

# NECROLOG

ZBYNĚK BALADRÁN  
15. 11. 2022 – 11. 2. 2023  
CURATOR: MARIKA KUPKOVÁ

**Marika Kupková:**

**You like to write a lot. Extensive commentary and interpretations are part of your artistic work. Despite the fact that they deal with complex power-discursive themes, they give the impression that you write them as easily and spontaneously as if you were breathing and that it is a joy for you. How do you do it?**

Zbyněk Baladrán:

It's probably due to an internal dialogue I have about my artwork. I have to somehow vent it in words and sentences. I enjoy thinking about things from a distance, looking at my work as if it were someone else's and questioning it. I think artists are very autographic in the sense that they intuitively express many hidden moods and ideas shared in the collective unconscious. Of course, I usually know what I'm doing and have some framework idea of where it leads, but still, there are many layers in artistic activity shared in the cultural circle I belong to, influenced by education and social background. The distance I try to cultivate helps me to see these hidden layers as well. This is the origin of my texts. And if they come across as lightly written, I am happy with that. I try to make them understandable, but they are themselves more a remnant of struggle, questioning and my own insecurities.

**Your texts are based on extensive research and investigation of power practices. They oscillate between the search for (media) undistorted reality, subjective interpretation, and subversive play. What about necrology? With that marginal academic discipline, after which your exhibition at Galerie TIC is named, and which supposedly exists only in a local context.**

Necrology is a bit of a dark joke. I don't know if it only exists in a local context, but some joker made a big deal out of it on the Czech Wikipedia, and I thought it was an accurate representation of the work I do and what I do. I mean, metaphorically. Sure, decomposition processes are related to power practices, perverse working conditions, or the adoration of weaponry and killing in the midst of a black and white world. All this is around us, accessible and so frequent that I don't know how else to accentuate the fact that it shouldn't be. By titling the exhibition using this Greek word, I am only ironically emphasizing the seriousness of what is on display here, while at the same time it most likely carries an authorial distance. How else to deal with complex issues than through culture, i.e., visual art.

**And aren't you the joker who created the Wikipedia entry Necrology?**

Come to think of it, in the context of artistic mythology, it would be good for me to acknowledge this. Unfortunately, it would soon be proven that I am not the author. It's not certain whether it was written by someone completely naive or, on the contrary, by someone who has a high-level command of the language of propaganda and wrote the slogan either out of practice or for some mischievous reason.

**In the interest of building a personal mythology, you denied it correctly and I can continue to speculate if you didn't make it up yourself after all. Whatever the case, necrology serves as a humorous metaphor for the contemporary art world.**

The metaphor captures the decay we feel around us. And perhaps this is the next stage of

progress. Benjamin's angel of history, who with outstretched wings is rushing with his back to the future and sees all the destruction before him, is probably slowing down and beginning to perceive decaying processes, not just ruins. Probably because progress is no longer the frantic wind blowing out of paradise that it once was. Somehow it has run out of breath. But that's just another bleak metaphor for civilization. With art, I think it's something else. It's based on conventions that are continuous and established between artists curators and the public. The conventions of contemporary art are largely established and connected to the market. The fact that we often consume art in public institutions doesn't change the situation. In underdeveloped countries like ours, it is not so evident that the influence of money creates – mostly through foundations established by extremely wealthy people or corporations – the ultimate value of artworks. This is a convention that the audience then takes part in. It also has to do with what art looks like and what it deals with. If necrology were to serve as a metaphor for the art world, it would likely report on elites searching for values in a decaying world. Kind of like looking for diamonds in a cemetery. Thus, necrology can be useful for interpreting the world we live in.

