art and artists have failed. Having conceded the creation of everyday life and the wider world that determines it to the economy and the state, too little is left to them: the narrow confinement of school and studio; scanty materials and soon-exhausted forms; long work on objects destined to be glanced at in the margins of life; and perhaps a little of this society's disgusting prestige. Even the strongest effects of their most powerful works are, to be honest, slight and transient. They rarely survive the ordeal of crossing the busy road outside.

Some of the works in this gallery might be rescued, and quite literally *brought to life*, by being construed as blueprints. Egon Schiele's 1911 painting of Český Krumlov, *Mrtvé město (Dead Town)*, was perhaps only intended to convey the rancid petit-bourgeois spirit that drove him from the town. Arguably, however, such an intensified vision of the human environment could usefully be built as a home for heightened life, once the economic tyranny that makes all construction vain has been excised. Similarly, Aleš Veselý's *Enigma* sculptures could, perhaps, be approached as proposals for labyrinths, and Jiří Valenta's *Portrait of a Blind Young Man* adopted as a design for a new room for a new life. Even Michael Bielický's somewhat silly spiral sculpture without a name, which by accident or design gives the impression of oscillating, might be expanded and redeployed in the construction of certain tunnels.

The gallery contains a number of actual models of buildings. They reflect their times. As a result, they are, without exception, perfectly repellent.

The organization of the gallery inadvertently illustrates the decomposition of art over the course of the twentieth century. With each succeeding floor, as the work becomes progressively more recent, the proportion of sheer vacuity and imposture increases. By the top, exhaustion, affectation and academicism are the only inhabitants of the ruins.

One Prague figure who confronted the failure of art was Karel Tiege. In the *Poetist Manifesto* (1924) he called for an unsustainable “artistic professionalism” to be displaced by “the art of life, the art of being alive and living.” By the time of the *Poetism Manifesto* of 1928, this had become a programme for liberating all forms of art from utilitarian ends and combining them into a unitary “poetry for the five senses, poetry for all the senses” such as would produce “maximum emotionality.” The narrow scope of this “emotionality”, however, is revealed by Tiege’s examples of the “poetry of physical and spatial senses,” which include such petty pastimes as “sport of every possible kind: motoring, aviatics, tourism, gymnastics, acrobatics.” These and other comments suggest that the new emotions will continue to be confined and consumed within the limited domains of leisure and the aesthetic. Neither work nor the subordination of social production to an independent economy is disputed. On the contrary, Tiege takes the subjective and objective aspects of the existing socio-economic structure entirely for granted, blithely referring to “our mechanical civilization” and the need to adjust art to “the present day” and the “modern nerves and psychic make-up of contemporary people.” In effect, his programme does no more than realign art and recreation with early twentieth century capitalism and its burgeoning consumerism.

Similar shortcomings can be seen in Tiege’s 1925 article, *Constructivism and the Liquidation of ‘Art.’* Tiege quite rightly proclaims “the total collapse of all varieties of so-called art” and calls for “the all-out liquidation of art.” But liquidation in favour of *what*? For Tiege, “our” civilization is a “civilization of the machine.” The machine is the driving force of progress. Moreover, “its *law is minimum effort for maximum effect*. This is the law of *economy*. The law of economy is the law of all work. And work is the only law of the world, its ordering force, which leads organized matter to an unknown destination” (his italics). In this world, “a product is beautiful when it has been created economically and precisely for maximum perfection and utility” and thus “powerful modern beauty exists in every object which is made for a precise and definite purpose and which fulfills exactly the end for which it is intended.” This not a matter for artists: “The machine is the work of specialists, of the engineer, never of the artist.” We also, says Tiege, need specialist “inventors” to “awaken new needs” and move development forward. All this is mystification. Inventors and engineers are servants, not masters. The particular needs that are awoken and satisfied are selected by capitalism and the state, and are confined to those that will sustain their profits and their power. The machinery and methods of production are developed with the same specific powers and ends in view, having being designed at every point so to allow the workforce to be directed, controlled and dispossessed from above. Tiege’s laws of economy and work are no more neutral. If work and the world at large come to be dominated by unknown and unchosen ends, if there is everywhere a relentless imperative to maximize productivity, this is not because of any universal laws. Rather, it arises from the perfectly

contingent and reversible fact that an independent economy of commodity production dominates society. Stripped of its deceptive rhetoric, Tiege's proposal is merely that we replace the artist's production of small objects of contemplative beauty with the technocrat's dazzled submission to industrialized alienation. There is nothing of progress or beauty in this. "Her face unmask't, I saw her corps unclad" (John Harringdon).

