MARGINAL NOTES ON A SPONTANEOUS ART COLLECTION

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Abstract: The article “Marginal Notes on a Spontaneous Art Collection of Pavel Konečný” tries to generally depict the current situation of artistic expressions, as classified under the term art brut. I briefly describe the story of a gradual expansion of my collection of spontaneous art, including its specific focus not only on art brut, but also on folk and naïve art. I also pay attention to some peculiar marginal creators from the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Keywords: art, visual art, collector, collection, art brut, naive art, folk art, spontaneous creators.

Resumen: El artículo “Marginal Notes on a Spontaneous Art Collection of Pavel Konečný” trata de describir la situación actual de la expresión artística llamada arte bruto. El autor describe brevemente la historia de una expansión gradual de su colección de arte espontáneo, incluyendo su enfoque específico no sólo en el arte bruto, sino también en el arte folk and naïve. También presta atención a algunos creadores marginales peculiares de la República Checa y Eslovaquia.

Palabras claves: arte, arte visual, coleccionista, colección, arte bruto, arte folk, arte naïve, creadores espontáneos.
If someone would have asked what attracted me to the spontaneous art (which, of course, includes the creation of unschooled artists across the board, richness and variability in the ways and forms of expression), I might have told him that it was innate artist’s creative skill and unusual fantasy to talk with the outside world, but also with his own inner self. Moreover, in a dedicated, humble awe and passion, without knowing anything about art and its functions, as they are commonly understood by the majority of today advanced technocratic society. Revelatory and cathartic ability to disrupt established cultural patterns of art is important for me. The necessity, inner desirability for a strong creative passion, quite similar to age-old basic natural elements, a clinging one’s own human imagination attack. The desire to get to the beauty (and of course not only beauty) without any additional compensation, except a strong desire and the experience itself: Shapes, colors, lines, materials, all their possible combinations, variations and ability to put them into unexpected contexts, unusual environment. Inspiration - not imitated from books, not read from catalogues, but gathered with painful scars on the soul during life, even accidentally and involuntarily - is the building material for a utopian dream, wondrously nascent with obsession, sometimes successfully concealed from others, and even more compelling than exhibiting efforts of others to achieve recognition. However, purity of intentions at the time of hypocrisy is true only until it becomes an article offered under the counter as a scarce one. I am afraid now that the water of hidden natural spring art brut will soon be offered in attractive packaging with a perfect “chemical analysis” of its composition. Around untainted surface of springing source of clean water, it is becoming a bit crowded. Interest in artistic expressions of marginal artists, outsiders, rises every year in many ways and undoubtedly becomes fashionable. In the world, new galleries specializing exclusively in art brut or outsider art have been created, and an extensive network of collectors has been arising around them. There is an increasing number of publications, catalogues and films devoted to spontaneous artists. The magazine Raw Vision is no longer the only specialized press tracing this individual area of visual art. After being commercially successful overseas, the selling exhibitions of outsider art, accompanied by specialized auction events, have in a large measure moved to the Western Europe, too. I have been observing a turning point in the perception of the original spontaneous art creation for several years, and especially since a kind of growing crisis of established galleries and auction system, or rather the art market. Crisis manifested itself not so much in financial terms of the profit of these institutions, but rather in not cultivating, distancing of the vast majority of contemporary art for visitors to the exhibition halls. As if the development of art reached a deadlock of sterility, obscurity, and perhaps even a cynical grimace of mere grinding the principles of once expressed and proven art creation contents. Value emptiness, so far away from the inner truth and vital vigor with which we are confronted when in contact with the indefinable magic of spontaneous creation, is now clearer and more readable. As if, the injection of authenticity, originality and freshness of art brut was tasked to resuscitate the weary artistic experience. Danger of gradual and inconspicuous transition of pure spontaneous creation in a mere mindless production begin to grow alarmingly, though.

