

SUMO Prague 2020 *The Odd Year*
Various venues, Prague 4–6 September

You win some, you lose some, and 2020 seems to be a year full of the latter. With the gallery-sharing programme SUMO, Prague's commercial galleries and artist-run spaces hoped to reverse that trend – or at least help stop the city's art scene from slipping into the abyss. For the third year running (albeit under a new name), international curators, galleries and project spaces were invited to co-opt venues throughout the city with their local counterparts, under the apt theme *The Odd Year*. While some took the subtitle as a conceptual point of departure, others unfortunately interpreted it all too literally.

The exhibition text for *Phaneron*, curated by Eva Skopalová at project space A.M. 180 (in cooperation with the Paris space 22,48 m2), for example, proposed our very real reality as 'hallucinatory' and 'fantastic': photographs of a cave by Cécile Beau illustrated the rather absurd idea that we are currently living in Plato's cave, and Chloé Poizat's small sponge-fossil-like sculptures carved from stone furthered this idea of cave-dwelling, wherein one might find artefacts from another era. Her intricate, shadowy drawings were so precise that I initially mistook them for prints; seen on their own, or in the context of the artist's wider work, they could have been impressive. But the accompanying idea that 'the dreaminess of our post-apocalyptic age is a new hallucinatory cave' rendered them artificial artefacts of the history we are currently living through.

Opposing Skopalová's denial of our lived reality was *Fantasy Finery*, a forward-looking show curated by Monika Čejková at project space Berlínskej Model (with Berlin space Horse & Pony). Featuring works made in the last three years by Emma Pryde, Vanessa Conte and Yong Xiang Li, with drawings from the 1970s and 80s by Mel Odom, it explored digisexuality, or the possibility of sophisticated technologies like AI replacing physical sexual partners altogether: a futuristic concept rooted in reality. During lockdown, many people would have welcomed a digisexual revolution with open legs – and if there's a second wave, perhaps they will. As I was standing in the small, closed space among some 15 others, COVID-19 cases in Prague were skyrocketing, no masks were in sight and a friend texted me a link to an article about a number of schools and doctors' offices closing in Berlin because too many parents and doctors had attended a sex party.

Two galleries seemed to take things a little more seriously, in both their health precautions

and exhibitions that strayed from the path of the pandemic. For their main space, Hunt Kastner cooperated with Berlin- and Karlsruhe-based gallery Meyer Riegger to present the late Ján Mančuška's film installation *A Gap* (2007), its first showing since its original site-specific presentation for Meyer Riegger's Karlsruhe space. Listening to the four characters in the four videos, each of which was shown in a separate space, helped the viewer reconstruct a story about an accident resulting in the protagonist's own memory loss. Since it was impossible to see all videos at once and with varying projection speeds, *A Gap* posed questions about memory, the construction of narratives and transformation of space. The opening itself offered a reflection on memories as well, welcoming family and friends of the Czech artist, who died in 2011 aged thirty-nine. For Hunt Kastner's smaller project space, the gallery worked with Reykjavík's i8 to present images from Icelandic conceptual artist Sigurður Guðmundsson's series *Situations* (the works documented here dating from 1970 to 1981). Though the works have been frequently exhibited internationally, this marked the artist's first showing in Prague and only the second time in the Czech Republic. Around the corner, Lucie Drdova Gallery also collaborated with two galleries – Vienna's Vin Vin and Croy Nielsen – to present *The Unremarkableness of Disobedient Desire*, a visual interpretation of Sapienza Goliarda's epic novel *The Art of Joy* (written in 1976, published posthumously in 1996). Curated by Laura Amann with work by Nina Beier, Romana Drdova, Kiki Kogelnik, Ida Szigethy, Kazuna Taguchi and Dino Zrnc, the works together suggested that female empowerment and freedom can be achieved through political, sexual and intellectual dissent.

At Litost gallery, a show curated by Anca Poterasu (who runs her namesake gallery in Bucharest) brought us back to COVID-19. *In Midst of the Worst, the Best of Times* presented works all made during the lockdown by ten Romanian artists and offering reflections on the domestic and familiar. Megan Dominescu's hooked rug pieces, for instance, provided humorous critiques on contemporary aspects of society inspired by advertisements she saw near her studio. *Botox is always an option* (2020) depicts an older woman with wrinkled skin, grey hair and sagging breasts next to a woman with a clownishly large smile, a perky bosom and artificially blonde hair; the former

captioned 'before', the latter 'after', a giant syringe and the word 'Botox' emblazoned across the top. Aurora Kiraly's *Soft Drawings* series of felt and cotton collages meanwhile established a mood of lonely isolation. In *Soft Drawings: Subconscious Narratives, Days Passing By* (2020), the silhouette of a woman is framed by curtains as she presumably looks out an unseen window, with an armchair, plant and cat in the foreground. No COVID show would be complete without a reference to masks: Olivia Mihaltianu's *Unisex Underwear Mask, One Size Fits All* (2020) presented brightly coloured and animal-print thongs marketed and packaged as masks – a reference to the viral video of a Ukrainian woman removing her underwear and placing them on her head after being refused service at a post office for not having a face covering. An amusing exhibition but a safe one, although this year I'd also argue it's better to be safe than sorry.

Meanwhile, Polansky gallery had to cancel its hosted exhibition and instead hung *Atilis Press*, new works by Vladimír Houdek, each painting an oversize, fictional book cover bearing a title, an Op art-inspired black-and-white graphic and the name of the eponymous fictional publishing house. Offered titles like *Imagination within the System, Analogy of Causes and Restart* (all 2020), viewers were invited to imagine their own storylines, but at a time when we're constantly reimagining what the next week, month or year might bring, such prompts felt superfluous.

With this thought lingering in my head, I visited a private collection of modernist Czech art, partially housed in the top-floor office space of a seven-story Soviet-era shopping centre, where, again, upwards of 30 people sans masks milled about and ate from a buffet. But while we were technically playing by the rules, Prague had by now been added to certain travel-ban lists (Viennese gallerist Sophie Tappeiner, whose artists Julia Goodman and Anna Schachinger were showing paintings at the gallery Zahorian & Van Espen, purposefully didn't get on her train) and would, in 72 hours, appear on Germany's. As I sat at Berlin's Hauptbahnhof waiting for my own coronavirus test, I couldn't help but wonder, in this odd year, if SUMO itself was superfluous. But while the galleries could have easily cancelled and accepted defeat, instead they played a tough game and fought for the win, narrowly defending themselves against our new reality.

Emily McDermott



top Megan Dominescu, *Botox is always an option*, 2020, acrylic rug-hooking, 43 × 62 cm. Courtesy the artist

above Sigurdur Gudmundsson, *A Picture*, 1978. Courtesy the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik