

G E O R G K A R G L F I N E A R T S

PRESSEINFORMATION

I Had a Dog and a Cat

Curated by Hana Ostan Ozbolt

Exhibition: September 9th – October 15th, 2022

Opening: Friday, September 9th, Saturday, September 10th, 12am – 6pm

The East, the West and all that in-between

This year's *Curated by* Festival, titled "Kelet" ("East") as the opposition to "Nyugat" ("West"), invites us to turn our "gaze eastward at a moment when artists from [that region]¹ may need it most...when the West's inherent 'orientalism' and resurgent 'orientalizing' of Europe's others must be challenged and held in check."² The umbrella concept of the festival argues against stereotypical notions of East versus West and their attendant connotations, while at the same time reinforcing them through a kind of simplified, occasionally romanticised East-West relationship ("looking East not just for bogeymen and easily identified pathologies and perversions, but also for *hope*").³

Why are geographical terms and the labels associated with them (repeatedly) so appealing when it comes to contemporary art? That was one of the first pressing questions which emerged when we started engaging with the topic. It seems that the impulse to talk about geographies and regions in the art world presents itself more whenever there is geopolitical unrest in the region. One can, of course, not fully engage with the idea of the »global« contemporary (globalised conditions of the neoliberal system) without also paying careful attention to the particular, local and/or national symptoms of the current condition, but haven't the representations of these spaces in the globalised art world (which thrives on differences and is constantly in search of the Other), often only been an instrument of their commodification, especially in times of crises? And who are actually "Europe's Others" nowadays—aren't they the non-white, non-Christian migrants or refugees, who seek work/safety/residence in either the geographical East or the geographical West of the continent, shaping the way definitions of "Europeanness" are guarded and reinterpreted?⁴ It looks as if such Kelet-Nyugat (East-West) categorisations, which (re)produce spatial formation and divisions, often successfully perpetuate existing clichés and stereotypes about art from the East and the West that seemed relevant decades ago and included—indispensably at the time—discussions about the "distinctive character"⁵ of "what precisely constitutes" the specificity of Eastern European art.⁶

¹ "Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and other nations." Dieter Roelstraete, "Kelet," *Curated by: KELET, 2022*, <https://curatedby.at/kelet>

² Ibid.

³ "Now is the time to look East, not just for bogeymen and easily identified pathologies and perversions, but also for *hope* – for inspiration, salvation. For the rising sun of promise that is called 'Kelet', not 'Nyugat'." Ibid.

⁴ See Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others. Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

⁵ Boris Groys, "Back from the Future," in *The Art of Eastern Europe. A Selection of Works for the International and National Collections of Moderna galerija Ljubljana*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac and Peter Weibel (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 2001), 9.

⁶ The East-West dialogue, however necessary and stimulating it may have been in the art context (and however much it is re-emerging due to the current deterritorialisation in Europe), should gradually be replaced by a broader concern to negotiate the shifting boundaries between centre and periphery, wherever these may be, and focus on the analysis of various critical issues from a specific regional position that foregrounds a

GEORG KARGL FINE ARTS

When confronting various dichotomies, we found ourselves in an in-between position and one of the artists in dialogue came up with an intriguing suggestion: “Maybe someone’s previous destiny could become a format for an exhibition.” Taking into consideration what concerns us all, that of human relations and not what divides us, we turned to Josef Čapek, a Czech painter and writer (1887, Hronov–1945, Bergen-Belsen), who challenged the existing conditions and thinking of his time. The breadth of his engagement was remarkable, and he managed to create moments of play and light until his very last days.

The life and work of Josef Čapek, together with his children's book *All About Doggie and Pussycat* (1929) became a source of inspiration. Developed via an in-depth collaborative working process, the exhibition brings together artists of various origins, who intertwine with the existing order of things and respond to their time in wide-ranging ways: they (de)construct, expand, repurpose and, thereby, depict the inner and outer world with all its complexities. Collisions and contradictions, present in the ordinary and the common,⁷ give rise to myriad extraordinary ideas, experiences and reflections on our coexistence.

An old child

Josef Čapek, painter, illustrator, writer (journalist, narrator, essayist and dramatist, who towards the end of his life also wrote poetry), one of the central Czech cultural and intellectual figures of the first half of the twentieth century, was born in 1887 in the town of Hronov, Bohemia in what was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He once referred to himself as an “old child”: he was inspired by children and their perception (“To see things as a child sees them is to see them directly and with fresh and very intense mental participation”) and was interested in their artistic expression.⁸ His unique drawing style of eloquent simplicity and joyful depictions of dogs, cats, as well as people, captured us all.