As a long-time collector, I have always been interested in the opinion of artists, writers, and visual artists who are close to me, in the art creation of outsiders, marginal authors, in their complacency and openness so similar to children’s artistic expressions full of authentic joy, aliveness, immediacy and spontaneity. I once looked for an inspirational text suitable for a small publication entitled Těn naïve drawings, which I was just editorially preparing for publication. I addressed with a little chance of success, the world famous Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal, and asked him if he could write something on this topic from his point of view. I was very surprised when, in October 1977, I really received a letter from him from Kersko where he used to live then. Inside the envelope, there were typically Hrabalesque concise poetic texts of which I have to mention a few ideas:
“A naïve artist is sentenced to a model of his inner desire, a naïve painter is the submersible river Punkva, which had run deep in the rocks for a long time, until it suddenly appeared on a sunny meadow. No matter what the painter learned, how old he is, and what role he takes in social life. [...] The most important thing is the miraculous transformation of man in a painter, the unexpected good fortune when heavens burst and the hand of its own accord records the gusts coming out from the soul” 1. Also, an outstanding contemporary sculptor and artist František Skála, did not refuse me when I asked him for the accompanying text to the exhibition of my outsider art collection in the Prague Museum Montanelli in 2012. He also convinced me of his empathic sensitivity to spontaneous authors’ expression, when he willingly and with an existential preoccupation wrote into my catalogue: “I don’t care if an artist is an amateur or a professional. There is no harm in formal training, but it is far more important not to lose that natural drive for self-expression by means available to us; the drive found in all children, which comes from the heart and brings joy. [...] I am only interested in the traces that an encounter with a particular work of art leaves within me. In today’s world full of strategies for deceiving people, what is most valuable is the purity of immaculate expression” 2.

The penultimate Venetian Biennale focused unprecedented attention on the spontaneous work of outsiders, chosen from around the world and did not hesitate to expose and present them next to the leading contemporary artists and already established, generally accepted authorities of Modern Art. Inconsistency of this fact is obvious, and only the future will answer the question of whether this significant and certainly bold curatorial act providing different criteria and a new perspective for the spontaneous creation of unschooled artists was indeed a step in the right direction. However, let’s believe that exactly such a dynamic dialogue, direct confrontation of the marginal and professional art are needed and necessary. After all, it was predicted by the Czech essayist and writer Josef Jedlička, when he wrote a few years ago: “A culture that does not have its corrective in outsiders, has stagnated since its lifetime rate is a measure of courage of these outsiders” 3.

A garden after the rain, which is the image metaphor that irresistibly comes to my mind when I begin to think about my collecting, about the paintings, drawings, and sculptures that have been part of my home for forty-five years: I cannot think of any aesthetic or philosophical connections, only of a garden after the rain. Full of trees in blossom, with the scent of the wood and the cracked bark, with sunny spots but also mysterious secluded nooks with thick shrubbery and old tree stumps. Perhaps also a mysterious night garden, drowned in the flickering light of the stars and the moon, purified by the morning shower, with apples lying in the grass, with the wind swishing in the tree boughs, with well-trodden muddy paths around the wet redcurrant bushes and rotting fruit. Ordinary and miraculous at the same time. Like these ordinary and at the same time miraculous works of art, by “artists with the pure heart”, the subject of this text. The phenomenon of collecting has an important place in fine arts and occurs in various periods of history of art. Collections may be classified according to the genre that is collected.

Regarding my own collection, I would perhaps describe it as something that arose from my natural emotional attraction toward the unostentatious, authentic work of people living an ordinary life, often on the margin of society. True, from the beginning of my activity, concentrating on a specific area of naïve art, folk, marginal, outsider or medium art, I did not see any final goal in my efforts, I did not set in advance any strict criteria for selection and documentation, or even methods and principles of evidence.