**Another poetic statement of decline?  
Another Zweigian world of yesterday,  
but which is at the same time a world  
of tomorrow more than the very future  
we have in front of us? For the world of  
yesterday contained hope in anticipation  
of what was to come.**

I hope that an attempt to understand and realize some things, even if poetic, is one of the prerequisites for some future plan or vision. It's probably not enough on its own, art has its limits, but the imagination must be constantly refreshed and tempted. Without this we cannot imagine the future, that is, have hope that it all makes sense. It is true that the imagination is now a little more focused on images of destruction, but perhaps we have to go through this consistently in order to be able and willing to imagine a different future.

**There are comparisons of the museum to a contemplative necropolis or a tomb of artworks. Both apt and frightening. Your explanations, illustrations and descriptions, and the manner of installation are a quotation or rather a paraphrase of museum displays. It is very fitting to necrology.**

Yes, that's right, I'm basing it on ways of display that have gradually become convention. And I use the assumption of positivist objectivity that these conventions operate with. In the museum, the visitor sees the presentation of specific research and knowledge shown in a factual form. Most of the time, they are not aware that they are looking at a mixture of consensual ideological ideas that constitute the beliefs of the class or ethnic groups to which the exhibition is dedicated. Such consensus is necessary, but I am not saying that there is necessarily any manipulation on the part of the creators. After all, they often share the same conventions with their audiences. However, by bringing this type of representation into a contemporary art gallery exhibition, these conventions are rendered moot. On the one hand, there is an incentive to look at things in a similar way as in a museum, i.e., with a tendency to accept what is displayed as a factual presentation. On the other hand, having glimpsed the contradiction that we are watching this in a contemporary art institution, it is the manner of display itself that is of interest. This is not a romantic appropriation, far from it, but a conscious search for the tricky details of the ways we perceive and accept different types of beliefs. Drawing out these types of conventions helps me understand the pitfalls of seemingly convincing certainties, which can also be a humorous experience, as is perhaps the case with this exhibition.

**What would you like the viewer to experience when visiting your exhibition?  
Are you concerned with how to communicate with them, how to effectively convey ideas and emotions?**

I'm not sure if I can communicate with the audience, but I try to work with their expectations. My work can seem too chatty, too complicated, and nobody is very curious about that. It's not easy to uncover the emotional level, and yet that is an important drive for me, without which I wouldn't be able to convey the ideological side of things. Even though what I do may seem too constructed and conscious, I like to experiment, to look for new connections and combinations that work sometimes more, sometimes less. But losing control over certain aspects of the workflow tends to be beneficial in the end. And what would I like viewers to experience in my exhibition? Everything that I experienced in creating it. That is to say, the many questions that constantly emerge and challenge to be solved.

### **What are the questions?**

Probably the most basic ones that all people think of. Where did we come from, where are we going and why? For those who think these questions are too general and with no answer other than a theological one, I can express them in a more nuanced and specific way. They concern community, human lives, and the relationships between them and their surroundings. I have always been interested in social relationships and the ways in which they are formed. This includes thinking about the social contract, that is, what holds different societies together. Which is an ideological construct that we share. So, specifically, I would answer that I am interested in ideological questions like how shared beliefs and opinions are constructed; how shared images are formed and operate; how the status quo can transform or even negate its own starting points.

**You're mostly thinking at the level of great power or global affairs. Have you ever considered focusing on a local issue? Perhaps take on the uncovering of a particular social cause? I'd say that kind of involvement is not very close to your heart.**

