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IMAGES, MEDIA AND IDOLS

(AN EXPLANATION OF ŠTEFAN PAPČO'S WORK *CITIZENS*)

What really is an image and what really is not an image? When do images gain strength and power? In what way do images interact with human bodies? When the human body and image meet in the struggle of representation and performance, how do these processes turn a living being into an object that can become an idol? And finally – how can contemporary artists work with pictorial media so that they can depict the body while not creating an image as idol? We are trying to find answers to these old but still topical questions in relation to the work of the young Slovak artist Štefan Papčo, *Citizens*.



1. Štefan Papčo, *Citizens*, the planned installation of the work, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

NATURE AND SOCIETY IN RELATION TO IMAGES

How do images differ from the things by means of which images appear? What is the difference between the image and the thing? Things are material, while images appear to be ephemeral, although they are fixed in various media: they appear and disappear, they can be painted over and still appear under the layers. On the one hand, images are dependent on material things used as media, which enable them to become images of other things, but also to be manifested in things, while on the other hand they have the ambition to be emancipated from things. This does not apply to all images. An image can acquire the form of a mirror image. On the surface of water, in a mirror, but also in a work of art in a natural or artificially produced material, other things or persons are reflected as if they were imprinted. Mirror images also differ from others in the degree of emancipation in relation to the material bearer. The thing or person reflected in a mirror is always connected with the image. Moving further away or closer only makes the mirror image smaller or larger, it does not disappear. It disappears only when there is not enough light, or when something happens to the reflecting surface of the material. Images surprise and fascinate us, they ask us questions, and they evoke various emotional reactions¹. We can touch persons and things, but not things reflected on the surface of water, in a mirror or in an illusive image. We see them, or to be more precise we can only see them, but at the same time we are convinced that in their pictoriality they do not exist in a real, physical sense.

One of the clear differences distinguishing artistic images from natural images not made by human hands is that the former are thoughtfully produced. This production connects the orders of simple vision with the orders of the image in general, and finally also with the orders of the artistic image. The orders of artistic images reach far beyond the limits of the natural and relate to personal and social problems. In this reaching beyond, it is sometimes possible to forget that the basic relationship of

¹ There are many publications concerning the topic, for example: P.P.L. Tinio and J.K. Smith, *The Cambridge handbook of the psychology of aesthetics and the arts*, Cambridge handbooks in psychology New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014; D. Freeman, *Art's emotions: ethics, expression and aesthetic experience Montreal*: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012; E.R. Kandel, *The age of insight: the quest to understand the unconscious in art, mind, and brain: from Vienna 1900 to the present*, 1st ed. New York: Random House, 2012; P. Gouk and H. Hills, *Representing emotions. New connections in the histories of art, music, and medicine Aldershot*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2005; C. Benson, *The cultural psychology of self: place, morality, and art in human worlds London*, New York: Routledge, 2001.

images to nature still survives. However, there is an artistic strategy to bring our attention back to the basic relationship of images to nature.



2. Štefan Papčo, *Andrej*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

The example we choose to illustrate our ideas, namely Papčo's work *Citizens* (in Slovak: *Občania*), is concerned with the situation of a work that is placed in nature, but presented in the environment of a gallery. The artist placed a set of five wooden statues of people dressed in unusual 'clothes' (for example bivouac sacks) in various inaccessible places in high mountains. Papčo's statues are watched by cameras powered by natural sources. The digital images are continually transmitted into the gallery, where they are projected onto a wall. A two-dimensional group of light sculptures is finally created in the artificial gallery environment from the original five three-dimensional wooden sculptures in the natural environment. If we understand each individual statue as a work, we can call the final image, including the method and process of its origin, a *super-work*. In the framework of this *super-work*, the depictions of statues in the gallery are freed to some degree from their connection with the natural environment and their own physicality. The resulting depiction can also be manipulated by cutting through their shape. In this fragmentary form they still bear the traces their environment leaves and finally, definitively, has left on the wooden statue. Each member of the group lives its own life from the moment their creator made it, took it to the selected place and pointed a camera at it.

During three years of unprotected exposure of the carved work, the statues will have been exposed to an extreme environment and weather. Part of the aim of the artist is to allow natural forces to penetrate his work, so that its form is changed temporarily (as in the case of changing light conditions during the day), or permanently (for example by weathering of the surface). In relation to the physical form of individual artefacts, the question arises: what will happen to the five wooden statues when positioned within various mountain ranges? Will they freeze, rot or weather? The artist selected unstained lime wood as his material which naturally succumbs to the influence of the environment more quickly than other woods do. At present it is impossible to exclude the possibility that the artist's aim may be the complete disintegration of the wooden statues in the natural environment. This text originated at the time of the origin of the *Citizens* group of sculptures. The decisions the artist will take, or less probably not take, should determine the form and method of survival or disintegration of his creation, which he is still shaping or participating in shaping. Some questions have not been solved yet, so that we can express only qualified pre-conditions, not factual statements.