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attitudes that are often typical of enthusiastic collectors of anything under the sun. This of course means that I often proceeded chaotically according to the irregular, high or low tide of my inner attraction toward non-professional art. From the point of view of a real collector, this naturally has its negative aspects. One of the major limitations affecting the extent and in a way also the quality of my collection is the fact that I did not have a car for a long time, and all my trips aiming to find the artists, often in a complicated way, were done with my wife mostly by train and on foot. Only after my wife’s sudden and unexpected departure from this world, I began travelling and visiting spontaneous creators with my girlfriend also by car, and so I could expand my radius of action to neighboring Poland and especially to so much beloved Italy.

The roots of my lifelong interest are, as now I can see them, in the lively and open cultural atmosphere of the 1960s, affecting of course Olomouc in Moravia as well, an atmosphere that brought major stimuli and a valuable experience through exhibitions held in that period. One of these experiences, on December 6, 1968, comes back to my memory especially vividly. On that day, by chance more or less, I went to the private viewing in the Theatre of Music in Olomouc. It was a small exhibition of the work of the painter Antonín Řehák from Svatý Kopeček, near Olomouc. I remember how I was passing through this rather small exhibition room next to the main hall, and was enchanted and felt immediately attracted by a previously unknown magnetism. To this day I recall the remarkable detailed drawings as well as the large oil paintings of the sensitive guardian of flowerbeds, and the obliging distributor of drinking water to his neighbors, a naïve artist, known by that time both in this country and abroad who was incorporated in the encyclopedia of naïve art by the theorist Otto Bihalji Merin. Unfortunately, at that time it did not occur to me that I might buy one of the works shown there but it must have been one of the initial hidden impulses for my collecting.

My first journey as a collector took me to the East Bohemian town of Nový Bydžov, after I had discovered, in a copy of my favorite magazine World Literature, no.5-6/1969⁵, “the pataphysical home” of a retired tailor, Václav Kudera. I wrote to him and he replied by return of post and in his careful handwriting invited me to come and see his remarkable private stone gallery. Thus in the summer of 1971 I brought home the first statue. It was unforgettable, meeting this charming man, who would bring from afar, on a cart, sandstone milestones from road edges, in order to carve from them the figures or faces of people known around the world of culture or of some rather original neighbors of his. On that day, we bought the stone head of Karel Hynek Mácha. There was a price reduction for students! The imaginary portrait of the Romantic Czech poet thus became the “founding stone” of our collection. A great experience indeed. Some more trips to discover the innumerable forms of authentic art followed soon. The yellow single-story house in Palacký Street Nr.189 in Kyjov in South Moravia was hiding a wealth of the works of Mrs. Cecilie Marková, a hats saleswoman. In 1972, I saw, for the first time, with my astonished eyes, the blazing landscapes, the irreal astral flower-heads, the perfect pencil drawings based on the message of a medium, and the glowing pastels from which dreamful human faces were emerging, mirroring the sadness of the soul. These original and impressive works, with roots reaching to the depth of spiritism, hung on the walls of the room, one picture close to another, or carefully stored in large folders kept behind the sofa and wardrobes, hit me with their strange power. I came to know Mrs. Marková closer, and then for many years, with each additional visit, I watched in detail every new acquisition, displayed on the kitchen table (where she made her works). The soft-voiced