Graffiti is everywhere in Prague. It is no better than the other decorations with which the city is smeared. A stereotyped style is taken from an external youth culture. It is then regurgitated, with a few speciously individual touches, so as to win the approval of a pseudo-community of fellow adherents and make an assertive display to passersby. Nothing of substance is said, nothing of consequence is done. It is mere advertising for the alienated self. In somewhere like Vltavská metro station, its empty semblance of communication perfectly complements the vacant terrain of tatty bus shelters, concrete flyovers and a barely-alive grassy knoll.

One of the entrances to the Smíchovské nádraží metro station in Smíchov has been made to look like a yellow cave. What were they thinking of?

Further along Nádražní, at the junction with Na zlíčově, there is a closed factory, one of a number in the area. It has been reclaimed from alienated labour, and made a little interesting, by decay and weeds. Behind the fence, there are two beautiful guard dogs. What are they guarding? On a fence around the corner, there are pictures of animal skulls. Why? Are these memorials to the victims of the dogs? It is easy to create such mysteries from a lack of information. The solution would, no doubt, be perfectly banal.

Across the footbridge that runs over the lines at Praha-Smíchov railway station to Radlická, amongst a cluster of workshops on Pod brentovou, two models of large birds (cranes or stalks, perhaps) stand on top of a tall chimney. I doubt that any real birds of this size ever visit Prague. There are only representations.

Like so much else, the steep steps of Santoška promise much but often lead nowhere.

In Santoška, the wealthier residents appear to have appropriated the heights and views of Malá Strana for themselves. The guard dogs suggest that they fear for their privileges. Do the words "fxxk you" (in English) painted on a wall imply that at least some of their offspring are not so sure that there is anything up here worth fighting for? Have they merely chosen the pseudo-rebellion of Anglo-American youth culture instead?

At one end of underground line B, in the north-east of the city, is Černý Most, a collection of apartment block developments that is home to around 22,000 people. This is not the lumpen-proletarian nightmare that haunts the imagination of the middle classes in Britain, America and France. There appear to be neither gangs of feral young people in hooded tops nor gun-toting crack dealers on every corner. Gangsta rap does not thud from the windows. It is all very ordinary: working people coming and going; small dogs; cars and car parks; un-decayed blocks in well-maintained parkland; laundry and potted plants on the balconies; a functioning school in good repair; small shops on the estate and branches of Tesco and Ikea in an adjacent shopping centre; a concentric ring of roads. It is somewhere to which one returns, when one is not at work or out on trips, to watch the TV and be with one's family (or perhaps the other way around); a place of tidy horror where the friends and relatives of suicides always say they do not know what drove them to it.

"All is imaginary – family, office, friends, the streets, all imaginary, far away or close at hand, the woman; the truth that lies closest, however, is only this, that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 21 October, 1921)

In an attempt to find out something about current events in the city, I buy a copy of the weekly English-language newspaper, *The Prague Post*. Perhaps it will be possible to find a few facts amongst the misinterpretations and outright lies. According to the lead story, on November 17, the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, 2,000 gathered on Wenceslas Square to protest. One protestor is quoted as wishing to "live normally and from time to time go to the mountains or the seaside or be able to afford some culture." Another is reported as having said: "We are not against entrepreneurs; I earn my living with my hands, but I respect those able to make big money and employ people. But we want greater solidarity. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing." If this account is accurate, are the sentiments it reports representative of the thoughts and feelings of the protestors? Are these really the limits of their desires and discontent?

A news item on Prague Radio reports that a poll commissioned by Czech television at the time of the anniversary found that two-thirds of respondents were of the view that politicians today were more corrupt than their pre-1989 predecessors and only a third thought that life is better now than under communism. In response, the President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, said: "our task was not to guarantee happiness and wealth for everybody; our task was to change the political, economic and social system from communism to something completely different." The question for those who have found this imposed system not to be "something completely different" is how to renew, extend and deepen the failed revolution of 1989.

