

## SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

# A SWALLOW DIED AT QUARTER PAST TWO

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The author's artwork, to which the theoretical text belongs, represents ideas connected with the "theme" of man's relationship to "nature". Introducing this issue, it is necessary to highlight the broad spectrum of thematic fields that are related to the given theme. The result of my awareness of this continuity is an increasingly problematic relationship to the notions of *theme* and *nature*, which for me, are gradually losing the borders of their meaning. Therefore, it is necessary to note that the terms are used in the theoretical work, taking into account their ambiguous meaning. The problem of too many contexts is highlighted several times in the text. It is also the source of the main, verbally non-transferable idea of the artwork. The work reminds the perceiver/observer of an *infinity* that is hardly imaginable (rather unimaginable) for a human being, hence, one needs to understand things, which he fragments, categorises and judges. The tradition of dividing the natural sciences into separate categories is understandable, yet problematic in this respect. In the introduction of the theoretical work, I draw attention to this issue. At the same time, I provide information on the transformations of this approach and on the current technological advantages that make it possible to observe natural processes comprehensively and globally. However, it is important to recall the moral aspect of technological progress in the past and today. Further, in the introduction of the theoretical work, I present the idea of deriving diverse human social expressions from the specific natural conditions of particular areas. Within the aforementioned, I also take into account the historical contexts that have had a major impact on the change of thinking and attitudes towards the surrounding environment, such as migration and the related intermingling and blending of cultures, their genome and cultural expressions (including religion), the change of climatic conditions, the reproduction of knowledge, experiences and events, the form of transmission and storage of information and its deliberate or accidental reformulation, and others. In this context, I also recall the strong influence of myths and legends, which very often deals mainly with natural principles and existential questions. However, their interpretations are rather problematic not because of their current events and the state of society but because they correspond to the specific circumstances in which they emerged. For this reason, I do not refer to them further within the work. They are only mentioned in the context of ideas about environmental sustainability that are increasingly preferred and relevant today. At the same time, however, I also address the issue of people's naive approach to the matter in the text. This stems mainly from a lack of direct experience and knowledge of natural processes.



I refer the reader to a brief overview of the most significant historical events related to the conception of my work, which often served as a strong source of inspiration for the creation of its visual character. The latter is presented together with references to the source literature as an Appendix.

The personal attitude to the chosen issue and the subjective aesthetic, and emotional perception of the author in the creation of his work, is always essential and cannot be completely suppressed. In the work, however, I try to focus equally on the perceiver's experience and to stimulate him to an inner dialogue with his own person. My intention is, therefore, not to lead him directly to specific opinions and theories but to explore ideas related to the subject matter and to look into his own layers of association. As a means to do this, I have chosen to interact with the work not only visually but also haptically. An important part of my work is therefore a practical and theoretical focus on human sensory perception.

## MEANINGFULNESS AND SENSUALITY

In the beginning of the chapter entitled *Meaningfulness and Sensuality*, I take a closer look into the concept of *nature* and what it denotes, more precisely, what cannot be denoted by that. I commonly encountered this problem in theoretical texts that dealt with similar themes. This is an important step that leads us to become aware of a large number of thematic interconnections. The result of these is that the effects of human activity (both present and past) are ubiquitous and the elementary notion of nature, as a place that excludes the human factor from itself, does not exist. Nevertheless, the dictionary defines the term *nature* as:

Nature (in Slovak language - príroda -y ž.)<sup>1</sup>

1. the summary of all the things and phenomena in the world that did not come into being by deliberate human activity: animate, inanimate nature; man reshapes nature; philosophical expression world, real-life, reality

2. open countryside outside human dwellings: going for a walk in the countryside; nature conservation; outdoor school in a recreation centre, a recovery centre, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.slovensky.eu/?s=pr%C3%ADroda&btsubmit=H%C4%BEada%C5%A5>



If we accept this definition, then it is important to focus on the question of what man is (including his intentional and unintentional actions and behaviours) and what his relationship to nature is. In this section of the theoretical work, I highlight the diversity of approaches to this question.

Throughout history, the most frequent reflections on man and his existence are related to sensory perception, emotional experience, and the ability to deliberate over things. Existence is closely linked to the phenomenon of death, and the response to it, and thus to questions about the soul, spirituality, religion and self-consciousness – “me”. I write about the latter in my theoretical work: „Isolating oneself, as an individual from the group, means a more intense focus of attention on the "inner" physical and psychological world. It emphasises the boundary between me and what there is outside me, i.e. the environment, but it also brings an awareness of one's very own existential dependence on that environment.“ I then turn to theoretical sources that, based on extensive research, address issues related to self-awareness and issues related to sensory interaction with the environment. This is also related to a person's ability to be aware of the consequences of their actions.