After graduating from the Prague School of Applied Arts (Uměleckoprůmyslová škola v Praze) in 1910, Čapek spent several months in Paris, where he discovered and studied naïve art. The “nascent but distinctive concept of primitivism” was “the most important thing that he brought back to Prague,” writes Pavla Pečinková.⁹ He came to believe that the concept of art cannot be anchored in the practice of traditional institutions and that the fundamental principles of artistic expression must be sought outside the work of academics. His own artwork and theoretical essays were subsequently oriented in this direction. From 1914 to 1915, Čapek formed his individual painterly expression, which was initially figurative, an adaptation of the principles of Cubism and Expressionism, and closely related to his ideas of modern Primitivism. He understood “art-making”

transnational perspective. A slippery and polemical resurgent topic will be additionally discussed as part of the accompanying programme of the festival at Georg Kargl Fine Arts. Initiating a round table with invited speakers of different generations and backgrounds (most of whom are also the curators of *Curated by 2022*), we will also contextualise the umbrella topic of the festival, including some of the questions posed on these pages. See Octavian Esanu, *Contemporary Art and Capitalist Modernization. A Transregional Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁷ When asked in a recent television interview about what she defines as “the Common”, the Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič answered: “Only the multitude can produce the common; the multitude of human relations.”

⁸ Jiří Opelík, epilogue to *All About Doggie and Pussycat*, by Josef Čapek (Prague: Albatros, 2000), 114–115.

⁹ Pavla Pečinková, “Josef Čapek's Interpretation of Primitivism,” *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 1 (2012): 71–82, 71. This particular text as well as other writings by Pečinková were crucial for my understanding of the work of Josef Čapek, with whom I was not familiar on an in-depth level before.

GEORG KARGL FINE ARTS

as an “important personal statement related to the elementary values of human existence.” In his essay *On the way I (Cestou I, 1920)*, he formulated the thought that was to remain the premise of his future work: “What exists? Yes, man and the meaning of life exist. This is not a question of content in painting. This is a question of both origin and destination.”¹⁰

His work reached a peak in the 1920s and 1930s when his spectrum of artistic, intellectual and political (being a supporter of Masaryk's democracy)¹¹ involvement became very broad: his original domain of painting evolved into the field of drawing and illustration, printmaking and stage design. Simultaneously, he devoted himself to literary work, writing short novels, dramas, as well as stories for children; for several years the newspaper *People's Daily (Lidové noviny)* published his children's stories, before the book *All About Doggie and Pussycat* was published in 1929.¹² Wondering whether it was an “undignified activity” for “a man of letters to write for young children about, say, a Doggie and a Pussycat,” he continued: “In fact, I seriously believe that it is not undignified to write for children, but it is undignified to write badly for them.”¹³ His daughter Alenka, born in 1923, “wanted me to paint people and children and cats and dogs. The child watched what I was doing and gave orders for it to be done according to what was required by the eyes and mind of a child.”¹⁴ Čapek's interest in children's drawings was closely connected to his critical and theoretical reflection of primitive/naïve art. His various essays present the expansion of the term “art”, by addressing the traditional notion of the limits of the artwork and questioning its wider purpose.¹⁵ “Art is essentially a manifestation of life, just as everything else is an expression of life.”¹⁶

Narrating and Translating Dogs and Cats

Every story has a narrator. In fact, the story can only exist through his/her/their manifestation. In our case, the third-person narrator “Mr Čapek” tells various stories about Doggie and Pussycat (sometimes portrayed as two- and occasionally four-footed partners), collected in the book *All About Doggie and Pussycat* (1929). He describes how they keep house, wash the floor, play theatre, celebrate National Day and bake a birthday cake. The narrator is never separate from the story, even if his/her/their voice is more or less heard; the voice always seems to embody a presence, a background for differential traits. Josef Čapek's intellect, beliefs and values—his worldview—are so

¹⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹¹ One clearly senses the “national character” in many of Čapek's writings. Traditional narratives of modernity claim that modern artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rejected traditional techniques, subjects and ideologies, embracing international and universal concepts of newness, and abstaining from national traditions and culture. Art historian Marta Filipová diverges from this statement, analysing narratives of modernity in the Czech art world of the fin de siècle and interwar era. “She argues for an ‘interplay’ of two circumstances: ‘the adoption of modernity combined with a successful national movement’. The Czech case was unique, according to Filipová, because many artists embraced both nationalism and modernism. In essence, she argues, they ‘nationalised modernism’.” Cynthia Paces, “Nationalising Czech Modernism,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 23 (2020).

¹² The book *Povídání o pejskovi a kočičce* (written in 1926, published in 1929) has been one of the most popular books in Czech (children's) literature. It has been widely translated (until 2016 into seventeen languages with more than one translation in English, French, German and Slovenian).