and passionate comment of the artist was accompanied by the loud ticking of the wall clock, and often ended with a timid question: “[...] So what do you say to that, Pavel?” It is told about her that formerly in Kyjov, where she attended spiritualist séances, she had the reputation of a mysterious, inapproachable and complex woman. However, I came to know her as a modest, active, kind woman with a real interest in the world around - and this interest did not flag with advancing age. Her art achieved the character of a purifying therapeutic ritual and provided stimuli for her rich and well-balanced inner life. She astonished us by the contrasts: under an ordinary up-and-down lamp, she created a world of prehistoric landscapes, fantastic labyrinths of almost automatic (through a medium) drawings and at the same time, she managed to keep an eye on the stove where cakes were being baked. Similarly close to me was the Slovak beekeeper and sculptor Matej Čupec, whose later work I could follow from July 1972 until his death. My friends had called my attention to him. He lived in a rather small house with a garden at the northern end of the little village Horná Štubňa, not far from the spa Turčianské Teplice. When you crossed a narrow footbridge over a small stream and walked a path to a red metal gate, you had to pass several stone heads, propped up against the house wall, right under the windows. The heads looked across the flowerbed up to the sky. You felt as if you were on Easter Island. We were told by his kind wife that from the early morning he was at work in the place where he kept his beehives, on the edge of a wood a couple of miles away. Nevertheless, it paid to wait, and when he returned, we could watch in the room or in the workshop his new works, which had amazing originality. In particular, the peculiar stone heads, made of a material acquired in a nearby andesite quarry, never failed to captivate me with their original, raw, one might say archetypal expression reminding me of menhirs. Sometimes I recollect this: one summer, I bought from Mr. Čupec a rather big and heavy stone statue, The Gypsy Head. We stayed somewhat longer, engaged in talking and observing the šošky (he tenderly called his works “statuettes”) so that only a few moments remained to the train departure. I set out on foot along the road lined with apple trees to reach the station. On the way, Mr. Čupec overtook me on an old ramshackle motorcycle. From the large rucksack on his back, the stone face was peering. When the train arrived, he took the sculpture out and with care put it on the bench. Next to it, he put a honey jar. Later I acquired several more heads from Mr Čupec, but that first head I like best. The first contact with an artist was most often made in writing. In the early October 1972 I wrote to the then address of Mrs. Anna Zemánková - Buzulucká 2, Praha 6 - asking whether I could buy some work of hers. In late October the reply came: “I am pleased to have your letter, come and see my very interesting drawings. I do not sell them. I always say they are too large for sale. However, when you come, I let you choose the drawing which you like best. If your mother is interested in my art, I cordially invite her too. You can spend the night in our home, there is plenty of room. Looking forward to seeing you, Zemánková”. And indeed, we were received in a kind and unaffected way, which may have been due to the fact that both my wife and I came from Olomouc, where she was born. In the doorway we were welcomed by a corpulent smiling woman with bright eyes. Later, when we were seated, under a lamp with a lampshade made by herself, she talked in her deep, rather dramatic voice, about the beginnings and the development of her art, the complex character of an artist’s inspiration, about the original techniques she had discovered, about the motivations and dimensions of her spontaneous creativity. We were amazed when we went through the stacks of remarkable drawings, pastels and paintings, which seemed to have originated in a different, unheard-of world, full of unknown kinds of flowers, birds, and butterflies of compelling beauty. At that time we brought back home one pastel she had given us, made with the pressed technique, combining yellow-orange and soft green colors with a tiny drawing made with the ballpoint pen. It is still before our eyes. The flowers in it look like spread out sails of a ship heading for the horizon, for somewhere else. I met Mrs. Zemánková several times. In the spring of 1980, I taped an interview
with her, in which she remembers her far from easy life, full of a desire for expression, a life filled with true creativity and love. Later it was published in the catalogue of the so far largest retrospective exhibition of hers, prepared by Arsen Pohribný for the Art Museum Olomouc in 1998.