3. Štefan Papčo, *Miroslav in situ*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

It is possible that in a certain phase of their existence, the statues will acquire such an attractive form that the artist will decide to present them in a different way. In relation to the gallery's real possibilities to exhibit a work for a limited time, as well as the confined possibilities of the viewer to systematically follow the gradual changes to the statues, the decision on how to show the viewer the changes caused by weather and environment is a matter for the artist. The decision between the two

extreme possibilities – complete destruction of the work or complete gallery presentation of its remains – will influence the overall meaning of the *super-work*.

To what degree can Papčo's decision to expose sculptures to the long-term and unpredictable actions of natural forces be regarded as a legitimate part of the process of artistic creation in the usual sense, and to what extent is it a decision to abandon the traditional concept of the image as a work of art? The number of terms used in the previous sentence is culturally conditioned and the replies of the different viewers may vary depending on their positions on contemporary cultural processes.

However, apart from this, it is possible to make more general statements about every image for which the cultural and value conditions are not clear at first sight. 'Seeing' has its own laws: for example, seeing distinguishes foreground and background, it fills in missing parts on the basis of the law of the suggestive shape, and so on. Images mediate the appearance of a thing among other things on the basis of imitation and similarity. They presuppose relations between the prototype or model and the image. Orders of vision and images are directed mainly towards recognition of the already seen. Artistic images are ordered according to social and stylistic norms, mainly by our own order of vision, which enables visualisation of the invisible or visualization of a new vision of the already seen². But what actually appears in things and why do we call them images? Why do people produce a special type of image – the artistic image? How do images generate meaning³?

The image can be understood as the non-material layer of the work of art, which appears to all who look at it. From the material point of view, this non-material thing is fixed by cuts into wood, coloured marks or arrangement of surfaces, walls and spaces. However, apart from their relationship to the human body as a partly natural phenomenon, the decision on what human bodies to select also influence the meaning of the original wooden statues. This decision cannot be considered without thinking about the social dimensions of the body, art and the image.

Things are part of the material, physical and chemical environment, but images as images are the products of the psycho-physical activity of the viewers, while also being an active part of various social environments. The image arises precisely on the boundary between these envi-

² B. Waldenfels, *Bildhaftes Sehen. Merleau-Ponty auf den Spuren der Malerei, in Kunst. Bild. Wahrnehmung. Blick. Merleau-Ponty zum Hundersten München*: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010, p. 31-51; *Záhada viditelnosti (poznámky fenomenologie umění ke statutu moderního malířství)*, in *Znepokojivá zkušenost cizího*, Praha: Oikoyomenh, 1998, p. 231-234.

³ G. Boehm, *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen – Die Macht des Zeigens*, Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2007.

ronments, and so it inevitably brings into the beholder's attention their boundary by means of mental and physical framing. The character of these environments and the position of the viewers may also lead to various forms of positive perception of images, but also to doubts about them and, in extreme cases, to iconoclasm, which will be considered further below. What is the proportion of framing, the cultural view and the 'social environment' in the origin and formation of the images? This question is so fundamental that it motivates a whole current in the social history of art.



4. Štefan Papčo, *Igor*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

Papčo's work is composed of sculptural, handmade images representing specific people. The selection of people was not only a matter of aes-

thetics. Work with the social statement, with depiction of the 'political bodies of citizens of socialist Czechoslovakia with all the consequences flowing from this for the image and the narrative, was also part of the artistic programme of the artist. The environments in which these bodies from the *super-work Citizens* are placed are not only marked by the visible, natural power of the elements, but also by an invisible, 'anonymous and dispersed' political power, which not by accident arises by digital manipulation. Although it is not a matter of naked, tortured bodies, but rather of bodies covered in something that may be part of the mountain-climbing equipment, also an allusion to a straitjacket. Precisely this image arises when bodies are placed, not in the natural environment, but on the flat surface of a picture on the wall of a gallery⁴. Apart from the polarity of man and nature, the psycho-social being and its natural body, various terms of an essentially social nature, such as diaspora, citizenship, Empire or totalitarian that shape the socio-political meaning layer of the work, can also be applied to analysis of the *super-work*. Thus, it is also concerned with the polarity between the person as a citizen and the social order, shaping various basic dimensions of his existence. We can also recognize in the work people wishing for confirmation of their essential dimension, which casts doubt on the legitimacy of the social order of the time. On one hand there are the performers and exhibitionists, who desire extreme experiences, while on the other, and perhaps also simultaneously, people fleeing from the social order and voluntarily subjecting themselves to the laws of nature, people climbing to the summit and, at the same time, people hunched up and threatened, ecological dissidents or representatives of the grey zone – perhaps also political prisoners, outcasts or modern hermits, escaping from culture, from their own surroundings. The artistic problems solved by the author also include the contrast between the body and the strange clothing or unusual drapery, in this case of the human form and the bivouac or sleeping bag, which is simultaneously a meeting of two orders: figurative, mimetic, imitative and non-figurative, abstract and developing chosen aspects or connections of visual shapes and similarities. Precisely by means of the system of similarity, we can recognize the images of specific people, actually Slo-