An important part of the theoretical work is the focus on specific human senses. Commonly this term refers to sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell. Others are also known, but are not so clearly defined. I mention them in my text, but I pay special attention to those that I work with purposefully in my work. I emphasize that sensory perception is linked to memory and emotion, which is essential to the conception of an artwork, but I also remind that this is not a project that should purposely evoke a specific experience. On the contrary, the variability of the perceivers' reactions became essential for me.

A particularly rich and interesting theoretical source in studying the background of my work was the book *Anthropologie smyslů (Anthropology of the senses)*. The publication comprehensively deals with cultural diversity and how sensory perceptions and experiences are translated into a system of symbols and meanings. The book also presents theories, reflections and research that consider questions of changes in the dominance of individual senses, and in relation to the environment, we perceive. Despite the very fascinating examples of different cultures and their specific ways of relating to the world, I only include in my theoretical work the most important information that is directly relevant to my artistic work. To give only some specific examples of cultures would, in my opinion, be semantically confusing and misleading in this context.

One of the important contexts, I address in my theoretical and practical work, is the perception of spirituality in nature. In this particular field, I present rather a summary of generally known information, more essential for me has become the study of artistic treatment. The need to



depict and to personify natural phenomena, elements and processes, is very old. This kind of paraphrasing of what is seen and experienced had its patterns associated with a deep-seated emotional response and judgement of beauty and ugliness. The kind of reaction and the way of judging depends on many of the factors, I have mentioned. In this case, too, the nature of the environment and one's relationship to aspects of it play a significant role. The aesthetic effect and appreciation of nature, in the sense in which the dictionary defines it, is a broad category in the history of art and literature. In my text, among other things, I emphasize the issue of aesthetic appraisal of real places with literary models and artistically constructed representations. During my studies, I was involved in various positions of artistic representation of nature and similarly to the theoretical field, a large number of artistic disciplines gradually began to overlap. Only the field of fine art can be theoretically considered in several ways and it is necessary to proceed to a certain selection and selection of the given fields. Therefore, I do not deal with this issue comprehensively but with regard to the created works of art. One of the basic publications, to which I have a personal, as well as a theoretical affiliation, is for me *Minimal & earth & concept art*. It contains theoretical texts on the art of the art movements mentioned in the title of the book and interviews with the artists themselves. The book includes, for example, a text published in 1966 in the magazine *Arts Magazin*, which comments on Ad Reinhardt's statement in his *Dvanásť pravidiel pre novú akadémiu (Twelve Rules for a New Academy)* that „the present is the future of the past and the past of the future“<sup>2</sup> following: „The vague, unbounded surface sections of Reinhardt's ordinary /60"x60"/ paintings reveal indistinct squares of time. Time, like a colorless cross-section, is contained almost indistinguishably in human consciousness. Each image is both memory and forgetfulness; a paradox of dimming time. The lines of its networks are barely visible; they fluctuate between the future and the past.“<sup>3</sup> Although, these are relatively old statements, their content is in a way still relevant, stimulating and partly corresponds to the work, I have created. From the international art scene, I further introduce the work of Helen and Newton Harrison, and I describe Betty Beaumont's project entitled *Ocean Landmark Project*. Nancy Holt's site-specific installations and objects, which balance between architecture and sculpture, became essential in the conception of my work. Another important artist for me, whose work appears in my theoretical work, is Hans Haacke. From his works, I mention in particular those, in which he uses elements, principles or materials of animate and inanimate nature. Reflecting the Czech and Slovak art scene in the text is essential for me. I should mention Ivan Kafka, Michal Kern, Karel Malich, Petr Štembera, Milan Maur, Miloš Šejn and Rudolf Sikora. I will pay closer attention to the work of

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<sup>2</sup> SRP, Karel. *Minimal & earth & concept art /druhá část (Minimal & earth & concept art /second part)*. Praha: Jazzpetit, 1982. s. 481.

<sup>3</sup> SRP, Karel. *Minimal & earth & concept art /druhá část (Minimal & earth & concept art /second part)*. Praha: Jazzpetit, 1982. s. 481-482.



Václav Cigler, which, in addition to artistic intentions and realisations also includes textual concepts and reflections on the environment, a number of unconventional urban solutions and almost futuristic landscape architecture designs. These are often accompanied by a number of artistically very valuable sketches and collages. The selection of the artists I present is conditioned by the fact that their work or approach to work is in some way related to my own. If it were only a focus on the theme of the relationship between man and nature, it would be possible to list a much larger number of artists and projects.