I was planning to make a similar interview with the naïve painter Joža Mrázek Hoříčky, who for years was a celebrated model in the sculpture studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. In the early 1980s, he lived in Černošice near Prague, where he inhabited one room in a devastated former pre-war hotel. He even sent me a telegram confirming the date so that I did not expect any complications. Numb with cold from the long train ride on this frosty winter morning, I walked through the corridors of the quiet hotel, with the tape recorder, but found no door with a name card. It took quite a time before I managed to break this Kafkaesque atmosphere and discovered an entrance on the second floor, where the painter was to wait for me. I knocked but no one answered the door so I slowly and cautiously went in. What I saw was most unusual: an unheated room full of furniture. In one corner, under the frosty window, in bed, covered with a heavy feather quilt, the painter was asleep, puffing regularly. When he woke up, he began the rite of morning hygiene - combing his thick beard and his white Bohemian hair. He had to break the ice covering his washbasin. In the meantime, I looked round to find a socket where I would plug in the tape recorder. It came out there was no electricity in the room. Therefore, Joža, now dressed in his Sunday best, took me to a noisy pub on the ground floor, where we had breakfast and I was told much about his varied life, which started in the city of statues, Hořice v Podkrkonoší. Finally, he showed me part of his older paintings, kept under the bed, and allowed me to make photos of his present-day landscape painting. For Joža, the main value in the judging of his work and actually any other artefact was whether “there was nature in it”. It certainly was in his pictures. I was unable to make a recording of his talk but I did not leave empty-handed. The artist at that time would travel by train through Bohemia and was diligently working on a cycle depicting our castles and castle ruins. I gained one of these pictures for my collection. Joža had a natural talent for acting and declaiming, and used it on any suitable or unsuitable occasion. He also wrote poetry, as shown by the ecstatic lines he dedicated to me: “Dear Friend Konečný Pavel: The Verses for You are sharp as a Sable! As long as a Spark Burns in Us: Of Good, Faith and Beauty. We shall live to see each Tomorrow, Happiness – Peace and Salvation! I adapted these lines with which I am not Content. Because they could sound in an empty Room! I acknowledge this For Ever! Joža Mrázek Hoříčky”.

One beautiful Sunday morning in summer, my friends and I went for a trip by train to Hlubočky, not far away from Olomouc. Nearly at the end of the village, we passed a low house with a lemon-yellow front; in the garden in front of the house, a beautifully shaped tall green juniper bush was growing. A house fit for an artist, I said to myself, and went on, but then I noticed, in the back yard, a woodshed decorated with a large colored head and several smaller heads. This naturally attracted my attention and brought me swiftly back to the gate. I rang the bell and an elderly man, not very tall, dressed as if for work, and came to open the gate. He was Vincenc Jahn, a retired man, who obligingly let us in. He showed us his work, giving a brief introduction to each: several fresh, lightly painted oils depicting scenery from the surrounding woods, and several more heads full of expression and astonishing imagination, wooden heads to which he gave the final shape according to his ideas, while using cement or plaster. “There is some
wonderful life in the wood of the tree”, he said thoughtfully and I already had a title for my newspaper article about the discovery of an authentic, as yet unknown painter and sculptor. It was some time in the middle of 1992. The untrained, quite original, only from inner motivation derived art of Mr. Jahn was unfortunately approaching its end. Soon afterwards, he became severely ill and the creativity was deserting him, even though I encouraged him in his work and supported him. The splendid series of heads that got into my collection, thus reminds me of a more or less accidental meeting, without which the work of this sheltered autodidact painter and sculptor and a modest man would have remained unknown. To take walks is not merely good for health.

Paths to the original raw art can be different but they always make you come closer to the artist since he cannot remain indifferent to you even as a human being. By presenting his work, he opens his soul. Without pretending anything, without calculation, with the faith in and expectation of the same sincerity on your part. Thus, in 1990, I came to know a quiet, introvert man, concentrated completely on his work, which had become the sole purpose of his life. Now a disabled retiree, Zbyněk Semerák lives in the north of Moravia in the district town of Šumperk, in the middle of woods. He would perceived nature, however, only through the glass of the kitchen window, when in the deep of the night or in the early morning he was crouching at the table and patiently, with exhausting feverishness he was creating his detailed drawings and complex temperas. He had become detached from the present world. He had neither a telephone nor a television set; he was not engulfed by the latest news and data from the life of the society. He would only draw and paint. He disliked taking a break for a meal. This permanent activity, which put demands on both his eyes and his soul, and created his own, imitable, dreamt-out world, was undoubtedly a sort of private rite. His subtle psyche nearly could not stand the strain of the sudden loneliness after the death of his beloved mother, with whom he had lived since he was a child. All that was left for him since was his creativity, a security and a beautiful obsession. A work of authentic art brut can be born even among the cold and impersonal blocks of a housing estate. I find it repeatedly whenever I visit Zbyněk.