⁴ On the concept of political body E. Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The king's two bodies; a study in mediaeval political theology* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957; on the difference between *corpus mysticum* and *corpus morale et politicum*, p. 210-211. On the newer forms of pastoral power and biological power in the basic modalities of understanding (body as mechanical or biological entity), associated with the enforcement of the worldview and behavioral rules see M. Foucault, *Zrození biopolitiky. Kurs na Collège de France 1978–1979*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2009.

vak mountain climbers, if we have met them personally or seen pictures of them somewhere else. Recognition includes entirely spontaneous association or conscious remembering of various stories that include a significant connection between image and narrative.

The relationship of images to narrative is so strong that a certain story is an essential pre-condition for the origin of images, and recognition of this story is a pre-condition for understanding the images. The relationship of iconic images to narrative images can be compared to the relationship of the prehistoric mythical period with cyclical time to history with its linear time or events, and with the relationship of the principles of imitation (*mimesis*) and storytelling (*diegesis*). From the beginning, images were inseparably connected to or infected by the stories to which they spontaneously referred, or people gradually learned to evoke them, so that they could depict a more-or-less continuous story of events. The relationship of image and word is partly replaced by the relationship of image and narrative, although narrative need not be inevitably connected with the word. If the relationship of the image and the narrative should make the image subordinate to the verbal narrative as its instrument, from the point of view of images this view would appear as logocentrism or linguocentrism. The image and the artistic image, with their orders and specific meanings, can be understood as an effective boundary between the word and the verbal interpretation of images. In this text we are considering pure images and images with stories only as ideal examples enabling us to formulate definitions. We are well aware that artistic images with a visualizing pictorial function most frequently work in hybrid regimes and, in the framework of support for the intensity of the visualizing function, they reach beyond the familiar norms and limits. This also applies to Papčo's work *Citizens*. Narration and story intervene in sculptural and technical artistic images in various ways⁵. In the case of the five individual statues placed in extreme locations, narration and story come into play paradoxically by means of the natural environment and natural processes. What is the final meaning of the demanding ascents that mountain climbers undertake? Do they take the trouble only to get lost in a hostile environment? Is the resulting artistic form a confirmation of the human need for meaning, or in the final analysis its denial? The extreme context functions like the extreme position of the body of the *Diskobolos*, which spontaneously evokes the impression of movement or action in the mind of the viewer.

⁵ W. Flusser, *Komunikologie*, Praha: Bradvertising, 2002.

5. Štefan Papčo, *the face of Igor*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author



In his wooden sculptures, Papčo also puts into the recognition function of vision and images the function of visualizing, of enabling us to see images of people, citizens and mountain climbers in a way we have not seen them before. We perceive them not only through his personal sculptural poetics, but also by means of the effects of the environment and the weather. When the figures are successively dried, wet, rotted, frozen or snowed on, their social processing is lost or at least covered by the actions of nature. Precisely these changes in the material nature of the statues, together with the changing contrasts of the faces and drapery of the bivouac sacks, form the background for the sculptured artistic images. As a result, the images sometimes lose their narrative element, which retreats in favour of aesthetic values of a different kind.

Since the bodies of the individual figures are lost in the abstract shapes of the drapery, we do not see their specific shape. In spite of the physical performance, which the pictorial regimes associate, we cannot say whether it is a heroic body created for extraordinary physical performances, sport, work or battle⁶. The monumentalizing possibilities of sculpture disappear in the abstract shapes, and so they cannot be subjected to an exclusively ideological interpretation. The artist deliberately works, not only with the final lines of imitation up to the primary prototype regardless of whether memory or photography mediated it, but mainly with the extensive and crossing over lines of similarity. This leads to multiple imaging, which can be called the pictorial function of Papčo's sculptural images, in analogy with Roman Jakobson's concept of poetic function. But the complex imaging of Papčo's work *Citizens* does not end here.

⁶ Comp. K. Clark, *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form* New York: Pantheon Books, 1956, J.-P. Stonard, *Kenneth Clark: the nude; a study of ideal art*, 1956, (in:) *The books that shaped art history: from Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss*, ed. R. Shone and J.-P. Stonard, London, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013, 102-115.

