

# **Staging Samizdat: The Czech Art of Resistance, 1968-1989**

by  
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## Introduction—Springtime

It is May 2014, I am back in Prague and just entering the Museum of Communism. I have avoided visiting it since it opened in 2001, not wanting to participate in what I consider to be a form of dark tourism. But research and curiosity have now led me here, to a room above a large casino in the middle of the city's old town. The museum, like the casino it sits on, is a private, money-making enterprise directed at tourists. I wonder what they have amassed for their collection, what could be considered sufficiently entertaining about the Soviet era to exhibit and how have they contextualized the objects in this private collection. Once inside, it is not unlike the world of the wax museum, an accumulation of stuff resting somewhere between an antique shop and a hoarder's garage full of junk. The museum consists of three rooms of Communist memorabilia, some statues, drab consumer goods and everyday items, uniforms and a few weapons interspersed with didactic panels offering an oversimplified history of a complex time. It is a commercial enterprise permeated by a forged nostalgia; it resembles a regional history museum, with a bit of carnival horror thrown in. One of the rooms is devoted to a feeble attempt at recreating a secret police interrogation room using Styrofoam blocks painted to look like stone walls, containing two desks and a phone that rings at regular intervals for no apparent reason—nothing happens. In today's brave new world of branding, it's noteworthy that the part of the museum with the greatest impact is their immediately identifiable and cleverly designed mascot: it is a Russian stacking doll, but one whose normally placid, pleasant features have been modified by the addition of razor sharp teeth. This is the museum's most concise and intriguing visual statement—a "biting" representation of a voracious "mother" Russia, now for sale as a harmless souvenir postcard, poster, or coffee mug. Yet the museum itself fails to live up to this clever, sharp invitation.

Across the river is a smaller museum celebrating the Committee for State Security (Komitet gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti, KGB), the main security and intelligence/counter-intelligence gathering agency of the former Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Notorious for its ruthless and brutal tactics, the KGB was one of the key agents in the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968. Entry is 300 Kč (11 €), making it one of the most expensive museums to visit in Prague. Like

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<sup>1</sup> Known by this name circa 1954-1991, but still functioning today under different names.

the Museum of Communism, like the Sex Machines Museum or the Museum of Torture, this commercial enterprise is intended to entertain, amuse and titillate, if not to educate. The KGB museum shows off its accumulation of weapons, uniforms and espionage technologies via displays that are staged like the booty of a collector, but one who fetishizes the dark arts of a police state. There is no attempt to contextualize this paraphernalia as the apparatus of one of the largest secret police agencies in global history. The power of the past is diluted when taken out of context, and so what the precise goal of this showroom of Soviet oppression might be, beyond commerce and military fantasy, remains unclear. But surfing the museum's online photo-library on *tripadvisor.com* may offer some insight into its meanings for visitors: most photos are of tourists striking suggestive poses, holding various hand guns and machine guns once used to subdue innocent citizens.<sup>2</sup> What version of history can visitors glean from displaced objects like these? Maybe it is the touristic thrill of coming into close contact with things that once marked a violent era as its oppression and brutality fade from history and become a product for consumption. After touring these memorials to a totalitarian regime, I walk out into the Prague springtime and wonder: where is the resistance museum?

In designing my exhibition *Samizdat: The Czech Art of Resistance, 1968-1989*, I began with this question. Growing out of a research project exploring the expanse of unofficial cultural production in the Czech region of Czechoslovakia during the dark period after the 1968 Soviet invasion and military occupation, the exhibition became an experiment in constructing a temporary museum of resistance. Presented in New York City (2011), Washington, DC (2012) and Cedar Rapids, Iowa (2015)<sup>3</sup> *Samizdat: The Czech Art of Resistance, 1968-1989* featured over 300 artefacts that materialized resistance in the form of covertly produced books, journals, posters, art works, *magnetizdats* (secretly-circulated audio tape recordings), and photo and film documentation of Czech underground cultural activities between 1968 and 1989.

This article discusses the challenges of curating and designing a public exhibition for a North American audience whose knowledge of Czech history and the Czech language would be limited or non-existent. How could I high-

<sup>2</sup> KGB Museum, URL: [http://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction\\_Review-g274707-d2665565-Reviews-KGB\\_Museum-Prague\\_Bohemia.html](http://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction_Review-g274707-d2665565-Reviews-KGB_Museum-Prague_Bohemia.html) (16.05.2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Samizdat: The Czech Art of Resistance, 1968-1989*, The Czech Centre, New York City, November 2011 to January 2012, curated by Daniela Šneppová. The programme included a companion film series of banned Czech films. A symposium—'Czechoslovak Samizdat and its Legacy'—was organized by the Czech Centre, to coincide with the opening of the exhibition. In Washington D.C., the exhibition was held at the Embassy of the Czech Republic, May-June 2012. It was part of the EU Embassies' open house during which over 3000 visitors attended the exhibition in one day. Currently (October 2015 to April 2016), it is held at the Czech and Slovak National Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids. A documentation for earlier shows is available at [www.artofresistance.ca](http://www.artofresistance.ca).

light and help them make sense of the historical and artistic significance of works in a foreign language? How could I stage an engaging interaction/dialogue with these materials and the findings of my research for an English-speaking audience? My goals for the samizdat exhibition were to communicate the aesthetic and material resourcefulness of Czech underground culture, exhibit the formal diversity of the materials, and then to expose the great expanse of intellectual content and wide variety of disciplines and interests covered in samizdats. I wanted to highlight the diverse backgrounds of their many producers and finally, to relate the complex historical contexts of their production and consumption. How and why did these works come into existence and how did they function in their historical context?

All history involves a messy mix of reality and fantasy. If one is willing to dig through the ruins of Soviet communism and attempt to disentangle fact from fiction, one can begin to glimpse the outlines of another reality, a series of everyday acts of resistance to totalitarianism. The challenge for the historian lies not only in the ephemerality of the everyday and its disappearance into the thin air of memory, but also in the active erasures of Czech culture and history effected by the post 1968 Soviet regime. Fortunately, key material traces remain from the Soviet occupation (1969-1989): the thousands of pieces of underground cultural production called samizdats and their parallels in other underground art forms and media. These were to form the basis of my exhibition.

### What Were Samizdats?

Samizdats were unique and illicit objects to be hidden and shared through clandestine networks of circulation that were crucial to both expression and resistance. Handmade books created from restricted resources would be passed from friend to friend, briefcase to briefcase, sometimes through a trusted intermediary; they would sometimes even make their way beyond the nations' borders to other Soviet satellite countries or even be smuggled across the iron curtain into the West. Samizdat refers to the practice of self-publishing unofficial books and documents under a repressive, totalitarian system of state control of all communication and culture. This overarching censorship meant that all forms of public art and expression had to toe the party line. Samizdat was one of the unintended by-products of totalitarianism throughout the Soviet Bloc, with unofficial literature becoming virtually the only avenue for writers, researchers and readers to exchange ideas freely.