"You find yourself painfully pushed against the wall, apprehensively lower your eyes to see whose hand it is that pushes you, and, with a new pain in which the old is forgotten, recognize your own contorted hand holding you with a strength it never had for good work." (The Diaries of Frank Kafka, 3 August, 1914)

An outdoor photographic exhibition on Namesti republiky called *Almost Velvet Revolutions* juxtaposes images from the events in Czechoslovakia with formally similar pictures from the Arab Spring. The visual parallels are useless. This is not to say that the two movements have nothing in common. Both, notably, were failures. The masses of ordinary people failed to carry out the process of social transformation themselves. As the old regime crumbled, they stood back and permitted specialists and new elites to take on the task of creating its replacement. From this alienation of their powers, this failure to bring every domain of economic and social life under their direct control, a new alienated society necessarily arose. If we are to understand how these two miscarriages occurred, and how they might be reversed in the present and avoided in the future, we need something more than vague and celebratory pictorial likenesses.

In the course of a week, what evidence do I myself see of the consequences of the current economic crisis and a struggle against it? None. Is this entirely due to the peculiarly purblind perspective of the tourist?

I see many forms of alienated labour in the city. The closed factories on Nádražní, and another that lies in ruins on Křesomyslova, suggest that manufacturing may be in decline in Prague; and yet I also come across various factories on Starý Hloubětín and a PVC factory and Pepsi plant on nearby Kolbenova. No doubt the rulers of the city are better pleased by the supposedly more modern alienation represented by the large telecommunications office on Nádraží vysočany, PriceWaterhouseCoopers on Kateřinská, GlaxoSmithKline on Na pankráci, and the various anonymous white collar penitentiaries that can be seen from the number 3 tram as it travels eastwards from Palmovka through parts of the city that have been stripped of all urbanity by lethal accumulations of business and traffic. Of course, there are also, amongst other things, tourism, retail, construction, government, public transport and the many attendants who collect the five-crown charge in public lavatories. What the city seems to lack are concentrated districts of hip production and consumption, such as Berlin's Kreuzberg or Prenzlauer Berg. Perhaps ordinary consumption has not yet reached the degree of saturation and disappointment that makes markets for avant-garde culture, artisanal goods and ever-receding 'wellness' both viable and necessary.

Between 1908 and 1922 Franz Kafka worked as a lawyer at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague. According to Gustav Janouch, Kafka said of his work at the institute: "That is not an occupation, it is a form of decomposition. [...] I sit in the office. It is a foul-smelling factory of pain, in which there is no sense of happiness." (*Conversations with Kafka*, 1968, page 125). Office work remains fundamentally the same today. The ground floor of the Institute's former offices at Na Poříčí 7, however, now houses a Turkish takeaway and a women's clothes shop. There is no progress in this either.

The final evening. An escalator abruptly projects from the bright mediocrity of the newer parts of the main railway station into the decayed gloom of the old entrance hall. Coffee and Becherovka at Fantova kavárna. Doors banging. A few passengers scurrying by in what seems to be mild alarm. The distant rumble of trains. The endless roar of traffic from the Wilsonova death strip. A policeman and a cleaner commendably skiving in the dark. No doubt it will all be erased by redevelopment sooner or later.

The road to Ruzyně airport is no better in the daytime. Chilling abominations of steel and glass, of which a car park clad with sloping panes of blue-green glass is perhaps the most revolting. Dusty suburbs of asthmatics bathed in exhaust fumes. A stooped woman hauling herself through what may once have been a village but is now a neglected verge of a dual carriageway. What a way to end a life. Sucked dry and spat out.

The usual collection of businessmen and executives waiting for the plane, the dejected marionettes of an international capitalism that leaves their minds, their bodies and their language as grey as the suits it forces them to wear.

In the distance, cast by the setting sun on the tops of clouds, lie volcanic pools of deepest red. The woman to my right yawns and switches on her iPod.

"Still unborn and already compelled to walk around the streets and talk to people." (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 17 March, 1922)

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