Over the years, there were many human contacts and warm meetings on my travels aiming to find untrained spontaneous artists, who create their work from real necessity and with an obvious humility. Thus, I came to know the joking bus driver on the line Žilina - Olomouc and a splendid, inventive sculptor - Jan Labuda from Slovak Štiavníč; the always optimistic and cordial painter of fantastic visions, a former textile factory worker, living in Rýmařov in a house full of paintings, literally from cellar to the lot - Mrs. Marie Kodovská; and another frailand quiet painter of confessions in expressive colors - Mrs. Františka Kudelová, now an inmate of the mental hospital in Kroměříž. I can’t forget the tall farmer from Eastern Slovakia - Andrej Hankovský from East Slovak Rychvald near Bardejov, who made wooden reliefs and figures of raw poetry, at 50 crowns per piece; the kind and generous postman and now world-renowned painter from Bratislava - Ondrej Šteberl; the taciturn fairy-tale narrator and lover of justice - the painter Václav Beránek from Jihlava; the sinewy sculptor from Babin in the Orava region, who left behind remarkable woodcarvings - Štefan Siváň. During my travels, I met the cheerful and noisy accordion player and painter of municipal vedutas - Josef Raiman, from Oslavany, the friendly deaf loner and incomparable Wallachian woodcarver - Josef Heja, the somewhat incommunicative kind man, the Slovak forester from Martin, producing statues, both small and large - Jozef Kňazko. With many more, unfortunately, I was only in contact through correspondence and for various reasons I have never met them in person. I regret it most in the case of the painter Mrs. Natalie Schmidtová, who lived in Rozsochy near Bystřice pod Peřéřejnem, and the original woodcarver from Prachatice, Josef Chwala. I
also regret that I am a mere collector and not a poet, as those whose works ended up in my collection.

Collection of spontaneous art, which I have been collecting for more than forty years, has a specific character, arising from the fact that it consists of both manifestations of folk art, as well as the naïve creation and art brut. In fact, I did not want to get started to deliberately limit myself in my collector’s interest, and for someone perhaps I created a somewhat eclectic set, but it corresponds to my personality makeup. This certain ambiguity, randomness and restlessness is definitely the most transparent and perhaps also the defining feature of my collection. It is focused almost exclusively on works by Czech and Slovak spontaneous authors and only in the last few years, it has increased in number with artefacts from Poland and especially from central Italy. The collection, currently numbering more than 500 items, is represented by 50 authors from four European countries. It has been exhibited nine times individually in the Czech and Slovak Republics, then it was loaned to several collective exhibitions of Czech art brut abroad (France, Belgium, Germany, Slovakia, and USA). I consider my biggest collector’s success the discovery and promotion of works by Czech authors such as Vincenc Jahn, Zbyněk Semerák, Leoš Wertheimer, Oldřich Vrána, František Frélich, Jaroslav Diviš and by Italian artists Pietro Moschini, who even managed to build a small museum in his house in Tuscania (Lazio) with the help of his family and friends. The collection of spontaneous art has become a kind of axis and a connecting line of my life and it still brings me much joy and satisfaction, so that I can hand down the inspiring news from the periphery of Fine Arts and primarily from mutual meetings with spontaneous creators and their works to other people.

Pavel Konečný
November 9, 2015

Anna Zemánková: Three Flowers, 70’s of the 20th century, combined technique, paper 62,5 × 45 cm, photo Pavel Konečný.

Ondrej Šteberl: Slovak Pastorale, 1969, oil, canvas, 65 x 85 cm, photo Pavel Konečný.

Photo 7. View of the exhibition of Pavel Konečný’s collection in Dům umění in Opava, 2015, photo Pavel Konečný.

Pavel Konečný

Marginal Notes on a Spontaneous Art Collection

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