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What do the painters need?

In the wayward 20th century history of plastic arts, particularly in its latter half, it occasionally seemed that painting was taking the second position to other arts, such as object drawing, action art or austere conceptual art, installation or electronic art. Then, all of a sudden, painting would bounce back to take center stage again. However, this view can hardly be considered objective, as painting has never been truly squeezed off the limelight by period studies in catalogs and journals nor those “non-painting” exhibitions or other artistic expressions. Rather than rivaling painting, they were accompanying it. Until a serious study is undertaken and exact numbers are obtained, we will not know how many famous painters engaged in other fields. But even then, these numbers will not really be saying much, because one new important work in one area outweighs a number of less important ones in another. Art simply cannot be quantified. Therefore, we might have to put up with the fact that art is flexible and ever-changing in its balance and form, with painting always in the forefront.

Following the „new wild“ era in the beginning of the 80s, spilling from Germany and Italy throughout the world and revitalizing the general interest in painting, installation and video and computer art now predominate in world galleries. After all, videoart was setting the tone for a hundred days at Documenta 1987 in Kassel, Germany. When Kasper Koenig presented a selection of contemporary European painting at the Broken Mirror exhibition in Vienna in 1993, including works by Antonin Strizek and Jan Knap, the only two Czech artists chosen, it was obvious that the interest in painting was on the rise again. The discussion symposium on theoretical problems of painting organized in 1994 by the Academy of Plastic Arts in Prague confirmed that even in the electronic age, painting maintains its central position in the world of plastic arts. Still, one question lingers on. Do the artists take the theory into account at all, and why should they? Are they interested in definitions? Obviously, they have no time for that, having to focus on their own creative processes.

It is in a similarly independent way that the Large Format symposium began after 1989. Regardless of the currently prevailing artistic trends and not caring about the academic theories and prescriptions. Jan Pospisil, the initiator of the symposium has always asserted that it has never been the symposium's aim to search for current fashions or investigation of pre-determined theoretical topics. What he did, was that he took advantage of the change in the political climate, which allowed such events to take place. He went no further, permitting thus the artists to do whatever they wanted, while using the material, space and boards provided by the organizers. Finishing a five square meter painting takes a lot of concentration, to which end the artists can use a twenty by eighty meters chateaux riding-hall in Valtice. The painters can then choose whether they want to perceive the otherwise unattainable vitality of their colleagues while working or whether they prefer to work in solitude in a secluded corner of this original “studio”. Accordingly, the “large” aspect of the action refers not only to the size of the format but also to the monumental interior of the riding-school.

The results of the five most recent symposiums, in which more than forty painters took part, demonstrate that this open workshop helps specify the views of contemporary plastic arts from an unusual angle. At the same time, dynamic painting expression, monochrome silent meditation, geometric painting, and painting

of figures, abstract objects or concrete structural elements are of equal importance. The direction of the symposium follows values brought in by the personalities present. The Large Format symposium proves that painting continues to play an important, albeit indefinable, role of the catalyser of new ideas, as well as functioning as a harmonizing weight on the volatile scales of art. Even if the paintings made at the symposium were to stay in the archives of the National Heritage Center, they have already fulfilled their primary task, in that they were the vehicle for a serious creative dialog. And if these paintings are given the opportunity to communicate with the audience, the symposium will give the painters all they long for.

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