Samizdats could take the form of documents, leaflets, newsletters, manuscripts, books, periodicals, studies, feuilletons or collections of essays, stories or poems; indeed, any text that was forbidden or otherwise unavailable. One critical form of samizdat involved the production of periodicals that would come out semi-regularly, usually focus on specific themes or disciplines and include many essays and documents between their covers. I included selections from these periodicals in the exhibition: on culture and literature there was *Kritický sborník* (Critical Anthology, begun in 1981), *Vokno* (Window,

begun in 1979), *Revolver Revue* (begun in 1985)<sup>4</sup> and *Prostor* (Space, begun in 1982). For philosophy, there was *PARAF* (PARalelní Akta Filozofie, Parallel Act of Philosophy, begun in 1985) and *Reflexe* (Reflexes, begun in 1985), for theology *Teologické texty* (Theological Texts, begun in 1980), and for history *Historické studie* (Historical Studies, begun in 1978) or *O divadle* [On Theatre].<sup>5</sup> These journals would have had a 'circle of authors and regular subscribers'.<sup>6</sup>

Samizdats were not solely the work of political activists or dissidents struggling against the regime. Independent production could come from any segment of society and have little or no overt political content. But the presumption that samizdats were exclusively produced by dissidents was one of the larger myths around samizdat production, one that clouded understandings of the full extent of the practice and its results. This presumption is bound up with the myth of the dissident as a heroic warrior: 'A mythologizing belief in the power of the ideal free word was linked to a heroic conception of the authors of Samizdat'.<sup>7</sup> Writing about the heroic myths associated with Russian samizdat culture, Komaromi<sup>8</sup> cites Aleksandr Daniel in questioning 'the view of Samizdat as the forum of "heroic and uncompromising" truth wielded by dissident-warriors struggling valiantly against the totalitarian regime to bring about its eventual demise'.<sup>9</sup> These were myths sympathetic to the dissidents' own self-representations, a key aspect of all culture. This myth of a heroic underground worked with the Cold War dualisms drawn upon by both sides. The West presumed and anticipated the materials arriving secretly from the 'East' to be a form of dissent, and certainly emphasized those that were of most use in shoring up their cause. The propaganda systems from both sides used and re-contextualized samizdats and other materials for their own ends.

A relatively small percentage of Czechoslovak society was actively involved in alternative cultural production, but a slightly larger one was involved in its consumption. The 'grey zone' of the silent majority nonetheless included individuals who secretly supported the underground, but were not willing to risk their socio-economic stability by opposing the regime.<sup>10</sup> In the grey zone, illicit activities ranged from helping access materials for underground productions to illegally listening to foreign radio broadcasts

<sup>4</sup> *Revolver Revue* survived the 1989 revolution and is still being published in 2015.

<sup>5</sup> VILÉM PREČAN: Bibliography of the Czechoslovak Samizdat: Samizdat Periodicals 1977-1988, in: ACTA 2 (1988), pp. 5-8.

<sup>6</sup> JIŘÍ HOLÝ: Writers Under Siege: Czech Literature Since 1945, 2nd edition, Eastbourne 2010, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 599.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 612.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 599.

<sup>10</sup> JIŘINA ŠIKLOVÁ: The 'Gray Zone' and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia, in: MARKETA GOETZ-STANKIEWICZ (ed.): Goodbye Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing, Evanston 1992, pp. 181-192.

or foreign television (a practice easier closer to the borders of Germany and Austria) and consuming banned national culture in any form, whether samizdat, magnetizdat, or art. It is difficult to estimate the percentage of the population involved in independent thought and action (i.e. consuming alternative/illegal materials) but one attempt to quantify the extent of Czechoslovak participation was conducted by independent sociologist Zdeněk Strmiska, living in exile in France and published in Paris in 1986 in *Svědectví* [Witness], an émigré literary quarterly edited by Pavel Tigrid.<sup>11</sup> The survey consisted of 85 questions distributed to a sample of Czech urban dwellers (342 subjects).<sup>12</sup> His results showed that 70 per cent were not Party members but 75 per cent did attend official political meetings (indeed, some were mandatory). 37.7 per cent were regular consumers of samizdat and tamizdat materials, another 31.2 per cent 'read it by chance and passed it on', and 8.2 per cent read it 'exceptionally' and did not pass it on, for a combined total of over 77 per cent of the sample having some contact with illegal materials such as samizdat.<sup>13</sup>

These numbers may seem high, but even if skewed due to how and where the survey was distributed, it may not be that surprising when one considers that state-imposed limitations on information covered all disciplines, practices and philosophies, including religious thought. In the world of samizdat, one could find works virtually from any discipline or area of interest imaginable: philosophical treatises, cultural reviews, scientific explorations, works of history, politics, economy, sociology, geography, religion and theology, art theory, history and criticism, architecture, music, ecology, journalistic reports, interviews, diaristic texts, autobiographies, and many translations of the work of foreign writers, from novels to poetry to all possible sub-genres of literature.

Samizdat literature circulated as part of an unofficial, innovative, independent culture that included living room performances known as apartment theatre, underground concerts, exhibitions (both outdoors or in private residences), apartment lectures, seminars or even apartment universities,<sup>14</sup> spontaneous performances and action art events, magnetizdats, and, later in the 1980s, compilation video cassettes. These various art practices and media

<sup>11</sup> ZDENĚK STRMISKA: Results of a Survey of Contemporary Thinking in Czechoslovakia, in: H. GORDON SKILLING (ed.): *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, Oxford 1989, pp. 92-97.

<sup>12</sup> Exactly how the survey subjects were chosen is unclear, and since cities were where the main bulk of samizdat production occurred, these numbers may underrepresent rural readers.

<sup>13</sup> STRMISKA (as in footnote 11), p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> BARBARA J. FALK: *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East Central Europe*, Budapest 2003, p. 92.

forms became key channels for 'Second Culture'.<sup>15</sup> Here, acts of independent thought and creativity could take place and reach pockets of a population now force-fed a diet of state propaganda and apparatchik-approved univocal culture.

### Pressure Cooker: Normalization and the Rise of a Second Culture

Samizdats were the result of a very particular shift in the historical context after the Prague Spring. Labelled a 'counter revolution' by the Soviets, the liberalization of Czechoslovak society, politics and economy that reached its zenith in 1968 was abruptly halted on 20 August of that year with the invasion of 100,000 Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops. 'Normalization' involved the restoration of Soviet order, a return to a pre-reform, pre-Prague Spring model that quickly reversed most of the hard-won liberal changes on all fronts. Between 1969 and 1971, 'nine hundred university professors lost their jobs [...]. The Academy of Sciences lost 1,200 scholars.'<sup>16</sup> Creative fields were demolished: all twenty-five cultural and literary journals were closed, 1,500 employees of Czechoslovak Radio in Prague were fired<sup>17</sup> and artists who had supported the reforms were blacklisted, with their works banned from the public sphere. In 1970 the artist unions were abolished and new organizations with new rules established.<sup>18</sup> If one was not officially employed (i.e. state approved and registered) as a writer, artist, musician, actor, filmmaker, etc., one could not work in that field. Your choices became limited to emigration or working outside official channels. It is estimated that by the end of 1971, 130,000-140,000 Czechs and Slovaks had escaped or emigrated.<sup>19</sup>

The pressure exerted upon Czechoslovak culture through these purges, expulsions and reinstitution of all forms of censorship in the early process of 'normalization' caused a drastic displacement of cultural energy. With the face of Czechoslovak culture so quickly and dramatically altered, where was this energy to go? It could not be harnessed by the new regime, but neither could it be completely dissipated. Perhaps alluding to the French Resistance, when asked in 1961 about the future of art, Marcel Duchamp replied, 'the great artists of the future will go underground'.<sup>20</sup> But the 'underground' of 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia carries a different meaning than the 'underground' of the counter-culture of the same period in the West, since the risks

<sup>15</sup> IVAN MARTIN JIROUS: A Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival, in: LAURA HOPTMAN, TOMÁŠ POSPISZYL (eds.): *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, New York 2002, pp. 56-65.

<sup>16</sup> HUGH LECAINE AGNEW: *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, Stanford 2004, p. 271.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 272.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 271.