The work also refers to the story of the possibility of citizenship in various societies and periods. Can bivouacking alone in a cold and entirely inhospitable environment be regarded as a reference to the private oases and niches, small private paradises, often much less striking, in which many people survived the regime that offered them an inauthentic interpretation of their own basic needs? Since the work lacks symbolic references, establishing the possibility of anchoring individual identity in the wider collective framework, is it possible to regard the *super-work* group of sculptures as a narrative parable of radical individualism, selecting its own route at the price of unprecedented difficulties?

It is clear that Papčo's *super-work Citizens* applies various types of image and their orders, and simultaneously also varied forms and types of narration. The most striking narrative component is the story of the mountain climbers to whom the work refers. Since this concerns pre-existing stories, which stimulated the pictorial presentation, we can call them narrative prototypes. It is necessary to distinguish them from the story contained in the work as a more-or-less planned event involving static, wooden statues. The artist has let the forces of nature intervene in the statues as objects, so that they are transformed into unique sculptural images, which include narrating and visualizing functions. These narratives cannot exist without an image, since they are tied to its transformations. Therefore, we can call them within-image narratives. Finally, there are the primeval stories of the sculptural medium, telling of the relationship of idolatry and iconoclasm, existing in the collective memory of cultures connected with Hebrew monotheism. Since these stories explain or comment on the possibility or impossibility of the artistic image and its meaning, they can be told with meta-image narrations. These three types of narration (pre-, within- and meta-image narratives) participate equally and in mutual harmony in the shaping and development of the work of art, or set of works (see below). They join in creating its conceptual and artistic depth and define its place in the history of culture⁷.

The realistic carving of the faces refers to the individual stories of specific people and a specific community. The regime of representing drapery puts into the individualized story not only various degrees of anonymity, or even de-subjectivization, but also introduces other stories of climbing to the summit, stories of being a modern hermit and the like. A story also comes into the work *Citizens* by means of the name as an instruction to possible readers. The name connects the stories of the individual people and their community with the wider problem field of com-

⁷ B. Waldenfels, *Ordnungen des Sichtbaren. Zum Gedenken an Max Imdahl, in Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. G. Boehm, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994, p. 238.

munity in the sense of citizenship and civil freedoms. The same name connects the 'virtual' sculpture group to the line of sculpture groups without bases and with similar names. The virtual sculpture group as a logical compositional whole finally forms a sort of collectivity as a fleeting light possibility, a temporary experience of the optical coordination of individuals huddled into their private worlds in their inconspicuous resistance to the official constructive story, their incorporation into one artistic whole. The rules of arrangement and functioning of this whole do not derive from the will of the coordinated individuals. They are determined by the artist as a superior subject, as a quasi-demiurge, creating a harmonious arrangement from unique monads, on the basis of his own decision, his own will.



6. Štefan Papčo, *the face of Pavel*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

MEDIA PRESENTATION

Papčo deliberately creates and presents his images in various media. To what degree and on what basis can we distinguish in individual media the material and non-material pictorial layers? What results flow from the character of the media for the social position of the image? To what degree does the artist's work with media use possibilities normally accessible in our culture, and when does it reach beyond or even criticize them? Apart from the more-or-less traditional natural and artificial images, and artistic images, Papčo also uses technical and digital images, which share the fact that they are produced with the help of equipment of various types. The images produced by them differ from the prototype

images in their degree of connection and disconnection, which means in what is designated as analogue and digital depiction. However, images and artistic images also differ from ideas, dreams and visions in not depending only on the visual memory of a particular individual, but in using various other forms of personal and collective memory, and finally in drawing on an autonomous visual memory. They combine various ideas and concepts, while also organically connecting various stories. Let us return to some basic concepts that can help us to understand the *Citizens* sculptural group.

The method of presenting the work in a gallery environment leads to various questions. Precisely, the projection of the images of the statues onto the wall of the gallery frames in a substantial way the physical forms of the individual sculptures and their overall perception. The artist has combined digital images of the statues into a single whole. The viewer can only exceptionally see what is happening to the wooden statues in their specific environments. The statues are clearly deliberately placed where they cannot be damaged or stolen, and where the digital equipment, namely cameras powered by the wind or sun in the mountains where the statues are placed, cannot be damaged or stolen. Therefore, their real physical form is practically inaccessible. We see it mainly in the space of the gallery, on a plastered wall or projected onto canvas, thanks to the fact that they are constantly recorded by cameras, which will record all changes until their possible disintegration. However, they are filmed so that we see them as objects isolated from their environment, although this aspect will have to be technically solved in the final installation, and so it may change. At the same time, the record of the 'life and death' of each statue is combined by the data projectors into a 'virtual sculpture group', which, however, is not an exclusively static 'painted image' but also a filmed 'image changing through time', although in some stages it may not be easy to perceive this. In this sense, Papčo's work *Citizens* is, above all, a technical and an artistic image at the same time. It is a technical image, which enables the transformation of a sculptural artistic image into a 'painted' or 'filmed' image. The transformation of the ephemeral nature of wood into the ephemeral nature of colour, light, shade and darkness, also produces from a static statue exposed to the environment and weather, a sculpture group that is static and changeable at the same time. Again it is a technical image, which brings the historic artistic image into the artistic image of iconic character or 'portrait', to form a hybrid image with signs of story and narration. The resulting *super-work* demands that the viewer progress from the image to the story before and after the image, so that the artistic hybrid