The most important images that fundamentally stimulated and influenced people's interest in and relationship to the environment were the first published photographic records of planet Earth in the 1960s. This not only pushed the boundaries of engagement in protection nature, but also in artistic presentations and activities. In this field, I will mention, for example, the artistic association *Woman Environmental Artists Dialog* and the exhibition *Fragile Ecologies*. The inception of photographs of our planet had a fairly broad social impact that I think is worth recalling. In addition, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, James Lovelock's *Gaia* theory, Thomas Berry's theory, and Arne Næss's deep ecology had a profound impact on our relationship with the environment.

## ANALYSIS OF THE VISUAL CHARACTER OF THE WORK

The work I created, which I refer to in the theoretical text mentioned above, consists of four objects that are visually and conceptually linked to each other. All four objects look the same from the outside. Each object consists of two adjacent parts. The first is a hollow cube with sides measuring 45 cm, the second is a vertically placed hollow pedestal with the same width and height of 100 cm. These are interactive objects into which the observer has the possibility to insert his hand. For this purpose, a circular hole located in the centre of the front side of the cube of each of the three objects is used. The three side-by-side objects represent the elements of water, air and earth. A projector is placed in the cavity of the fourth cube, which shows a projection of the three crosses through an identical circular hole. These are visible on the front sides of the three opposite cubes. The layout of the arrangement of the objects in space forms the shape of the letter T. The internal construction of each of the objects is specially devised and adapted to the particular element, so as to have a sensory effect on the hand of the observer. Thus, if the observer decides to enter the installation space and insert his or her hand through the circular hole in one of the cubes, he or she has the opportunity to perceive specific tactile stimuli. At this moment, a light projection of a cross appears on his body, specifically on his back. In this way, the person becomes part of the whole installation and completes the conceptual plane of the work. The



meaning is thus expanded and transferred to the observers who are not in haptic interaction with the objects. At the same time, I allow for the possibility that the perceiver finds himself or herself in the space of the installation. In such a case, it is questionable whether he will be aware of the transmission of the light projection of the cross and his role within the installation, and whether he will be able to perceive this sign.

The importance of these four elements is quite frequent in the literature. In the course of studying the materials for my thesis, I encountered them in mythology and religions, mysticism, cosmology, in scientific spheres and various theoretical writings, in healing and alchemy, in law, in psychology and therapy, in art, aesthetics, fiction, poetry, and more. In the older writings, we usually encounter an extremely simplistic principle of their balanced interplay on which the world is based. Nowadays, we have opportunities to explore the processes of natural systems in much more complex ways, yet many of these are still incomprehensible or debatable, and it is uncertain whether it is even possible to encompass and understand the whole of nature. In concluding my analysis of the visual nature of the work in my theoretical thesis, I write: "All these known and unknown aspects, our sensory perception and our rational and feeling evaluation, in doing so, form an interconnected system that is in a given place at a given time, which means always and everywhere, and yet for each individual in a particular and specific way." In the work, I make symbolic reference to this, particularly through the use of light projection of crosses.

## CONTEXTS

The content of my theoretical work is mainly focused on information that is directly related to the content of the created artwork. Thus, it is not an independent theoretical text that would deal with the issue in general, but concentrates on the theoretical grasp of the meaning of the work. With this in mind, I chose specific thematic headings, although, the information sources, I studied during the course of the thesis provided a number of additional contexts. For my chosen topic, I encountered mostly literature that, despite its textual breadth, failed to comprehensively encompass all contexts. Therefore, it goes without saying that there will be additional or new information that could still be included in the text. For this reason, I proceeded to select and state those that are essential to the theoretical foundations of the thesis, and not to duplicate other extensive information from the sources. However, within the chapter entitled *Contexts*, I included a few more topics and sources that were significant to me before and during the development of the thesis. These include information from the Scientific and Industrial Revolution associated with power and predatory approaches to nature, the theories of Rene Descartes, and the anatomical



writings of William Harvey. I would also like to mention some of the authors whose theories deal with the disturbed relationship between man and nature, such as Alfred Adler, Paul Shepard, Philip Cushman and Dolores LaChapelle. In addition, I also introduce the field of *environmental psychology*, and in connection with it, I mention the research of Jan Krajhanzl, who worked on developing a system for defining and categorizing the human-nature relationship.

In the final part of the theoretical work, I express my personal opinion and choice of my focus on the creation of the artwork. Although, the stimulus was a reflection on the current state of the environment, the focus of the thesis lies in the issue of the notional separation of man from the concept of *nature*.

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