<sup>20</sup> JIROUS, A Report (as in footnote 15), p. 64.

associated with underground activities were far greater in a police state, where difference of opinion and non-conformism were subject to systematic persecution and punishment.<sup>21</sup> This new space was theorized by Ivan Martin Jirous as a 'Second Culture' or 'The Merry Ghetto'<sup>22</sup> and by Václav Benda as a 'Parallel Polis'.<sup>23</sup> These thinkers attempted to imagine and articulate how one might participate in a full life outside the mainstream—and apparently only—channel through the creation of parallel, underground social structures and cultural practices like samizdat. What they share is being not only outside but also beside the official public sphere, neither engaging with it nor against it but living beyond it—indeed, in spite of it. As Jirous put it, 'The goal of the underground in the West is the outright destruction of the establishment. In contrast, the goal of our underground is to create a Second Culture, a culture completely independent from all official communication media and the conventional hierarchy of value judgments put out by the establishment. A culture that cannot have as its goal the destruction of the establishment, because it would thereby drive itself into its embrace.'<sup>24</sup> Samizdats were one key form of this Independent Culture.

### The Materiality of Resistance

It is difficult to imagine how a culture might survive, let alone thrive, when it is threatened and banned from creating, distributing, engaging, debating or enjoying all the fruits of its artistic and intellectual labours. This situation is largely incomprehensible to many North Americans, and yet the translation of this time and place and these artworks was precisely my challenge as I prepared *Samizdat: The Czech Art of Resistance, 1968-1989*. I discovered one solution to this dilemma in the very materials of samizdats. Their scavenged, recycled, repurposed components revealed much about the world into which they were born. The blurry, carbon-copied and typed pages, the hand-corrected, retyped words, the unique paper cutting and book binding strategies, all clearly displayed a truth about processes of production under duress. As material traces of the regime's repressions, their aesthetic dimensions became, to some extent, distorted reflections of the regime itself. Writing about this aspect of Soviet samizdat production, Komaromi observes that, 'The wretched material character of the Samizdat text evokes the deep abyss between the material and the ideal and between the desire for culture and the

<sup>21</sup> Samizdats, like other personal materials confiscated during house searches could be used and even repurposed, turned into incriminating evidence for trials.

<sup>22</sup> IVAN M. JIROUS: *Magorův zápisník* [Magor's Diary], ed. by MICHAEL ŠPIRIT, Praha 1997, p. 228.

<sup>23</sup> VÁCLAV BENDA et al.: *Parallel Polis, or An Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe: An Inquiry*, in: *Social Research* 55 (1988), 1, pp. 211-246, here pp. 214-222.

<sup>24</sup> JIROUS, *A Report* (as in footnote 15), p. 64.

fear of its destruction.<sup>25</sup> The obviously distressed aesthetic of the Samizdat sat in stark contrast to the slicker productions of official publishers and their professionally printed and bound books. Although strategies for creating more polished-looking samizdats were eventually developed, the extensive efforts expended in publishing despite material deprivations, technological constraints, and crushing censorship, speak volumes about the deep need of the banned authors to disseminate their work in forms resembling the traditional book. As a result, there seems to be an ontological shift produced through these acts of binding, whereby a typewritten manuscript is transformed into a 'book', its status altered by virtue of its complex historical situation. Texts could have circulated secretly as loose or stapled pages, but here we find visible evidence that this traditional form, the book as an object, held a particularly symbolic value. The Samizdat book-work offered readers and writers something 'normal' to ground them during an utterly abnormal time.

Early in the research process, as I was confronted with the formal diversity and sheer mass of samizdat output, I was overwhelmed by its unexpected aesthetic qualities and the visceral impact of its materiality. I realized these objects demanded to be taken beyond the doors of the archive to reach a larger audience, to be shared more widely after having lain in archives and attics for decades. Here was hard evidence of an alternate reality: small acts of culture, created and circulated at great risk, acts that kept something alive in a sea of banality and barbarity. It is critical to recognize that the regime's harsh responses to acts of independent cultural production also exposed a level of fear aroused by art, inadvertently underlining the power these artworks were believed to possess. The samizdat now functions as a record, and recouping, of a living culture abruptly forced under the surface of a tightly controlled official public life. Underground publishers did the work of regular publishers, releasing work by current authors but also reissuing editions of older authors whose works had been banned. As well, they brought ideas from the outside world across the border via translations of foreign authors. Samizdat thus became a historical repository of this alternate culture.

### Staging

Designing an exhibition entails more than the straightforward, point-to-point transference of collected objects. It is a staging of history translated into an experience that must effectively engage the imaginations, intellects and emotions of visitors. The ability to encounter history in concrete form is one of the most powerful possibilities offered by a gallery or museum space. The confrontation with the physicality of a historical artefact is a very different experience than viewing a two-dimensional reproduction of it online, in a book or a magazine. The concrete world of objects I laid out before the audi-

<sup>25</sup> ANN KOMAROMI: The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat, in: *Slavic Review* 63 (2004), 3, pp. 597-618, here p. 616.

ences consisted of material traces of a creative struggle for a form of free expression. They did not resemble official, mass-produced consumer products. Their DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetic exuded an intriguing presence that called out their significance—at once boldly and quietly, enigmatically and shyly—to passers-by. Since I wanted to engage as wide an audience base as possible, I therefore looked for material whose visual and visceral aesthetics would reach beyond language.

Part of the challenge involved how to contextualize an utterly foreign experience, culture, politics, and history for a North American audience. While these aesthetic traces of resistance could be placed on exhibition for the New York, Washington, D.C. and Iowa audiences, there was nonetheless a critical barrier to fully grasping the content: language. Installing dozens of didactic panels to translate or explain everything would likely detract from the impact of these remarkable objects. So, how does one effectively convey Czech underground literature and culture to an English-speaking audience that does not read Czech?

One answer, staging, involves the design practice of strategically orchestrating materials in space. Staging can critically shape the museum-goer's understanding and interpretation of an exhibition. An effective exhibition poses questions through a creative juxtaposition of materials, offering unexpected connections and convergences across seemingly disparate communities, objects, materials and information. By juxtaposing historical artefacts, an exhibition should pose complicating questions and thus expose new approaches to understandings of the past. If successful, it provokes a thoughtful engagement with the materials by mounting a dialogue between artefacts and audiences, between past and present. In designing an exhibition, one has to consider and collaborate with the architecture of the exhibition space. How a human body might move through the space, for instance, can determine and shape the narrative of the museum experience. With an active awareness of the possible paths and movements of bodies, one can choreograph a visitor's navigation of key areas. The tactical deployment of lighting, positioning of furniture/display cabinets/wall treatments, use of sound and moving images, strategic placement of objects, posters, prints and documents, all combine to shape an experience into an understanding.

One of the ways I sought to realize these goals included setting up participatory areas for the audience to interact with the exhibition materials via a writing station and a listening area. Drawing on the centralization strategy of Communist directives, I placed a large rear projection screen in the centre of the gallery space that featured a compilation of ten moving image documents from the period.<sup>26</sup> This could be then viewed from both the front and rear of the screen and thus be seen from any point in the room. I created a continuous

<sup>26</sup> This was a consistent strategy across the three exhibitions. The central screen was a keystone in the exhibition although each gallery space demanded a different configuration and redesign of exhibition elements.

loop of selections from independently produced artist films and videos, documentation of political demonstrations, and performances of underground music, theatre and art events, so that the footage helped to connect the various display areas in the exhibition. In this way, samizdat literature was tied to music, visual art was linked with philosophy, and so on.

The exhibition included not only the material objects produced but also an overview of some of the key techniques used in the production of samizdats. A further means of staging samizdat involved highlighting one of its key technologies of production, the typewriter, and placing it back in its original context of a home office or study.