image can preserve the purity of the portrait and the meaning of the story of the image. Technical images, together with artistic combinations, 'painted', 'filmed' and 'virtual' sculptural images, start a whole series of stories, which we mentioned above. However, a technical image enables us to also develop the story of the media, from the classic to the new media, including the story of the sculptural media.

The artist placed a camera, set the parameters for imaging the surroundings, and set or calculated the method and direction of projecting the resulting shape onto the wall. This work procedure leads to important results. Originally, it was a matter of statues and a sculpture group without a base, but by placing them in the natural environment, by putting them in front of a camera in a certain position and angle, as well as the method of two-dimensional depiction on the wall, he really or intentionally creates a frame. At the same time, it is not insignificant that various framing strategies are applied in the whole *super-work*. The statues are placed in natural 'architectonic frames' and then in the virtual frames of the 'eyes' of the camera. Such 'double frames' are technically removed, the statues are literally cut from their frames, so that the cut outline becomes a sort of 'zero frame', and the adapted images of the statues are grouped into a virtual whole framed, by the boundary between light and darkness. Thus, the frame not only underlines the heterogeneity of the depicted worlds with their own laws, but also draws into the game the pre-pictorial and pictorial forms of the existence of the work⁸. Every statue has its separate material existence in the natural world, but loses it in the virtual world of the image of a group of sculptures. The group of sculptures actually 'levitates', and in this sense is not only a depiction of statues in various moments and stages, but also a 'miraculous' image. An encounter with this depiction substantially differs from a real experience of practical understanding of the physical world, by which changed states of consciousness may be induced in the viewer⁹. The specific content of this finding depends on whether and how the sculpture group is or will be placed on the wall, whether it floats on a lighted surface of the wall or is situated differently.

It is clear that just as the wooden statues are changing or gradually disintegrating, the sculpture group can also change or be lost if we do not

⁸ M. Schapiro, *Dílo a styl*, Praha: Argo, 2006, p. 321-339; B. Uspenskij, *Poetika kompozice*, Brno: Host, 2008, p. 168-182.

⁹ Comp. G. de Nie, *Eine Poetik des Wunders: bildhaftes Bewußtsein und Verwandlungsdynamik in den Wundererzählungen des späten sechsten Jahrhunderts*, (in:) *Mirakel im Mittelalter. Konzeptionen – Erscheinungsformen – Deutungen*, ed. K. Herbers and D. Bauer, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002, p. 135-150, here p. 136.

ensure that the record of the changes to the wooden statues is recorded in digital code, either continually or according to a certain plan, and preserved in a memory medium. Various forms of documentation can be supposed. Have photographic or film records been made of the artist placing the statues in the mountain terrain? Will the records be presented to the viewers, will they document at all the stories of the people represented by the statues? It is equally possible to suppose the complete or partial exclusion of documentation of the on-going processes. Various results flow from the answers to these questions. The method of their further presentation to the viewers is then a matter for future decision by the artist, or of the cooperating gallery manager or curator.

In connection with technical images, it is necessary to mention the story of the technical transfer from photography or filming, through satellite transmission, installation and projection. This is the basic story of the origin of the *super-work* Citizens. But the story does not demand only different types of images and their possibilities, but also individual orders of methods of representation.

ANTI-MONUMENT AND THE PERFORMANCE GESTURE

If we admitted that the artist programmed from the beginning the disappearance of the statues and the sculpture group, and already had decided not to intervene in the process, then the *super-work* would be an anti-monument in the sense that the environment causes the disappearance of the original sculptures and the set of technical instruments depicting them presents the process of the disappearance of the monuments in the gallery environment. If it is true that the artist also counted on documentation of the anti-monument, meaning the preservation of visual documentation of individual phases of demonumentalization, then the power lines of the process paradoxically run into the preserved depictions.

What could be the principles motivating this apparently destructive act – not only the possibility of creating image flows from the encounter of the seen, the resembling and the non-existent, but also the possibility of doubting the legitimacy of this creative act, with which various types of dispute between true and untrue images are existentially connected? People long ago realized that some images reflect the truth, but in certain circumstances they can change into problematic idols. Since the time of Moses, it has been known that it is possible, and often also necessary, to criticize idols. Images that make ironic shifts of meaning within the

original visual language can also be bearers of this criticism of images that became idols¹⁰. In this way, new horizons of artistic creation are revealed.



