SEP 11

HK Zamani in Dialogue with Tom Pazderka

INTERVIEW, SANTA BARBARA

Tom Pazderka: First off, I want to say, thanks for showing me the short documentary "Dialogs" that was filmed 30 years ago for the exhibit "Dialogue: Prague/Los Angeles."

I'm now probably more American than Czech, but you get the idea. At the time of that exhibition, 1989, I was living in Czechoslovakia and I was 8-years-old. So, too young for the context of the show, but in retrospect, looking at this footage, I'm struck with a sense of strong nostalgia, belonging and understanding.

I think it takes many years for these kinds of emotions to develop properly. I get the sense of having seen something like this at that time. We were never that far from Prague, where this event took place, just a 30-minute train ride from my hometown, and we went to Prague fairly regularly.

The imagery, the art and the style, not to mention the grainy VHS video, stark onscreen typeface—all scream 90s nostalgia.

But there is something deeper going on behind the surface. The exhibition was designed from the beginning as a dialog between American artists from LA and Czech artists stationed in Prague at the dawn of post-communism in Czechoslovakia, arguably in the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe. The question asked was, what would develop when these two groups of artists got together in an exhibition, feeding off each

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The commentary already points out how similar the work seemed between the LA and the Prague artists, despite the decades' long rift between the two countries. I'll have some questions regarding this later, but right now I want to pile on some material, because I feel there are some very juicy and prescient issues at stake here, some have to do with the past and some with our immanent future.

During the film, the camera briefly docks on the front of a building (I'm assuming that this wasn't where the exhibition took place, but perhaps some meetings?), which was known by every Czech at that time, because each town had one of these. There is a big red star near the rooftop and underneath the logo "Lidovy Dum," roughly translated as "House of the People."

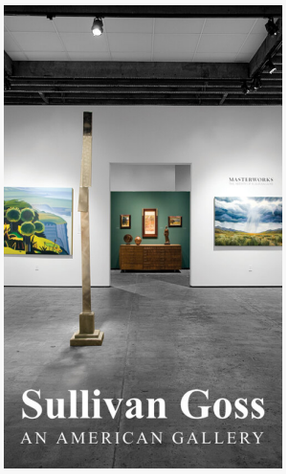
What was the feeling like during your time in Prague at this moment, was there a particular sense you felt, a genius loci of place? And are you also nostalgic for that era, well, perhaps I should first ask, are you nostalgic at all, and then ask what do you feel when looking at the images from that time now?

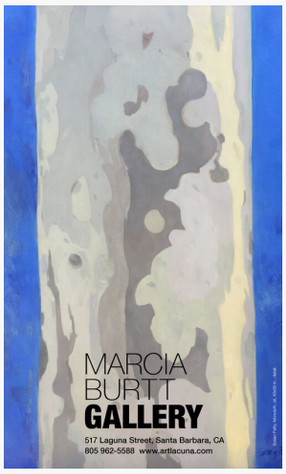
We're now close to the 30-year mark since the November Velvet Revolution. Last year marked 100 years of the independence of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the US/Czech political relations. The time seems to be ripe to dredge out some old history, no? But also, this question dovetails nicely into your performance, where you and a Czech artist use hoses to "wash" each other, or hose each other down. It's a simple and powerful work. My understanding of the piece may differ from yours, though, I'm getting the symbolism of the washing away of the grime and dirt of the past between the two countries and its peoples. How did you see this work then and how do you see it now?

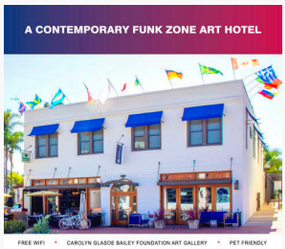
HK Zamani: Thank you. I'm excited about our dialogue. I'll be leaving for NY on Friday for a show in Philly, another revisitation of the past, a ten-year anniversary for TSA Philly, and it was at Tyler that I first announced the starting of the Kamikaze shows.

I'm more nostalgic for my youth than the era/s. I was thirty in 1989.