### Domesticated production

The typewriter, for the most part, was the only readily accessible piece of equipment for reproducing texts for people who were barred from access to conventional technologies of textual production and reproduction. Sheets of carbon copy paper layered between thin sheets of onion-skin paper were used to make multiple copies. Carbon is one of the key elements of life in the universe, just as it was for most Czech samizdat editions. This method could yield only 10 to 13 copies, at most, at each typing session and this depended on the strength of the stroke of an individual typist and her typewriter (most of the typists were women). As a consumer/reader you would hope to get one of the top copies, since the deeper you got in the stack, the fuzzier the letters would get. By the ninth copy the text became very fat and blurry, almost illegible; the pressure going through a thick stack of paper and carbon was not as intense or precise on the bottom copies. Corrections had to be done by hand on each sheet. There were typewriters (like certain models of the 'Consul') on which one could insert the paper lengthwise so one could make extra-wide format books. When available, other forms of reproduction technology could be utilized: silkscreen, offset printing, cyclostyle, hectography and photography.<sup>27</sup> But these were used less often than typewriters because the authorities tightly controlled access to duplication technologies. It is interesting to note that each of these main samizdat technologies was developed

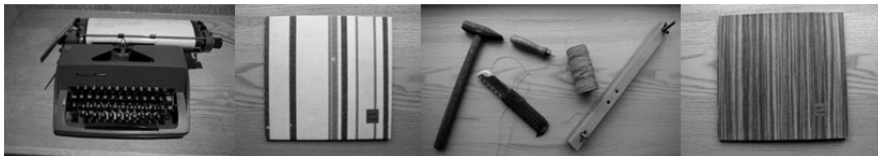


Fig. 1: Left: Consul typewriter, wide format; centre left: *Edice Kvart* wallpaper covered samizdat; centre right: tools used in samizdat production; right: *Edice Kvart* wallpaper covered samizdat (© Daniela Šneppová)

<sup>27</sup> Material examples of these various technologies are available for viewing at: Libri Prohibiti, URL: <http://www.libpro.cz/> (15.11.2015).

before the 20th century. Xeroxing was rare until the late 1980s, with the personal computer arriving only at the very end of the communist era.

In this environment of scarce resources and restricted technology, necessity became a good mother of invention, inspiring innovation for many working secretly in graphic design and bookbinding. Despite the limited technical resources, there was an enormous amount of attention paid to the aesthetic dimensions of Czech samizdat production. Unofficial editions were often beautifully hand-made, hand-bound books<sup>28</sup> whose onion skin pages were sewn and glued into their customized, hardcover shells. The tools used in their production were also often home-made using available materials. On display we included home-made screens, clamps, binding materials, inks, papers and cover materials. Placed alongside these were samizdat publications which described with text and diagrams how to build these tools at home and illustrated the techniques of how to use them. Here is an example in which considered juxtaposition turned a samizdat into its own didactic panel.

The materials for samizdat binding came from a variety of sources, including flags, cloth for suits, canvas, linen, road insulation materials, wall-paper, calendars, and office binders—in other words, any material that could be scavenged, traded or repurposed, even the official black flags of mourning. Some books were elaborate and included gold embossing or images on their covers and resembled the form of official books, while others were simply pages, sometimes stapled between colourful calendar images or left as unbound, loose sheets placed in folders. There are books with detailed cut-outs and elaborate inserts that include hand-drawn maps, diagrams, etchings, prints, drawings, collages, photographs, photographic documents or even photographs of other art works.

The art of these books was also to be found in the actual text layout. Collaborations between creative typists and publishers resulted in the design of a myriad of patterns and images created solely using an arrangement of typed letters. For example, in the journal *Spektrum* the Czech national emblem of the lion was created using typescript letters effectively arranged into the shape of a lion (designed by Tomáš Vrba) via carefully planned typing, row by row (reminiscent of ASCII designs in early computer art, except there was no auto-delete button available if one made a mistake).

<sup>28</sup> Key Czech samizdat editions after 1970 included: *Edice Petlice* (Padlock Editions), created by Ludvík Vaculík; *Edice Expedice* (Expedition Editions), created by Olga and Václav Havel; Editions *Kvart*, started by Jan Vladislav; *Česká expedice* (Czech Expedition), begun by Jaromír Hořec; *Krameriova expedice* (Kramerius' Expedition), begun by Vladimír Pistorius; *Kde domov můj* [Where Is My Home]; *Prameny* (Sources); *Hermetická edice* (Hermetic Editions); *Popelnice* (Trashcan), created by Jiří Gruntorad; *Mosková Mrtvice* (Brain Dead), to name a few.

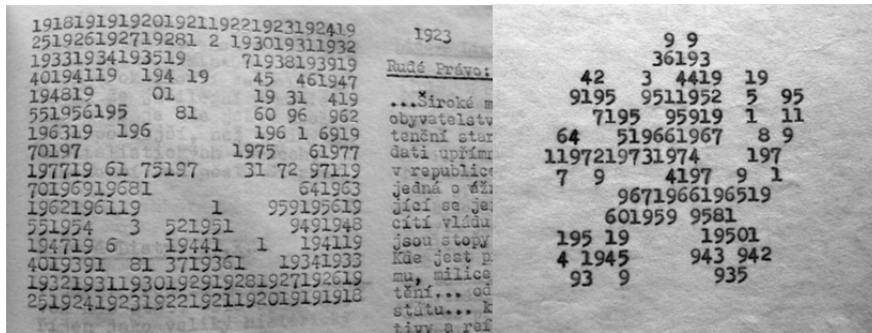


Fig. 2: Type design lion from samizdat journal *Spektrum* 3 (1979) (© Daniela Šneppová)

The samizdat author might be the one to design and produce the book or an unofficial publisher would create it relying on a trusted network of production and circulation. Sometimes the author would know the publisher personally and deliver the manuscript to them, while at other times they may not even have been aware that their text was in circulation (in a very small run) as a new edition. Issues of copyright were not the most pressing issue for authors and artists who wanted an audience for their works and sought a way for dialogue to be created with others. With the limited audience of samizdat circles came limited success in the traditional sense of sales, public acclaim, or critical recognition. Their work was created in isolation and thus, in an important sense, without censorship. Zdena Tominová articulated this predicament of a samizdat writer: 'isolated even from his limited readership; he gets a response only from a few of his closest friends, and this response can often be too tolerant to be healthy.'<sup>29</sup>

Which texts would be chosen for publication was at the discretion of the publisher and sometimes a small editorial board. The publisher would often take into consideration what their readers were interested in accessing. Since both the production and consumption of samizdat materials was a risky business punishable by incarceration, the communities were necessarily small, with each publisher having their own group of followers. Small groups would be involved in sharing a text, but it is impossible to estimate how many times an individual work was read or even reproduced, or how many times it was traded or sold on the black market. The wear and tear on some surviving editions does, however, tell us that they passed through many hands. It was not uncommon for them to be reproduced yet again by those who came into possession of them, via a typewriter or even copied by hand. Once a text was released into the world of samizdat, the author lost control, and there was no pulling it back.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> ZDENA TOMINOVÁ: Typewriters Hold the Fort, in: *Index on Censorship* 12 (1983), 2, pp. 28-30, here p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> KOMAROMI (as in footnote 25), p. 604.

Czech samizdat editions were most often created in small runs of 10 to 30 copies.<sup>31</sup> The larger organized editions would charge readers per book or journal to cover the basic costs of materials and fees for typists. Some editions were signed and dated by the publishers. The one-offs or non-serialized publications are often referred to as 'wild' editions, and most often were not signed or even dated. The publishers of these were often anonymous.