7. Štefan Papčo, *Igor 2*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

Some images only simulate or replace something non-existent as the simulacrum¹¹. This is the origin of both the veneration and condemnation of images, their destruction, but also their use in various magic, cultic and religious practices. Various general and artistic polarities are also

¹⁰ A. Julius, *Idolizing Pictures: Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Jewish Art*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001.

¹¹ J. Baudrillard, *Praecessio simulacrolum*, „Host“, no. 6, 1996 (Issue 6); G. Deleuze, *Platón a napodobenina*, *ibid.*, no. 5, 1995 (Issue 5). M. Camille, *Simulakrum*, (in:) *Kritické pojmy dejín umenia*, ed. R.S. Nelson and R. Shiff, Bratislava: Nadácia Centrum súčasného umenia a vydavateľstvo Sloart, 2004.

applied at this level, but especially references to the 'history' of images from the everyday, 'miraculous' image not made by hands to the deliberately produced or artistic image. Thus the question of the dispute between iconoduly and iconophobia, occasionally growing into various expressions of iconoclasm, penetrates into interpretation of the work. If Papčo's five wooden statues disintegrate in the course of three years and nobody has preserved the memory of their traces, then, in the end, not only the 'virtual' sculpture group *Citizens* would disappear, but also its unique artistic imaging. In this way, the *super-work*, in the sense of the composition of dispersed and manipulatively put together artistic and technical images, would gain the socio-critical dimension of a metaphorical reference to the story of the media and the narrative of the dissolution of citizenship in the context of a manipulated society. From this point of view, *Citizens* can be understood as a unique contribution to the on-going discussions about the role of pictorial media in relation to our present society¹². Disappearance of the statues and their traces would finally lead also to disappearance of the chosen point of view, so that the theme of the fate of mortality, specific to us people and our products, would also be radically raised in the whole story. The *super-work* as a whole would not integrate any direct symbolic messages that would force the interpreter to pose the question of the meaning of the work from a perspective transcending human mortality.

By means of inclusion of visual references to extreme situations Papčo's work demands a story of taking the sculpture up the mountain and a story of metamorphoses of material and things. These stories belong to the fragmentary perception of the work. They explain it and enable us to grasp it. The stories are even its constituent parts in relation to the whole *super-work*. The story of climbing the mountain is also historically associated with the story of Moses, who came down from the mountain with laws for the people, including the prohibition of making graven images. In our story, the sculptor takes graven images, which he has made, to the mountain, to expose them to destructive forces outside his control. And finally, in a digital descent into the spaces for veneration of images, he can entirely destroy them. In connection with Walter Benjamin's conception of aura and the polarity of the hidden and the exposed, he obtains further meanings in the range of the gap between the sacred and the profane.

¹² Comp. O. Grau, *Media Art's Challenge to Our Societies*, (in:) *Imagery in the 21st century*, ed. O. Grau and Th. Veigl Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, p. 349-374.



8. Štefan Papčo, *the author*, and *Miroslav*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

For example, the story of the sculptural medium also becomes a story about overcoming idolatry and even a sort of iconoclastic act. Papčo's work *Citizens* is not only a hybrid of various forms of pictorial and narrative representations, but also includes important elements of an action. It is at least a sculptural action of taking carved artefacts out into the natural environment, an act of their technical combination and montage, and finally also an action combining untraditional service to an image with inconspicuous iconoclasm. Thus, the artistic body and its actions are expressed in a varied way, in the form of a *super-work*. They also raise the question of the performability of Papčo's *Citizens*. Performability appears here as something indefinite, but still different from performance

as an active artistic expression or from various forms of performing art. Under performability, we will preliminarily understand something like the performative utterance in Austin's sense. Austin originally distinguished performable acts from statements on the basis of the view that something not only testifies about the world, but testifies and acts at the same time: I promise by both stating a promise and at the same time fulfilling it¹³. Taking statues to the mountains is not only a simple activity, directed towards the creation of a work, but also a fully valid artistic activity. It enriches the work with further visual and symbolic levels, although it may, but does not have to, be an active component of the work.



9. Štefan Papčo, *Andrej 4*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

¹³ J.L. Austin, *Ako robiť niečo slovami*, Bratislava: Kalligram, 2004, p. 14 on.