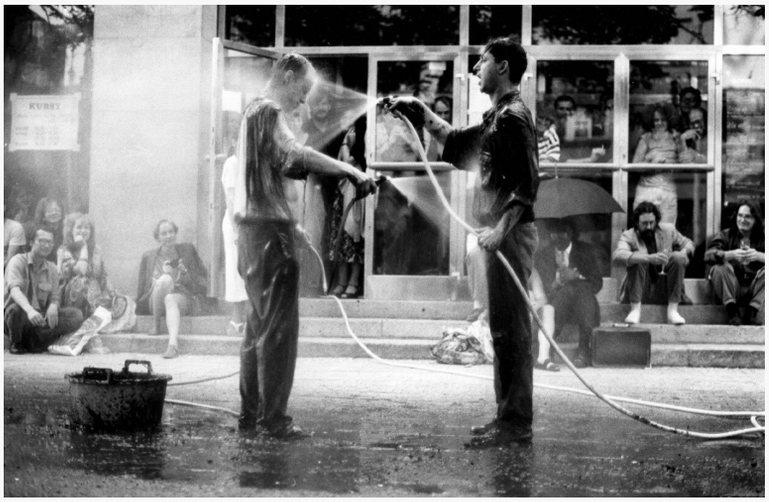
My first visit to Prague is particularly special for me. We had just graduated with our MFAs and were treated as the representatives of LA. The Czech artists were the best young artists of Prague.







East/West, 1989. Collaboration with Tomas Ruller. Performed at Gong, Prague, Czech Republic.



East/West, 1989. Collaboration with Tomas Ruller. Performed at Gong, Prague, Czech Republic.

The "Dialogue: Prague/LA" has become historically symbolic since the Velvet Revolution followed shortly after. There was a fifteen-year celebration of "Dialogue" that took place in LA and Prague in 2004. It was partly funded by the Czech government.

The original exhibits took place at Lidovy Dum with all artists, Galerie Mladich with some of the Americans, and lectures and my performance with Tomas at Gong. I believe our posters with both Czech and US flags where pasted around town, and it was the first time to see the American flag in Prague since 1967.

I arrived a week earlier than most LA artists, and sat in on many conversations conducted in Czech. I felt like the ugly American. The mood in Prague was Kafkarna or Kafka-esque. Many of the artists didn't have passports. They were unofficial artists since they refused to support the government's policies. Tomas Ruller was invited to Documenta but could not participate since he didn't have a passport.

The Czech artists were going along, but had doubts that the "Dialogue" could continue to LA. Who would have known that there would be a miracle with the VR (Velvet Revolution). Then there were fundraising efforts with the help of Jane Fonda, and the Czech artists were brought to LA in June 1990 to exhibit at Otis Art Gallery, Santa Monica Museum, and a couple of other locations where all artists showed together. Another catalogue was produced, this one was on the Czechs. The "Dialogue" didn't receive the attention it deserved. Perhaps if the LA artists were the Mike Kelleys of LA the recognition would have been more substantial.

On a personal level, for me, the introduction to the Czech culture was a substitute for interaction with my own Iranian roots. I haven't been back to Iran since 1974. Czechs were eastern and western simultaneously, a bit like me. On some level, I felt more of a connection to them than to most of my American colleagues. I went back in 1990 to make a catalogue, in 2004 for the 15-year anniversary dialogue, and in 2007 with an invitation from Tomas to collaborate in the Prague Quadrennial, and continuing with a performance tour to Poland. Tomas and I have continued our collaboration, and since 2009 through the use of internet with concurrent performances and simulcasts. Time and space is collapsed.

For our first collaboration, I invited Tomas to throw mud at me, and I didn't explain why. But it was because I saw myself as the ugly American. He thought about it and accepted as long as we would have a wash afterwards. It was a great piece to close the "Dialogue." In LA for the 15-year anniversary, we did a new version of the original piece. I feared being arrested performing it in Prague during the Communist era, but we came closer to that at Barnsdall Municipal Art Gallery in LA. They refused to give us

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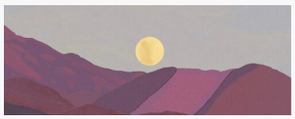

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permission to dig our own bunker/graves for the mud fight and wash, and we did it without permission. The gallery called the police. It was a powerful piece in '89, and it continues to be timeless. Our last performance together was last year. I was in LA, and he was in Brno in the Czech Republic for his retrospective museum exhibit.

I have had the most profound experiences in the Czech Republic. It's almost home. The first time that I read "Metamorphosis" was in Farsi.

Fashion of the Veil, 2009. Performance. Duration: 1 hour. Track 16, Santa Monica, California. Photo by Emma Jürgensen.

TP: There is a lot to chew on here already. Many years ago, I saw a documentary about the Czechoslovakian political climate of the late 1980s, I believe it was called, "The Long Wait for Spring," a play on words on the Prague Spring of 1968. It was produced for the West but included some interesting insights into dissident movements and the "would-be" politicians, like Havel, that they would eventually become.