Samizdat production demanded a great commitment, as it was mostly an unpaid, labour-intensive process. Jan Vladislav, publisher of the samizdat *Kvart* (Quarterly), discusses the production process:

'I found that a book took an average of 10 days to produce. I mean a full 10 days of intensive work, reading and correcting typescripts, as well as manual work to do the binding. Apart from that there was a lot of travelling to be done, picking up manuscripts and delivering the finished product. When you take into account that I published 120 volumes, that makes 1,200 working days, or three full years.'<sup>32</sup>

Everything had to be done in a clandestine manner despite the fact that the majority of samizdats were not explicitly political/oppositional in their content, and that a manuscript on its own was not officially illegal. It was often the case that not the author, but the publisher would be incarcerated for the production and distribution of illicit materials.<sup>33</sup>

It was not uncommon for a single samizdat title to come out in various editions issued by different underground publishers if it became popular enough. The same text could be transformed from a hardbound edition into a softcover stapled collection. I included multiples of certain works in the exhibition to highlight this aspect of samizdat (e.g., works by Franz Kafka, Egon Bondy, Jaroslav Seifert and Václav Havel, Eva Kantůrková). Samizdats could be new works prevented from being published, older works pulled from circulation, or sought-after classics. Egon Bondy's (pseudonym for Zbyněk Fišer) multi-volume *Poznámky k dějinám filosofie* (Notes on the History of Philosophy) was published in samizdat form thirteen times between 1977 and 1987.<sup>34</sup> Kafka's work, for example, was released numerous times by various samizdat publishers.<sup>35</sup> For the installation of the exhibition in Iowa, I borrowed 18 different samizdat editions of George Orwell's book *1984*, illicitly published between 1970 and 1987, and displayed them together for the first time. My point in including multiples of one text published by a variety of publishers was to underscore the wide circulation of certain texts and show

<sup>31</sup> In other Soviet satellites, such as Poland, the runs would be much larger since they had greater access to printing presses. They could run hundreds, even thousands of books.

<sup>32</sup> JAN VLADISLAV: All You Need Is a Typewriter, in: *Index on Censorship* 12 (1983), 2, pp. 33-35, here p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. Vaculík, Havel and Gruntorad, all served jail time.

<sup>34</sup> MARTIN MACHOVEC: The Types and Functions of Samizdat Publications in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989, in: *Poetics Today* 30 (2009), 1, pp. 1-26, here p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> It was also arbitrarily added to and removed from the official censored lists at different times at the whim of the authorities.

how, even in samizdat culture, a book could be a kind of hit, becoming especially popular with readers.

Works could circulate beyond borders; a Czech text could be smuggled out and distributed outside the Soviet Bloc or read on Radio Free Europe or Radio Liberty. The journey could go beyond the exile press through foreign translations and re-publication via a foreign publisher's interest in a particular text or writer. This road could be travelled in both directions. Translations of foreign authors were a critical component of samizdat publishing, erasing some of the enforced isolation of censorship in official publishing and education. I thus included in the exhibition Czech samizdat translations of books from other countries, such as the works of Solzhenitsyn, Orwell, Koestler, Roth, Arendt, as well as the complete *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, which had circulated in a series of anonymously-created, perfect bound softcover books whose typed pages were brown and curly from excessive wear and tear and, presumably, enjoyment.

### Private Space, Public Culture

With the evisceration of public space during normalization, private spaces took on a new significance and function. The home now became a site of education and intellectual debate, a production workshop, a theatre, a concert hall, a gallery or a meeting room. Here I found another means of overcoming the language barrier. I framed the exhibition around this critical site of samizdat production and consumption: the private, domestic space of home. References to and markers of 'home' were set up throughout the exhibition in order to immerse the visitor in a specific time, but also place, within the gallery walls. To remind visitors of samizdats' domestic contexts, patterns in paint (resembling period wallpaper) were applied directly to the walls of the gallery using an everyday decorative technology from the period, the carved rubber paint roller. Dozens of roller patterns were available to Czechs, who could choose from elaborate and ornate baroque or floral inspired patterns to more minimal abstract and geometric solutions. In times of scarcity, this was a resourceful solution to a shortage of wallpaper (which was put to better use as samizdat book covers). This technique was used in the exhibition at three key locations to indicate particular domestic spaces: a living room which functioned as the setting for a listening station (featuring Czech underground Rock bands and folk performers), a home office (the site for samizdat production), and a home library (housing a personal collection of samizdats).

In a totalitarian society, obedience and conformity were rewarded. Whether you believed in the system or not, you were required to act as if you did. Duality in everyday life, acting one way in public and another in private, became a coping mechanism in a state where censorship and bureaucratic and police surveillance instilled fear. No one was immune from their reach, especially since one's home might not be as private as expected with numerous phone and apartment monitoring operations. Samizdats were shaped by this historical context in which the Czech public sphere was pushed underground.

As an exhibition strategy, I mapped this daily tension through the juxtaposition of official and unofficial elements from the period between 1968 and 1989. The exhibition visitor would be encouraged to process the strange combinations of the duality of public and private life, without a didactic panel. For example, on the patterned wall in the home office area, above the desk I hung well-worn picture frames usually used to frame images of loved ones. But the portraits I placed in these frames were not taken by friends or family: they were instead captured in secret by strangers. These were surveillance photographs taken surreptitiously by the State Security Service (Státní Bezpečnost, StB) whose job it was to monitor the activities of subjects under observation and to document their movements and meetings. I borrowed these photographs from the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů).

The subjects of these uncanny photographs were the very people (artists, writers, publishers, musicians) whose objects were on display in this exhibition. Even the unwitting viewer would eventually begin to notice that there was something odd about these photos hanging on the living room wall. Unlike the family portrait or vacation snapshot, these photos all featured scenes taking place in unspectacular, unremarkable public spaces: on buses, in streets, by building entrances, in cafes, with none of the subjects striking the familiar poses, neither smiling nor acknowledging the camera. These surveillance photographs were taken with cameras hidden in baby carriages, in briefcases and in bags. By placing the photographs in the simulated staged living room workspace of an underground publisher, I sought to create an insidious tension by dislocating the familiar, juxtaposing it with the hidden political interventions into daily life. The familiar (the domestic space and the personal photograph) here was ruptured by an insurgent, alien force (StB).<sup>36</sup>

To communicate the quantity, qualities and diversity of samizdats produced in the period, I had a shelf built for the New York run of the show that ran the entire length of the gallery. On this extended shelf I arranged a large number of the books, where they sat together perhaps for the first time. Culled from different archives and personal collections, their individual placement varied: some had their covers opened to show the interior art and text and others were closed, displaying the variety of approaches to their binding and titling, while still others were stacked and overlapping, suggesting a collection or accumulation of samizdat's prodigious output. More were on display in various cabinets throughout the gallery, linking different disciplines such as music, art or philosophy. This was a space conceived for an active viewer: one had to move through the gallery space to make the connections. A few of the key pieces were suspended in clear cabinets so viewers could access all 360 degrees of their surfaces. The materials were arranged

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<sup>36</sup> StB conducted house searches, installed listening devices in walls and phones and conducted around the clock surveillance of subjects.



Fig. 3: Views of the exhibition in New York City (© Daniela Šneppová)

in broad themes to focus on areas including music, art, novels, religious and historical treatises, philosophy, politics, etc., with many overlapping categories.

A key instance where the material form of samizdat revealed its historical significance involved works designed to be invisible to the authorities. For example, I included an intriguing book that at first glance appeared to be a box of Foma (photographic paper). Here, photography was used to record and reproduce printed texts, rather than people and places. In a photo book the individual pages of a manuscript or book were photographed and then printed on common commercial lightweight photo paper. An entire book could be produced using this technique and then bound. Since this paper was quite thin, these prints could be combined with the onionskin typed pages allowing the inclusion of images of art works or event documentation in different bound editions. Once one had the negatives, the book, or art sections for the book, could be reproduced as many times as needed. In the exhibition I included an unbound version of a photographically reproduced book whose loose pages were housed in its original packaging. This conceptually completed the project by hiding its content in the material origins of its bright yellow industrial packaging. Wrapped in black lightproof paper the loose pages were placed back into their immediately identifiable (for Czechs) yellow box of Czech Foma photographic paper. It was a book hidden in plain sight, the commercial packaging of the common photo paper acting as its own



Fig. 4: Left: Foma photo book; centre and right: *Kolibřík* edition, with detail view of magnifier (© Daniela Šneppová)

camouflage and the industry-standard black lightproof paper protecting its contents from prying eyes, or at least creating doubts to the nature of the contents, since opening a box of unexposed photo paper would mean destroying it. Thus a technology of perfect reproduction was used simultaneously as a technology of dissimulation.