In every case the *super-work Citizens* implies the performability of taking the wooden statues into the mountains. Otherwise, we would have to perceive them as a palladium, accidentally discovered by satellites and cameras. This implied and not actually happening performability relates to the artist's game as a performer. Papčo is undoubtedly also a real performer; already during research at university, he offered a physically demanding performance as part of a presentation of his own artistic work, when he climbed a specially constructed wall in front of viewers. When producing the work *Citizens*, he could become such a noteworthy person as a high mountain porter, who, instead of necessary provisions, carries to the rocks wooden statues as if to an imaginary 'symbolic cemetery'. Alternatively, the sculptor embodies Sisyphus carrying the burden of sculpture. However, an accidental viewer does not need to understand his performance as part of the work of art. This level of interpretation of the seen work may remain beyond the horizon of expectations and understanding of the beholder. In the end, Papčo's work also has features of performance art, since it is being created in the course of several demonstrative events, which are deliberately emphasized when they also work with accident. The degree to which the artist's body is involved in the action usually indicates the performance character of the work. It is not enough that the work happened or that something happened in the work; a work should appear before us as it is being created, either physically or by means of technology. The permanent transformation of a wooden statue in the natural environment is an event we can experience thanks to the cameras, so we register it as a film or video-art form of an event. However, the natural context is suppressed and the event loses its natural environment. The origin of the sculpture group on the wall of the gallery seems to be mysterious. The cultural and social context of the artistic institution becomes a basic condition and component of the process by which the image of the sculpture group originates. Perhaps a recording will be the only thing that will remain after the physical disappearance of the original wooden statues, and in the moment of changes, the sculpture group cannot be easily distinguished from it. The image and the place are part of the artistic game, in which they become constitutive elements in the changes of state, part of the action, filled with meanings. The projected image includes the mountain to which the artist took the statues, but not in visible form. Its image could be entirely left out of the gallery form, but it still belongs to the work in a certain way.



10. Štefan Papčo, *Miroslav*, detail of the sculptural group *Citizens*, 2015. Photo: archive of the author

In spite of this, something stops us declaring Papčo's work to be performance art comparable to theatre, which presents the actions of natural and social bodies simultaneously in conflicts between various performers. On the other side is a sequence of events of non-living natural things, revived and disintegrating images, natural and cultural objects, some of them depicting living or formerly living people. When something happens to the statues, something happens to the sculpture group. If something happens to the visitors to the gallery, it is already not part of

Papčo's work, although the work is intended precisely for them and evokes changes in the state of their consciousness and attitudes. However, this does not mean that the *super-work Citizens* could not be a performance act. It tells us something about the statues and the changes to them, while also involving the fact of the changes in their state. It happens or, to be more exact, continually happens and this development leads to disintegration. This unity of word and action is a mythical relic and it intensifies the effect of the image, which, however, Papčo leaves to planned disintegration. Thus, Papčo as the artist not only tells the stories of the sculptural image, its veneration and condemnation, he also becomes both an iconodule and iconoclast at the same time. His work may be both an embodiment of his lack of a decision on the question of the existence of the image, and a great gesture of doubt towards the cultural institutions, especially galleries. He leads viewers to the invisible mountain to give them the possibility to encounter forces greater than human beings. He offers this exalted experience in a softened, sublimated form. Precisely this effective gesture is a performed act, which intensifies the representation, although it naturally always reaches further and disturbingly casts doubt: the reality slips away from the given state of things towards the future, it becomes projective and not purely descriptive. Therefore, the question of the projection of Papčo's work *Citizens* provokes further doubts about the state and mechanisms of the functioning of present-day culture, rather than conciliatory statements.

Citizens is a work in motion in which various types of image and narrative participate. First of all, the work is deliberately created by the artist. When interacting with nature, it functions as a kind of testimony on changes in the state of the original objects. The *super-work* confirms while also reaching beyond the original pictorial and narrative representations, present in individual states of the mobile existence of the artistic form. The performance act of the work *Citizens* primarily strengthens the pictorial representation, while also disturbing those of its forms that may contribute to idolatry. The natural interventions in the wooden statues, which may appear to be unforeseen, unexpected changes in the sculpture group, are actually part of the scenario, although not in an entirely definitive form. However, by creating *Citizens*, Štefan Papčo reached the boundary of art as a performance act in the non-representational sense of the word. He offers a game of mutual definitions of various ways of creating classical and non-classical statues, as well as reaching beyond the familiar approaches to the new media and projects of the

anti-monument¹⁴. He leaves the viewer with the question of whether and to where the artist and the viewer can progress along this path.

The interpretation of images as a methodological problem in Papčo's work *Citizens* with its complex range of images, narratives and performances raises various serious methodological questions.

The first of them is ontological. What is the character of this *super-work*, in the sense that various works or phases of works are put together into a single whole. It is not a classic 'closed' work or an entirely 'open' work of art, meaning a work in motion framed by a particular artistic programme, although signs of various versions and forms of existence may point to this. However, compared to these ontological forms of existence, Papčo's work is always something more and something less: on the one hand, the *super-work* is a complex of works, while on the other it is a work involving the programmed destruction of the work, or at least an attempt to make visible the void after the destruction of the work.

