

FUSE

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THE SENSE IN "YAWNING"

Yawning

CHARLIE CITRON, DAVID MILLER, MILOŠ VOJTĚCHOVSKÝ, MARTIN ZET
ORGANIZED BY HERMIT FOUNDATION, CZECH REPUBLIC
AT HOME GALLERY, ŠAMORÍN, SLOVAKIA

REVIEW BY JO WILLIAMS

Mournful and curious twists of history have lead to the presentation of contemporary art in former synagogues in central Europe. In use since the time when their congregations were destroyed, now entangled in legalities of ownership and ethical questions, these ruined synagogues reverberate with the tension of contested space. Hollowed and worn, they speak more powerfully than most memorials of the still recent tragedy of the Holocaust. The former Šamorín synagogue in Slovakia was the center of a Jewish community of 700, reduced by murder to thirty-five; now it is the site of the At Home Gallery. More than other abandoned and reclaimed spaces, it is not emptied of its past, of the catastrophe of its abandonment—no matter how beautiful, even joyful, the interior space now appears. In a town that has undergone five shifts of dominion in this century, the former Šamorín synagogue, now exhibition and performance space, is a deeply unsettled site. According to Jewish law, it is still holy and its secular use—whether as a warehouse during the communist regime or as the gallery today—is a desecration. For some, the contemporary use of the synagogue is not blasphemous enough and vandalism is routine.

Negotiating through the layers of history, meaning, theology and politics is a formidable challenge to anyone considering the use of such sites. Generally, these issues and their elective meanings are suppressed, as happened when a former mikveh (ritual bathhouse) was appropriated for a garage (in Šamorín) and a

former synagogue was leased as a department store (in Velké Meziříčí, Czech Republic). The law given to Moses dictates that desolate synagogues should remain so; weeds should be left to grow rampant within them. But the law does not account for no people being left to grieve the decay. The meaning of a place deemed to retain holiness in its very bricks falls beyond what could once be fathomed.

Visual art and memorials dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust too often, like uninteresting art of any subject, adhere too closely to the expected. Past exhibitions of installation art at At Home Gallery included train tracks built up to the building's door and a room filled with empty suitcases. Once expressive, suitcases, trains and barbed wire are now among the rote visual vocabulary of the Holocaust. Artwork relying on convention and easy emotion touches only that which its audience is prepared to feel. Thought or perplexity or fear—irritations that extend the significance of a work beyond the gallery walls and push understanding past a certain place, country, or people—are rarely engaged. In the creative treatment of any subject, the challenge is to elicit experience that remains vital over time and place. When the subject is human brutality that transgresses what was thought imaginable and now ranks as possible, the insult made by mediocre art is all the more disheartening.

Rusting and immovable, the intentional remnants from a 1998 exhibition at At Home Gallery have quietly become a per-

manent and pungent memorial. Staining and aging with the Šamorín synagogue, David Miller's permanent outdoor cast iron objects remind us, as did the exhibition's temporary works, of the sense installation art can still make. There is whimsy in the work, a suggestion of irreverence, as in the exhibition title "Yawning." To yawn is also a reaction to insufficiency, an attempt to revive the body and mind with an exaggerated and sustained breath in and out. This deceptively light approach to a subject of such weight deserves a revisit.

Within the synagogue/gallery's airy main room, Martin Zet and Miloš Vojtěchovský toyed with motion and meaning in a collaborative installation of object and sound. From where a light fixture once illuminated the sanctuary, the artists hung a functional fabricated fan extending too low and delicately from the frescoed ceiling. Placed just steps within the entrance and positioned to graze a tall person's skull, the work was unequivocally strange and threatening. The object winked at transcendence with its reverse vents that swept air upward as it slowly turned, but more disturbingly resembled an instrument of execution. Most vexing and jarring, as a cross spinning on a swastika-shaped axis, the fan incited anger or at least agitated bewilderment. Waves of recorded sounds of beating feathers filled the gallery and hinted at the otherworldly, those of human and animal voices of the earthly. These were interspersed at unnatural intervals with found sounds of machinery in motion—a



očist a l ec, David Miller,
installation detail, cast iron
objects, various sizes.
Photo: Martin Zet.

freight elevator, airplane, shotgun—disquieting passages that perturb more than uplift. The profane and inflammatory elements of Zet's and Vojtěchovský's installation electrified the sanitized gallery space, defying an easy veneration of art, much less of the former synagogue and the history it bears. It set in motion a sense of the easy violence done to meaning, whether by disregard, ignorance or the careless hurling of signifiers.

In the At Home Gallery's foyer, Charlie Citron's photographs hung in continuous strips. His work obscures images of abandoned, but not violated, sacral objects from the Czech Republic's Plzen synagogue before its recent reconstruction. The objects' transformation in a creative process of mutation (photographs of photographs blurred in boiling wax) sets up a metaphysical distance, the sense that one cannot get at them. This could be taken as history. Not particular to the Šamorín synagogue or At Home Gallery, the photographs addressed the precariousness of the neglected potency of symbols.

If Zet and Vojtěchovský posited an entry warning betraying a hesitation to

penetrate the space, Miller infiltrated the site from within and around, establishing a permanent presence. His life-size, rusted iron casts are of common, handled objects—bottles, buns, tools, a book—made weighty and useless. Their meaning is found in their deliberate placement. Stout, crooked, tall, or prostrate, ten rough casts of bottles of cleansing agents arranged as if casually convening near the former Torah ark have the presence of characters even without their title "Minyan" (prayer quorum). Among the permanent works, rusted cast tools—a rake, mallet, shovel, screwdriver—lean or rest in the building's landing, forever waiting not to be used. Others—an axe, scythe, drill—are fixed upon the worn facade's raw spots. Two hefty detergent bottles stand constant vigil on a side set of stairs. As if forgotten, a cast leather-bound book lies upon the edge of the building's fence, its rust staining the concrete. Upon the disused gatepost, cast bottles of beer, slivovice and whiskey form a composition that reflects the building they are set before. Playful but knowing, these permanent works on the periphery reinforce the presence of the former

synagogue/gallery to its very borders within a town and time that are baffled by its existence. Miller's cast iron objects somehow protect the place they inhabit. They stand as unflappable sentinels for contemporary expression, and as new relics that attempt to approach and care for (cleanse, repair, preserve) the absent community and belief that this site once sheltered.

These works animated meaning, though they could easily have escaped notice within the imposing emptiness and absence that the synagogue/gallery possesses. The site was treated not as a neutral gallery, but as a locus of history and memory, of human endeavour, creation, folly and ruin. Miller's work is now part of its story. He, like the other artists, suspended unthinking reverence, risked offence and misperception, to recover a meaning and experience already present.

Jo Williams has been living in the Czech Republic since 1993, working for museums and translating. She is currently Program Director of the Center for Metamedia-Play, an art residency and project centre in the Czech countryside.