To further highlight samizdat's strategies of invisibility, I included a number of tiny books from an edition named *Kolibřík* (hummingbird) that offered another innovative and obvious solution to a key material problem—how to hide in plain sight. The novelty and ingenuity of its material form was as intriguing as was the photo paper book or the books bound with wallpaper. *Kolibřík* editions, small enough to fit into a pocket, housed tiny magnifying lenses hidden in their spines, which allowed the reader to decipher their tiny fonts. These small books, created in Erlangen, Germany by Czech expatriate Jožka Jelínek (who emigrated after the 1968 occupation), actually fall under the category of tamizdat, which means published 'there' (tam), beyond the Czechoslovak borders. Jelínek utilized a photocopier to shrink and copy the pages of already extant exile books, manuscripts and samizdats. Producing over 30 editions using this technique,<sup>37</sup> he was able to make many more copies of each book than could his samizdat colleagues back home who were relegated to the typewriter. These small books were then smuggled back into Czechoslovakia for unofficial circulation.

### Art in Action

Since writers and journalists were not the only cultural producers who were banned from circulating works or ideas in public and participating in public life, I included much more than books in the exhibit. The Second Culture included unofficial activities revolving around sound, moving image and real time performance events. Some of these events were indeed documented in samizdats that contained material traces of these ephemeral cultural activities. These included images, photos and other artists' works, collected lyrics, reports on exhibitions or events incorporated into the bound tomes. Many of these included original artworks, such as the drawings and collages of Jiří

<sup>37</sup> Jiří Gruntorad, interview with author, Prague 2012.

Kolář; his collages have now become very valuable as original works of collectable art. Others included artist prints and photographs in small runs, a few of which I placed on display in the exhibition. Samizdats were practically the only way that visual artists could distribute their work without state censorship. It was also a way for them to build community through association with various authors and other artists. Their only other options were unofficial exhibitions in private homes or garages, outdoors in backyards, at cottages or in spontaneous performance and action art events.

Action art could be done anywhere, anytime, and at a moment's notice. The audience could be a few friends, perhaps no one or even an entire city. Sometimes they were captured by a photographer who might include all the incidental attendees who did not even know they were witnessing or taking part in an art event. It was a liberating, fleeting practice that took artists outside the studio (if they even had one) and into urban public spaces or out into the countryside, to explore how the body could be used as a direct form of communication or as a medium of research. It was one way of reclaiming public space and of operating at once underground and in plain sight. Action art is an experimental practice that drew on influences from conceptual art, Fluxus, surrealism, and Dada. Jiří Kovanda's *Wenceslav Square* project, *Untitled* (1976), for which he stood immobile in the middle of a busy sidewalk on the main square in Prague with his arms stretched out to his sides, was directed at this community without a community that filled the urban spaces during the era of normalization: 'Even small, all but invisible interventions like Kovanda's could represent a disturbance in the order of things and thus constituted an unidentified but clear threat to views of the *status quo* as "natural".'<sup>38</sup>



Fig. 5: Action art documentation, left: Jiří Kovanda, *Untitled*, 1976, Prague; right: Jiří Kovanda, *Untitled*, 1977. Reprinted by kind permission of the artist

<sup>38</sup> Slovene art historian Igor Zabel quoted in: KLARA KEMP-WELCH: *Antipolitics in Central European Art*, London 2014, p. 203.

Other key action artists working in the 1970s and 1980s included Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Zorka Ságlová, Tomáš Ruller, Lumír Hladík, Margita Titlová-Ylovsky and Milan Knížák to name a few. I have singled out two of Kovanda's works, which confront the isolation of life under the totalitarian regime, but also move past it to stage a broader existential dilemma. His escalator piece *Untitled*, 1977, is similar to the earlier project, but is even more directly confrontational in that it takes place on one of the exceptionally long escalators of the Prague subway system. Kovanda rode up on the escalator, but turned to face in the opposite direction of the escalator's movement in order to confront the other passengers head on, thereby exposing and exploring the barriers between strangers.<sup>39</sup> The piece thus begins with a refusal to face in the expected or accepted direction. The people directly around him had no means of escape and so had to stay for the duration of the ride. Again it was a moment of pregnant anticipation: would this generate any communication? Klara Kemp Welch suggests that 'there is an attempt at a psychological connection—by looking.'<sup>40</sup> Kovanda's gaze, looking directly into the eyes of the other travellers, must have been disconcerting, and even today it would be interpreted as somewhat abnormal or confrontational. I do not know if Václav Havel was aware of Kovanda's piece, since the disparate islands of independent activity were often disconnected from each other, but the following text, written ten years later by Havel, resonates with the escalator piece via its similar rumination about this same public space, one familiar to many urban dwellers around the globe. It is a space where people become automated, being moved along an efficient and alienating assembly line:

'Ride the escalators in the Prague subway and watch the faces of people going in the opposite direction. This journey is a pause in the daily rat race, a sudden stoppage of life, a frozen moment that may reveal more about us than we know. Perhaps it is one of those 'moments of truth' when a person suddenly stands outside all relationships; he is in public, but alone with himself. The faces moving past are empty, strained, almost lifeless, without hope, without longing, without desire. The eyes are dull.'<sup>41</sup>

Kovanda's project shifts this so the 'others' are not moving by but are placed in a 'face off' with the artist. The element of aggression in this piece is based in the lack of agency afforded fellow riders who, surrounded by others in a narrow space, are left with little recourse except to look away. In this brief odd encounter, the artist was, atypically, acknowledged by strangers: 'Being an unofficial artist in Prague was like being in hiding.'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> PAVLÍNA MORGANOVÁ: *Czech Action Art*, Prague 2014, p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> KEMP-WELCH (as in footnote 38), p. 203.

<sup>41</sup> VÁCLAV HAVEL: *Stories and Totalitarianism*, samizdat [1987], transl. by PAUL WILSON, URL: [http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=7\\_aj\\_eseje.html&typ=HTML](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=7_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML) (11.04.2014).

<sup>42</sup> KEMP-WELCH (as in footnote 38), p. 207.

It was crucial to include this significant, unofficial and often invisible practice of action art as part of the exhibition. The body is the first and the final site of resistance, and the action artists knew this. It was the key site for forging new modes of communication. At this time the experiments of Czech underground action art were on a par with global avant-garde developments elsewhere, even if their means of dissemination were severely curtailed.<sup>43</sup> Their experiments with time and space, and bodies and boundaries were often carried out in public, yet were invisible to much of the public and to the authorities. This meant that, like the samizdat more generally, they were simultaneously there and not there. Details of events and artists are still being collected, with the most recent comprehensive survey being Pavlina Morganová's book *Action Art*.<sup>44</sup> As the most ephemeral of arts, action art survives only in sparse records, mostly photographs and documentation in a few samizdats. To represent the projects of action artists I used a combination of media, such as large prints that documented ten performances from the 1970s and 80s, and samizdat copies of the semi-official *Jazzpetit* artist monograph series featuring some of these artists.<sup>45</sup> *Jazzpetit* was semi-official because it was part of the Jazz Section of the official Musicians' Union, who were allowed to publish and distribute materials only to their membership (limited to 3,000 copies).<sup>46</sup> The Jazz Section regularly published the *Jazz Bulletin* which reached well beyond their 3,000 members: by some estimates one issue could reach over 100,000 readers.<sup>47</sup> They managed to publish until 1983, at which point the authorities wanted to disband the Jazz Section whose membership had reached 7,000 (4,000 over their official limit). When that did not happen, they dissolved the entire Musicians' Union in 1984. They subsequently arrested and tried five of the Jazz Section leaders, three of whom landed in jail.<sup>48</sup>

For the exhibition, I also drew on an unusual series of samizdat editions by the Czech art historian, philosopher and critic Petr Rezek that I discovered at the Academy of Fine Arts (Akademie výtvarných umění, AVU) archive in Prague. Rezek wrote and translated many contemporary art texts from abroad and published them in a square format samizdat series as an untitled edition. His work helped introduce many foreign artists and ideas to Czech artists.