Further questions connect with the first ontological question, but they are concerned more with interpretation or with the theory of interpretation. Context is based on the fact that interpretation always presupposes some sort of ontological model of the work. In historical exegeses and interpretations, texts and images were gradually interpreted in meaning layers from the literal to the anagogic, or in art-historical versions from the literal to the iconological (Panofsky) or spiritual (Sedlmayr). The legitimization of images by prototypes significantly supported the layered conception of the interpretation of images. It is noteworthy that almost all layered conceptions have an ascending character: they are not only teleological and finally anagogic; it is assumed that we are climbing from a lower, simpler layer to higher ever richer meanings. To Papčo, *Citizens* embodies with one initial phase of its genesis precisely this rising trend of interpretation, but the overall meaning including the later phases strongly polemizes with this trend: not only accident comes into the game, various types of image and narrative not only play against each other, but also against their prototypes, so that only family similarities or even the liberating gesture of simulacra are open¹⁵. The *telos* of this movement becomes a *katagone*, but the interpretation cannot be described as exclusively descendent in the sense of loss of meaning or on the literal level. On the contrary, interpretation of the work gains in

¹⁴ Some strategies of anti-monument projects are mentioned in J.E. Young, *Pamät/ Monument*, (in:) *Kritické pojmy dejín umenia*, ed. R.S. Nelson and R. Shiff, Bratislava: Nadácia Centrum súčasného umenia a vydavateľstvo Slovart, 2004, p. 277-292. They were also discussed on the conference Monument/Anti-monument in Saint Louis (2014, April).

¹⁵ Deleuze, *Platón a napodobenina*, p. 5 on.

this ascendent–descendent movement: apart from the conformist legitimizing meanings, equally valuable critical and delegitimizing meanings appear, with their mutual tension and harmony giving the work its meaning. To what degree, why and in what circumstances is it appropriate to regard this and similar works, as a signal that the time has come to re-evaluate the traditional conception of the existence of works of art, as well as the art-historical methods of their interpretation?

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Key words: Image, Narrative, Action, Anti-monument, Iconoclasm.

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OBRAZY, MEDIA I IDOLE. PRÓBA INTERPRETACJI PRACY ŠTEFANA PAPČO OBYWATELE

Streszczenie

Analiza prac młodego słowackiego artysty Štefana Papčo *Obywatele* pokazuje, jakie są możliwości interpretacji współczesnej rzeźby. Materialnie dzieło tworzą prace wykonane głównie z drewna. Są one jednak wpisane w dokonujący się w czasie proces, w którym istotne są relacje i interakcje dokonujące się zarówno wobec różnych składowych dzieła, jak i wobec użytych przy ich realizacji środków. Nie bez znaczenia są też historyczne asocjacje. Rzeźbione drewniane rzeźby artysta ustawił w różnych trudno dostępnych miejscach w górach. Już sam proces ich przenoszenia i ustawiania nasycony jest znaczeniami. Następnie rzeźby pozostawione w górach oddane zostały

destrukcyjnemu działaniu sił przyrody; w ten sposób natura stała się współautorką nowego dzieła. Ta destrukcyjna interakcja dziejąca się za sprawą sił przyrody, która może być odczytywana jako współczesna forma obrazoburczej krytyki wymierzonej w dzieła, była utrwalana, dokumentowana z użyciem mediów cyfrowych i transmitowana na żywo przez Internet do galerii. Obrazy rzeźb i zachodzącej przemiany wyświetlano na jej ścianach. W ten sposób powstała wirtualna galeria rzeźb. Jednak w tej formie prezentacji zanika istota relacji obecnej w środowisku naturalnym. Cyfrowa transmisja dokumentująca zachodzący w różnych miejscach proces przemiany dzieł przetwarza prawdziwe rzeźby w dwuwymiarowe obrazy. Opisany tu proces spłaszczenia, trywializacji nabiera znaczenia, jeśli zrozumiały jest historyczny kontekst asocjacji, do którego odwołują się *Obywatele*. Rzeźby przedstawiają grupę wspinaczy górskich, dla których przebywanie w górach i związany z tym styl życia były protestem wobec totalitarnego reżimu w komunistycznej Czechosłowacji. Pozostawienie w górach oddanych w pacht naturze drewnianych figur, choć wyzwala stopniowo różne możliwości interpretowania, prowadzi do ich całkowitej materialnej destrukcji. Dzieło Papča *Obywatele* staje się tym samym anty-pomnikiem i jako takie otwiera cały zespół zagadnień odnoszących się do pamięci, rozpadu wartości obywatelskich w manipulowanym i kontrolowanym przez media społeczeństwie.