Very often, on the other hand, I try to generalize local problems and try to show them not as a problem that has been fixed elsewhere, but rather to show them and think of them as symptoms or manifestations of tendencies that are essential to understanding individuals. Such induction leads me to some abstraction. Before the pandemic, I was thinking about the strategies of retail chains such as Lidl or IKEA. The experience of the customer being pushed into compulsive purchases and decisions is of course a common experience that everyone is exposed to. When one looks at it in detail, one would probably agree that we are actually shaped by powerful manipulation. Yet most people think that going to such stores is an expression of free choice. I have been researching marketing, for example, specifically the Gruen effect at IKEA, and trying to identify it as a fundamental unit in the formation of collective memory. The ways in which marketing can influence, for example, the view of a shared past is a very local and specific topic. Or the marketing strategies at Lidl, the exploration of which led me to theorize that modern and contemporary art, or some of its techniques, have their echoes in the development of marketing and free market principles in the economy. Again, we would first say that art has its autonomy and is only subsequently vulgarized. I rather see it as without one there would be no other, they develop in parallel and influence each other in both directions. Contemporary art has adopted many techniques from marketing and vice versa. Specific causes are important for the creation of artworks because without political awareness or anchoring, it is impossible to imagine good art. Still, a certain generalization is needed so that it doesn't become a mere piece of news. I often react to specific events, but not in a way where it is difficult to identify them. It occurs to me that the work of the Forensic Architecture group is such a consistent specific practice. Its founder, Eyal Weizman, has even written a book on investigative aesthetics, a kind of attempt to theorize such a practice as an evolutionary link in the development of art. It's very inspiring, radical in some ways, but contradictory in its observance.

**How do you use these findings in your everyday life? For example, do you adjust your consumption habits? And do you try to get your surroundings, your family, to adopt them as well? Or is it enough for you to know what you are doing and why when you go to IKEA and buy goods you don't need?**

Your question is directed at the emphasis on individual responsibility and related consumer habits. I am convinced that, in addition to the clear positive importance of personal responsibility, it plays another unintended role: it corrects and restores a smooth exchange of goods between the seller and the buyer. Being cultured in today's society entails a certain type of behavior that translates into the way we take part in consumerism. So, I'll give you this answer: yes my family and I are quite sophisticated. In fact, being aware of how some things work just helps in not falling victim to kitschy political behavior.

**Let's move from the individual to the collective. A significant expression of your social commitment is the independent platform Display, which you have managed for two decades and which has been considered an unofficial authority and trendsetter of the local art scene. How is the experience of curating and cultural production reflected in your free work?**

The role of the artist and curator, i.e., this dual practice, is a symptom of the local art production of the last two decades. I think I was pushed into it by external influences, like many other artists. The traditionally understood practice of the artist as someone locked in a studio and creating artifacts is probably too romantic in a neoliberal environment. Curating exhibitions has been forced into existence by the absence or functional deficiencies of an institutional framework. Perhaps also a desire to play a more subversive role in artistic discourse in the sense of seeking and defining oneself. In any case, the two practices are intertwined and mutually influencing.

Nevertheless, I see myself primarily as an artist, and I include the creation of exhibitions within the circle of broader artistic practice. I deliberately say exhibition making, not curating. An exhibition is a specific entity incorporating many different components, sometimes voices, different ideas, and images. The resulting form is such a momentary freeze in time. I am interested in such pieces in which authorship often dissolves, and that's why curating as a designation of work is not for me. Curating is associated with a kind of concern for artists and their guidance, which I have never done. I enjoy a certain equality of access and work with other artists and often combine them with non-art images and documents.

**How does this professional interaction of yours change over time?**

My approach has certainly changed over the past twenty years, and lately I've enjoyed working on projects that are something between research, exhibition essays and maybe even parody. Specifically, this includes collaborating with Laďa Gažiová and Alexey Klyuykov on the Manuš znemaná člověk (Manuš means human) project at Kunsthalle Wien, or on the Spectral museum exhibition, which was part of the research on class consciousness at Display.

**Is parody also present in your authorial project Necrolog? Could it be a (subtly) parodied skepticism of a middle-aged artist towards contemporary art and the world?**

The exhibition could not do without irony and parodic elements. I always take everything very seriously, but there is no other way to approach such things without a certain distance. I hope that the individual parts of the exhibition are easy to understand, and my specific humor is comprehensible. A skeptical view of the world may be part of my age, but I am also convinced that the funny moments of the exhibition balance it out. And perhaps that shows that even in a necrophiliac world there is still plenty of joy.