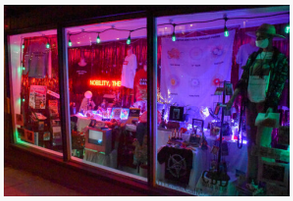
What was interesting for the time is that there were many artists that participated in politics in those days, perhaps spurred by the moment, and that Havel himself was a playwright. There seems to have been a window that opened up, however briefly, in which artists actually seem to have played an important role in the country's political life. The very fact that "Dialogue" happened was itself a powerful political act. Do you take it that way and how aware were you of Czechoslovakian politics at the time of the exhibition?

HK: I do remember that some of the folks I met in 1989 became politicians. I believe that was short-lived. The ones that were more interested in politics than their practice may have continued. The "Dialogue" did seem like the impossible being made possible.

Zdenka Gabalova was the Czech curator for our "Dialogue," and Barbara Benish was the LA artist/curator. Zdenka continued to work as a curator in NY, then became a Czech diplomat. She was the LA Czech Council for a while. I collaborated with her and hosted an exhibition of works by Jiri Cernicky in 2000. We produced a small catalogue for the show as well. Her ex-husband, Ivan Gabal, was involved in politics and continues to be a politician. Not sure what his position is or was after the Velvet Revolution.

Barbara Benish was always political. I believe one of her recent projects is about collecting plastic detritus from oceans and has a collaborative book project that was published a couple of years ago. She spends the summers at her mill in Czech Republic near the Austrian border, managing an artist residency and exhibition program, and teaches at UC Santa Cruz part of the year.

I was somewhat jealous of the arrangement that artists had in Czechoslovakia. They had humble flats and separate studios. That's all that I've ever wanted. Many of them thought Reagan was a great president and desired his brand of capitalism. I was surprised by that. But they learned soon about the deficiencies of capitalism.



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"LA Art Court" (Female Dealers), 2004. Fabric, armature, slide projection. COLA Grant Exhibit, Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall, Los Angeles, California. Photo by HK Zamani.

Some of my past performances have been overtly political and emotionally motivated; for example, the veil performances since 2001. Even abstract painting can be perceived as political.

I think that work has to be art first. If it is perceived more as politics than art, it's weak. There are artists that are very successful in making political art—Hans Haacke, Leon Golub, Ai Weiwei, Robbie Conal, Kim Abeles, to name a few.

TP: Let's pick up on that. Do you believe that art and politics are inextricably linked? Is there a position that art can take that is non-political? Pat Passlof once wrote in a manifesto "no"—to politics among other things like "content for content's sake, message, political correctness, self-expression, sincerity, ideas, technology, communication, gender issues, race issues, issues period, relevance, taste, deconstructionism, conceptualism, experts. Fuck cleverness. Fuck sophistication."

This saying "no" to the political seemed to me at the time of her exhibition as overtly political. Is this an impasse or does it even matter? The door that opened up for artists to enter politics in 1990s Czechoslovakia was swiftly shut, yet the political aspirations of artists continued, did they not? Can you also elaborate on abstract art and the political, perhaps relating it to your own abstract works?

HK: Politics and Art: I seem to vacillate between making work that is overtly political, mainly some of my performances, and abstract paintings that are a different kind of political statement. I think it was Habermas who we read in grad school that suggested abstract art was political in its apolitical aspect. I go along with that. Although, abstract expressionism was used by the US government as art of the free world to promote capitalism. This brings us to the subject of "Politics of Support," a theme that I have explored in my work, influenced by my practices as an artist and presenter. Examples would include "LA Art Court" series, and the Kamikaze Exhibit programming at PØST.

I returned to using traditional media in 2004. The subject matter and its treatment was also politically charged, a geodesic dome/tent. The image was the structure in a state of disarray from my performance at Kampa Museum in Prague in 2004. I think revisiting Prague for the 15-year anniversary of "Dialogue" compelled this return to traditional media, also a subject matter that seemed connected to thirteen years of conceptual works, and worthy of contemplative studies that followed. The image was painted in oils, and groundless, no cast shadows, homeless, and a failed habitat.

These carefully rendered paintings paved my return to paint. The current works since 2009 are a shift away from that subject matter and a return to the way I used to paint until 1992. It was a return to the cave (painting). I wanted each of these abstract works to have their own identity, not have a serial aspect. PØST is actually a political statement for me, and subversive always. My abstract paintings do follow Pat Passlof as well as others who feel our most meaningful dialogue is with our paintings. Yet, my most new body of works, "Inadvertent Protagonists" (2018 to present) focuses on the idea of "co-existence" in their imageries, and some paintings actively converse with their sculptural counterparts.

Inadvertent Protagonists, 2019 installation. Mixed Media. 515 Gallery, Los Angeles, California. Photo by Wayne Shimabukuro.

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Tom Pazderka

Tom Pazderka (b. Czech Republic) is a painter, installation artist and writer.

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