

Michaela Thelenová

"Discourse is hardly more than the reflexion of some truth that is born before our eyes, and when at length everything can take on the form of a discourse, when all can be said and when discourse can be pronounced about everything it means that it is possible because all things, after having made obvious and changed their meaning, can return to a silent internalisation of the consciousness of themselves."

Michel Foucault

Where do you look for the strongest impulses for your work? And where do you see the danger of its potential limitations? Michaela Thelenová finds a single answer to these questions: in regionalism. In the simplicity, but also the apparent illogicality of this attitude we can perceive the principle that essentially influences the character of Thelenová's work. It is not, however, the fact that Michaela Thelenová works outside the the dominant centres of contemporary Czech art, although the problems of the relationship between the center and the periphery is necessarily a part of her thinking. The crucial agent in the work of this author is above all her ability to acutely analyze and articulate lucidly a core of frequently contradictory individual and social discourses.

In subject matter Michaela Thelenová's work derives almost exclusively from the ambiguous reality of the post-industrial environment of North Bohemia. With some exaggeration we may say that she repeatedly sifts through her experiences of commuting between Chomutov - her birthplace - and the small Sudeten village Sovolusky in the hills above Ústí nad Labem where she currently lives. The poignant intimacy of her approach is further intensified by a frequently inspiring focus on her closest vicinity, when she uses as models for her artwork sections of her household, neighbours or family members. With such close detail, Thelenová is obsessively focusing on parts of the depressing post-communist urban landscape, overlapping the deformed social structure with the illusion of consumerist opulence, recording the remains of the German past of the region, comparing the image of nature with the human desire to change its form and recreate it, confronting the global aspect of computer networks with the fragmentariness of their concrete participants, stealthily scanning the sides of main roads where prostitutes loiter next to memorials to victims of traffic accidents.

However, the author does not sift through this diverse but geographically located material with an aim to compose a clearly defined photographic documentary, or on the other hand, to compile a socially conscious visual message. Her artistic strategy is based on a thorough sharing of events and on creating a critical discourse, through accumulation of visual elements. The chosen method serves Michaela Thelenová to accentuate the principle of "discontinuous systematicity"

(M. Foucault), she approaches the subject under observation from diverse, seemingly random points of view, and relativizes the process of denoting and thus weakens the viewers' possibility of mimetic orientation. The result of this approach are an emotional series of photographs consisting of individual images that are frequently not linked by any causal relationship and resist traditional logic. These pictures simply exist next to each other, and demonstrate their random congruity, they tempt the viewer to break into them so that they might become a part of him or herself.

An approach similarly relaxed and ambivalent as in the sphere of orientation towards content, Michaela Thelenová applies also when it comes to the form of her artwork. The means of expression she predominantly uses are "technically static images" (Vilém Flusser's term) produced by a classical or digital camera and computer printing technologies. It is, however, hardly possible to rank her work unambiguously within the territory of photography, as she stands outside of it by weakening the tautological function and by her skepticism towards the institute of representation-representing. Thelenová relativizes the relationship between the shot and its referent, she does not want to "possess the world of objects through the camera" (in Susan Sontag's phrase). She uses the same approach as in one of her earliest works of photography, when she cut up hundreds of shots of reality into absolutely unrecognizable details, and then composed those, using wax, into a strange and wonderful collage. Later Thelenová substituted the form of collage for the principle of seriality, in order to further the technological as well as logical discontinuity of individual shots, focusing only on the authenticity of the character of the observed discourse.

Michal Koleček, 2004

New Pictures of "Home": Michaela Thelenová

30. 10. 2003 - 25. 1. 2004, Michaela Thelenová: Víkend (Weekend), Gallery At a White Unicorn, Klatovy Since the early 1990s, Michaela Thelenová's work has been closely tied with the city of Ústí nad Labem. The art scene of this Northern Bohemian "capital" is gathered around the local university, where Thelenová (born 1969) graduated in 1993 and continuously teaches at the Studio of Photography led by Pavel Baňka. Also thanks to the local Emil Filla Gallery, directed by Michal Koleček, Ústí nad Labem became a challenging place for many emerging central-European artists, and Filla Gallery turned into one of the most remarkable contemporary art centers in the Czech Republic, agilely promoting also its local artists of young generation, including Jiří Černický, Zdena Kolečková, Jitka Géringová, Martin Mrázik, Martin Raudenský, and Michaela Thelenová.

Unlike most of these artists, Thelenová focused her attention on photography-based media at the beginning of her career. Since the mid 1990s, she successfully splits her time between teaching, art projects and her countryside-based family and homestead. Although Thelenová usually uses deploys "technical images", she also often works with a broader and more precise conceptual approach, closely combining photography and graphic and industrial design. Her works urgently, but gently circle around the issues related to femininity and motherhood on the one side, and language of media and fashion on the other, always with a needed detachment and irony. Also the media she uses are varied, from photography through the computer-manipulated imagery to web art, often branded with intentional "pottery" quality. Apart from a vast number of individual and collective shows, last year she successfully presented herself as one of the nominees of the prestigious Chalupecký Prize (dedicated to young Czech artists) with a series entitled Satelity (Satellites), diptychs consisting of satellite images and their almost perfect imitations from home-found materials.

Thelenová's latest show in Klatovy, curated by Jan Freiberg, manifests more photographic aspects of her work. The series on display called simply Víkend (Weekend) consists of 32 medium-sized photographs. Not only their panorama format makes them look as being taken through a car windshield. They can be - according to their title - interpreted as a bitterly ironic depiction of leisure time

possibilities in the Czech borderland. Moreover, they bring a message about the ecological devastation of both natural environment and social life in the region, and about consequent impossibility to visualize the local landscape. Although the artist uses the language of "subjective" photography and breaks the ties with old canons and techniques of classical photography, one could also possibly recall Josef Sudek's cycle of romantically desolate Northern-Bohemian industrial landscapes from the 1960s. However, Thelenová goes much further in the effort of imprinting her personal vision in the image and developing her private language to talk about alienated country that is, nevertheless, home for many people.

In the political-historical realm of the region of former Sudeten Germany, repopulated by Czech citizens after the war, there exists a specific absence of history that followed the expulsion of its German population. Sometimes it seems that the history exists here only in the bleached colors taken from communist photographs that depict the fictitious efforts and successes of the "abnormal" post-1948 era, today perceived with both horror and nostalgia. When read through this optics of political history, Thelenová's "weekend" photographs look like an attempt to re-establish the country's identity - to reconcile with history through new pictures of "home".

Pavel Vančát, 2004