¹³ “I think it is of great importance for a nation that literature for children (be) ... written”. Čapek's stories have helped to introduce “a new and highly artistic criterion” in the field of Czech children's literature. Opelík, epilogue to *All About Doggie*, 114.

¹⁴ Ibid., 114–115.

¹⁵ The essays from the volume *The Humblest Art (Nejskromnější umění, 1919–20)* and *The Social Utility of Art (Sociální užitečnost umění, 1919)*. The manuscript version of the essay *The Art of Primitive Peoples (Umění přírodních národů, 1914–1916)* and the article *Negro Sculpture (Sochařství černochů, 1918)* are “amongst the first European critical attempts to interpret ethnic art.” Pečínková, “Josef Čapek's Interpretation of Primitivism,” 71.

¹⁶ Josef Čapek, “The Social Utility of Art,” *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 1 (2012): 103–8, 103.

G E O R G K A R G L F I N E A R T S

deeply interwoven with the stories he tells that we sense his charming nonsense, playful humour, youthful joy and light irony on every page.

The exhibition *I Had a Dog and a Cat* draws parallels with the book *All About Doggie and Pussycat* on multiple levels. The main protagonists of the stories transform mundane tasks in their home into creative and unexpected endeavours. The selected artists, each with their own distinctive practices, share an involvement of combining divergent everyday things and experiences that would otherwise not meet. Occasionally they make us wonder. There is that barely graspable awe of transubstantiation; “the artist borrows the material of the world and exchanges it for his [her] own material to express his [her] own relationship to the world.”¹⁷ However senseless the actions and solutions to the various situations of Doggie and Pussycat may seem to us, they make perfect sense at the end. The two characters bring meaning to the world that Josef Čapek creates; for him (for the children and for the reader) they are the representatives of meaning—the toughest material is (human) thinking—dealing with everyday life through the process of concretion.¹⁸ Čapek’s approach to life (his overwhelming eagerness and attention to it, palpable through his unique artistic-literary style of precision and simplicity, unbroken and ravenous to the end) and his worldview, which refers to the elementary values of human existence and the understanding of art as a medium capable of reflecting on things that are fundamental when the limits of language are reached, inspired the exhibition concept.

Dog or Cat

The figures of the dog/Doggie (“pes/pejsek”) and the cat/Pussycat (“kočka/kočička”), who get on well together, living and keeping house, equal in performing their tasks, are portrayed within the framework of the male-female role, not without slight irony and intentional stereotyping: the Pussycat–woman mostly suggests solutions, “is always right” and “has the last word,” whereas the Doggie–man is the one whose manners are somewhat lacking, but he is “better informed about politics.”¹⁹ The principle of “dog and cat” and “male and female” on the one hand, and the dichotomy of Kelet-Nyugat, rising-setting sun, on the other, recall tensions between good and evil, truth and falsity, victim and aggressor, oral and written, the norm and deviation from the norm. Similarly, Giorgio Agamben describes the relationship between rule and life: “Neither written word nor living voice, the rule constantly moves between these polarities, in search of an ideal of the perfect common life that (it) is precisely meant to define.”²⁰

While dichotomies seem to be an outdated model for thinking about the now (to exist within a binary system, one must assume that we are immutable and that the way we read the world is predetermined, rather than for us to define and choose for ourselves), they also confirm our paradoxical urgency for a basic understanding of the world through storytelling. To simplify and mediate in order to understand and comprehend the world is a human need, closely linked to the

¹⁷ “Each truly creative approach is magic. (...) The artist borrows the material of the world and exchanges it for his own material to express his own relationship to the world.” Josef Čapek, *Umění přírodních národů*, in Pečinková, 71.

¹⁸ Adam Budak, exhibition text for David Fesl, *The Concrete Boy*, Georg Kargl Fine Arts, Vienna, 2020.

¹⁹ Opelík, 113.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 75.

GEORG KARGL FINE ARTS

limits of the (human) body. With this in mind, David Fesl conceived the exhibition design based on the existing natural lighting conditions in the building. The works in the exhibition are placed according to the following natural logic: "In bright places, one encounters the most works of art, in the dark ones the least. Where daylight does not reach, nothing stands." The strategy of reduction and maximum focus guides the viewers through the space, demanding their attention and inviting them to get closer to the artworks. Emerging or fading, held in suspense, the thresholds of the exhibition are the transitions (from light to darkness or from darkness to light), where unification or division naturally happens. In the absence of artificial lighting, the exhibition *I Had a Dog and a Cat* becomes a unique phenomenological experience.