<sup>43</sup> The 1960s opened doors and let in many international influences, such as exhibitions, magazines, and greater access to information from outside the borders.

<sup>44</sup> MORGANOVÁ (as in footnote 39).

<sup>45</sup> This was a 'semi-samizdat': the government-sanctioned jazz music union put out a series of small catalogues on a few of the key art figures. This was an unusual publisher working at the boundary of legality. The loop-hole was that publications were only to be distributed to official union members.

<sup>46</sup> SABRINA P. RAMET: *Social Currents in Eastern Europe: The Sources and Consequences of the Great Transformation*, 2nd edition, Durham et al. 1995, p. 128.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 129.

*Jazzpetit* managed to publish his tome *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění* (Body, Object, and Reality in Contemporary Art) in 1983, before the Musicians' Union was dissolved.

I compiled a series of videos and film documentation of underground cultural events to be screened inside the exhibition space. These included filmed documentation of apartment theatre (*bytové divadlo*), such as a performance of *Macbeth* starring Vlasta Chřemastová, Pavel Kohout, and Vlasta Třešňák, as well as experimental film and video projects, concert footage and political gatherings from the late 1980s. These were shown continuously on the large projection screen suspended in the centre of the exhibition space. These ephemeral aspects of unofficial cultural production were the most difficult elements to access for the show, since there was not much that was documented in the format of the moving image. As with samizdats, access to the technical resources for independently creating audiovisual media was restricted at the time. One surviving example reveals the resourcefulness of these producers working under these circumstances, Milan Kohout's film piece, *Podmostní filosofická jatka* (Philosophical Slaughterhouse under the Bridge, 1983). It was created using a consumer 8mm silent film camera available for purchase for purposes of tourism (a fact amazing in itself, given the limited opportunities for travel for the average citizen under Soviet occupation). Since it was a silent film camera and Kohout wanted a soundtrack for the piece, he and his cameraman jerry-rigged a home-made system that enabled them to turn a silent film into a sound film: 'We cut a magnetic tape from a regular tape recorder using a razor and glued the slim ribbon to the edge of the film stock after it was edited. Then we installed a magnetic play and record head (removed from the cassette player) on our projector and recorded sound onto the glued strip. The police were amazed that we created at home a sound film.'<sup>49</sup>

### Underground Music and Charta 77

Music was an integral part of the Second Culture. The exhibition's 'living room' space therefore included a period reel-to-reel tape recorder, the Tesla B4, which sat on a seventies coffee table surrounded by period lounge chairs for visitors to sink into and listen to a selection of music from various underground rock/punk/folk musicians of the 1970s and 1980s. These included the Plastic People of the Universe, DG 307, Dog Soldiers (Psí Vojáci), and Teeth and Nails (Zuby Nechty), along with folk musicians such as Vlasta Třešňák and Charlie Soukup. Recorded music was portable and easily reproduced mechanically in the form of *magnetizdats* (an audio tape form of samizdat, initially on reel-to-reel and later in cassette format). It was also easy to hide, since labels could lie. In the 1980s samizdat journals such as *Vokno* and

<sup>49</sup> Milan Kohout, interview with author, 2010.



Fig. 6: Left: Plastic People of the Universe, *Passion Play*, magnetizdat, ¼ inch audio tape, 1978; centre: *Revolver Revue*, 1987; right: magnetizdat handmade cassette covers distributed by Petr Cibulka, 1970s-80s (© Daniela Šneppová)

*Revolver Revue* would include advertisements for materials such as audio recordings on cassette as well as unofficial events including concerts.

Whether playing it or attending concerts, live music became a shared experience of the social. Such gatherings contributed much to the creation of community in the underground. As it turned out, government repression of an underground musical concert in 1976 became one of the catalysts for Charta 77, a key political document of resistance under normalization. In order to understand how this came to happen, we need to delve deeper into the place of music in the Second Culture.

For those who refused to be ‘normalized’, leaving behind the isolation of the official sphere and becoming a part of an underground community was an appealing, and for some, the only, option. The Second Culture was a space of freedom where music became a critical element and social glue. The sphere of underground music was open and accepting to a variety of musical genres and experiments and had a wide base of fans. But music, like other forms of cultural creation, was tightly controlled by the state. If you did not have an official license to be a musician, you were not allowed to practise the profession: to perform in public, to record, to have access to professional equipment or rehearsal space, or to circulate your music. As a continuation of the normalization process, in order to work officially after 1973, a musician had to pass state requalification exams every two years. These exams were not only about musical proficiency but also about Marxist ideology and government policies. This state licensing process was in fact a mechanism of censorship. Musicians who wished to perform in public had to agree with the current political situation, and follow rules set by the state: they could only play a state-approved musical repertoire, at state-approved venues, with no English lyrics or band names permitted. Government guidelines for appearance were also put into place including a rule outlawing hair longer than collar-length.<sup>50</sup> Hair was already an issue by the mid-1960s, when the government put an official campaign in place that forbade *vlasáci* (long hairs) from being in certain pub-

<sup>50</sup> TIMOTHY RYBACK: *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, New York 1990, p. 143.

lic spaces. Long hair on men was a clear marker for both the official and unofficial worlds: it signalled a connection to a subculture, an underground.

The individual musician's decision to capitulate or not was complicated, as many just wanted the opportunity to play and were willing to accept the state's terms. For others, the compromise upset their moral compass and was unacceptable. As a key organizer and voice of the musical underground, Martin Jirous (artistic director of the Plastic People of the Universe) put it in 1975, 'It is better not to play music at all than play music that fails to spring from the performer's deepest musical convictions. It is better not to play at all than to play what the establishment demands.'<sup>51</sup> As in other fields, the price of resistance was loss of occupation.

Underground music created networks of communities through sharing tapes, magazines, books and records and through the orchestration of communal events, most importantly the concert: a collective social practice. Not allowed to perform in public, not even for free, the musicians who wanted to play their own music their own way found creative ways to perform in the countryside, at cottages, at weddings and other private functions. Locations of concerts would be spread through word of mouth, at times with very little advance notice in order to avoid police interference (unless they were part of a wedding, in which case invitations would be sent). People would travel far even on short notice to attend a concert. Attempts at creating this communal zone of freedom were deemed unacceptable by the regime and repercussions for independent music activities escalated in the mid-seventies. The most common charges against the music underground were hooliganism, disturbing the peace, singing indecent lyrics and illegal business activities. I should point out that much of the music was not considered overtly political in content and that many musicians claimed no explicitly political or dissident impulse but simply wanted to play music for an audience. As Vlasta Brabenec, saxophonist for the Plastic People of the Universe, clearly states: 'Our position was that we didn't want to be dissidents, and be 'on the other side of the barricades'. We were being ourselves. They were our expressions, our ideas, but we didn't want to fight openly against the Communist regime.'<sup>52</sup> It was the regime that defined whatever counted as political, non-conformity or criminal action. Police monitored individuals, events and activities associated with the musical underground, which they intervened in on many occasions, and often with violence.

The level of threat these independent, spontaneous communal activities posed for the authorities was forcefully demonstrated in the aftermath of an illegally-staged concert called the 'Second Music Festival of the Second Culture', held under the guise of Jirous's wedding celebration in Bojanovice

<sup>51</sup> JIROUS, A Report (as in footnote 15), p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> ROB CAMERON: Vrata Brabenec—Plastic Person still fighting for justice, Radio Interview, Prague 2003, URL: <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/one-on-one/vrata-brabenec-plastic-person-still-fighting-for-justice> (12.04.2014).

on 21 February 1976. The event featured numerous banned bands and performers, including the Plastic People of the Universe, DG 307 and Charlie Soukup. There was no police intervention at the actual concert/wedding celebration, but within a month of the concert the persecutions began: over 100 people, including audience members, musicians and organizers, were interrogated; twenty-seven arrests were made, homes were raided and instruments and materials, including photographic and film documentation, were confiscated. The arrests, trials and incarcerations of the musicians and organizers caused such outrage among Czech intellectuals and artists that it became a pivotal moment for the Czech Parallel Polis and the struggle for human rights. Government repression of the participants helped bring together dissidents of various factional (ideological) orientations, with members of the musical underground community in an unprecedented collaboration. Together they worked to create and circulate the now famous Charta 77 petition to the Czechoslovak government protesting chronic violations of basic human rights. I included one of the original carbon copies of Charta 77 in the exhibition. It hung on a wall that was papered with multiple copies of the official media response published in the government's main daily newspaper *Rudé Právo*, with the article entitled 'Losers and Pretenders' ('Ztroskotanci a Samozvanci')<sup>53</sup>, a propaganda piece directed against the signatories. Charta 77 was signed initially by 241 citizens, including writer and future president Václav Havel, but the petition was seized by the police before it could be delivered on 6 January 1977.<sup>54</sup> It became the focal point of opposition to the government, as Charta 77 subsequently became the label used to designate a broadly-based human rights movement active until the 1989 Velvet Revolution.

Very few people, including government bureaucrats, had access to the full Charta 77 document at this time, but most people knew that something oppositional existed and the names of some of the people involved in its creation began to appear in the official press outlets via slanderous government media campaigns. The chartists were framed as degenerates, losers, agitators and agents of the Imperialist West. Without ever having read Charta 77, thousands were coerced into publicly signing an official document refuting it, sending letters to the press in outrage against it and its creators and even appearing on television as part of the Anti-Charta rally that used VIPs from the official cultural sector to publicly oppose the charter. The State's hysterical response was due in part to the effectiveness of the chartists in reaching the foreign press who printed stories of the absurdity of the Czechoslovak government putting musicians on trial for playing rock music in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>53</sup> PAULINA BREN: *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring*, New York 2010, p. 105.

<sup>54</sup> JONATHAN BOLTON: *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 149-150.

Part of this story involves the unwitting government dissemination of dissident activity within the borders via official media campaigns and public spectacles: ‘nobody would have known or cared about the Charta if it wasn’t for the articles and the anti propaganda from the side of Communists.’<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion

The exhibition, *Samizdat: The Czech Art of Resistance, 1968-1989*, took a large number of works out of the archives to stage an encounter with the early 21st century and by so doing became a kind of museum of resistance. Although our technologies may have changed, the issues of power, culture, and agency that samizdat grappled with remain all too relevant in a world where totalitarianism lingers still. My resistance museum represents one attempt to demonstrate that resistance is not futile, even against staggering odds. Despite the regime’s efforts, via propaganda campaigns and systematic interference in the lives of many signatories (persecution, harassment, surveillance, interrogations, incarcerations, etc.), Charta 77 and its offspring continued to circulate and grow in samizdat form. Charta 77 is now considered one of the key steps that led to the Velvet Revolution of 1989, reminding us once more of the historical importance of independent acts of culture like samizdat and the collaborations and sense of community that kept a Second Culture alive. By placing a copy of Charta 77 next to other political and literary samizdat books, art films, performance documentation, and music recordings, I asked exhibition-goers to consider the complex convergence of aesthetics and politics at play. These connections were underlined in strategic arrangements of artefacts and staging that juxtaposed various modalities of production and media forms, revealing links between official and unofficial spheres and across the various archipelagos of independent communities. In the end, my experiment in creating a museum of resistance paralleled some of the logics of samizdat, insofar as the exhibition was also temporary and transient, and that it aspired to unconventional design and staging, and returned to hiding when the archival loan period concluded and the artefacts were returned to their boxes in Prague.

I recently realized something about samizdat, something quite obvious, perhaps even hidden in plain sight. In the Czech language, the word ‘samizdat’ can be read as conjoining two key words: ‘sami’ (meaning ‘ourselves’ or ‘on our own’) suggests independence or freedom and ‘zdat’ (if we accent the á) becomes the Czech verb, ‘to dream.’ Samizdats grew out of an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that demanded a sort of creative invisibility when

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<sup>55</sup> František Stárek cited in TREVER HAGEN: From Inhibition to Commitment: Politics in the Czech Underground, in: EastBound (2002), Special Issue ‘Popular Music in Eastern Europe’, URL: [http://eastbound.eu/site\\_media/pdf/EB2012\\_Hagen.pdf](http://eastbound.eu/site_media/pdf/EB2012_Hagen.pdf) (12.02.2015).

dreaming of freedom. In this ‘hidden sphere’,<sup>56</sup> manifesting the work of the imagination became a most courageous act. In moving from the realm of ideas to the world of the material, small aesthetic acts like these empowered individuals and communities. In the museum of resistance, these small acts were situated next to hundreds of other small acts, objects, and events which, when experienced together, en masse, offered a different sense of what happened. This is what these small acts of cultural activity represent, then: moments that suspend and confront and resist fear. Philosopher and Charta 77 spokesperson Jan Patočka asserted that individuals can ‘transform themselves from passively accepting “fate” into freely and actively ‘choosing’ destiny [...] The ability to act constitutes history.’ Critically, therefore, ‘freedom was not conceived of as liberty or volition, but as initiative.’<sup>57</sup> Samizdat is thus a key material trace of those actions and initiatives and choices and transformations. And because the circumstances of an object’s creation and circulation are part of the object’s identity and meaning, the aesthetics of samizdat constitute a crucial feature of its historical significance.

### Zusammenfassung

#### *Samizdat aufführen. Die tschechische Kunst des Widerstands, 1968-1989*

Dieser Artikel untersucht die ästhetischen und politischen Ansätze verschiedener kultureller Untergrundpraktiken in der Tschechoslowakei während der Phase der Normalisierung nach der sowjetischen Invasion von 1968. Zu diesem Zweck wird nachvollzogen, welche Herausforderungen bei der Konzipierung einer Ausstellungsreihe, gedacht als ein temporäres „Museum des Widerstands“, bewältigt und welche Strategien dafür verfolgt werden mussten. Unter dem Titel „Samizdat. Die tschechische Kunst des Widerstands, 1968-1989“ gastierte die Ausstellung in New York City (2011), Washington, DC (2012) und Cedar Rapids/IA (2015). Sie präsentierte mehr als 300 Artefakte, die den Widerstand in Form von heimlich hergestellten Büchern, Journalen, Postern, Kunstwerken und *magnetizdats* (unter der Hand kursierenden Tonbandaufnahmen) anschaulich machen, sowie Foto- und Filmdokumente von tschechischen kulturellen Untergrundaktivitäten zwischen 1968 und 1989. In dem Artikel wird der ästhetische und materielle Quellenreichtum dessen, was Ivan Martin Jirous die „Zweite Kultur“ nennt, diskutiert, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der formalen Diversität und den komplexen historischen Kontexten ihrer Produktion und ihres Konsums.

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**Key words:** samizdat, Czechoslovakia, totalitarianism, resistance, underground art, Second Culture, Soviet occupation, censorship, media materiality, museum practice

<sup>56</sup> VÁCLAV HAVEL: Power of the Powerless (1978), URL: [http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2\\_aj\\_eseje.html&typ=HTML](http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML) (22.01.2015).

<sup>57</sup> Patočka cited in FALK (as in footnote 14), p. 246.