

Ladislav Čarný

Between reconstruction and interpretation

Abstract:

Articles written by three Slovak art theorists about the work of the artist and pedagogue Ladislav Čarný. Jana Geržová (study *Between Reconstruction and Interpretation*) is devoted to his work in the 80s and 90s - mirror objects, light objects and paintings, mimicry (camouflages) for light and shadow, and processual installations. The study by Helena Markusková (*Alchemy of Media*) deals with his cycles *Hermeutics*, *Reliquary* (Homage to Duchamp) and video installation *In the Epicentre*. Zora Rusinová analyzes the author's installation and exhibition in his article until the present, the latest exhibition in 2017 *Schrödinger's Cat / Cat's Schrödinger*.

Key words:

Installation. Light art. Mirror object. Painting. Processual art.

In the medical terminology, the "period of incubation" is the time between infection and the manifestation of the disease. In the field of creative activities this metaphor is usually attached to an artist's years of preparation without a guarantee that there will be a time of "manifestation" at all. In 1968, Ladislav Čarný came to the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava from the creative milieu of the Basic School of Art, in Žilina. In spite of his deep inward obsession with painting that lasted till the mid 1980s - this time was a long period of incubation during which he slowly found the balance between a strong potential of ideas (to have to say something) and the language of art itself.

MIMICRY

In the years 1983-84 he participated, as a recipient of a grant by the Slovak Fund of Fine Arts, in the project 'Creative Scholarship Stays'. The result was the exhibition *Mimicry* (Camouflage) in Bratislava. Čarný exhibited a series of heterogeneous works, inspired by mimics existing in the world of living organisms (the change of form, or coloring as a protection against impending danger), Čarný paraphrased this interesting ambivalence at the level of psychology and art.

Camouflage for the Man within the Environment of Civilization and Camouflage for the Man amidst the Crowd; suggested the artist's interest in the psycho-sociological aspect of the relationship of Man and Environment, the awareness of the man's identity; but also of his being manipulated (the project considered the projection of the picture of a man onto another man, of a crowd of people onto a crowd moving in the opposite direction). In his series *Mimicry for Worn Clothes* and *Mimicry for the Naked Body* (painting of a body on real clothes, painting of clothes on a naked body) he used the technique of illusive painting and tested the psychological impact of such a substitution.

The idea of mimics was worked out in its purest form in the drawing *Camouflage for the Light* - a minimalized drawing, the only object of which are drawn values of the light, confronted with real light that reaches the surface of the picture through a perforated stencil. Through this work he entered a territory in which he would abide for several years to come. He gradually created works that verified the problem of the ambivalence of reality and illusion, of the natural and the artificial from several viewpoints - *Light in the Field of Painting* (1985), *Light in the Field of Drawing* (1985), *The lighting Cross* (1987), *The lighting Solo* (1989), *The Knot and the Triangle* (Homage to R. Fila) (1988), *Ovulus* (1989), *The Little Red Vulture* (1989), *The Last Canvas* (1986-1989).

In his *Light Trap* (1984), he again worked with real light. Light, the primary quantity in the physics of light, was for the first time, presented in its verbatim concreteness by means of a simple object. It

consists of a mirror with scratched foliage forming small flats of clear glass. By means of these, as well as other transparent materials (paper, tracing paper, transparent foliage) the otherwise diffused light concentrates into clearly readable islands of light.

The concentration on extracting the fundamentals of the aspect of light - went hand in hand with the increasing minimalization and conceptualization of his work. In 1990 he again tackled the problem of depicting real light in a more elaborate version (*Light Trap II*, *Light Line*, both at the exhibition 'Mirror objects' in Marianka) and in the installation *The Chimney* (intersection point of daylight and artificial light at the exhibition *Power station T*, Poprad - curator V. Beskid). Besides working with real light had started the creation of his first mirror objects, that were to become the center of his artistic work in the years 1990-1991, and his remodel of other artists' artefacts. Within the frame of the 'Mimicry' exhibition he displayed the three-dimensional plaster cast of an antique head, on the rear side of which, he painted in oil the same portrait of a face. Today this object is catalogued under the name of *Hermes as Janus* (the name was suggested by the French theoretician E. Cornevin). Its original name was *The Re-modelling of a Sculpture by Drawing*, with the subtitle *The Duel of the Media* - these titles said perhaps more about the circumstances of the origin of this piece of art. The process of minimalization and conceptualization brought Čarný close to analytical art.

The picture or the object refers to themselves, to the process of their beginning. Art itself

became the theme of depicting. On the basis of this principle, several interesting objects and installations were created in later years (*Act of Homage to the Nude*, a mirror object, 1990, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, a picture from the gallery collections, mirrors, light reflections, 1992, *Close Encounter*, comments on the gallery collections, slide projection, 1993).

CAPTURED BY MIRRORS

In 1989 L. Čarný completed his picture, the *Last Canvas*. That was his farewell to the medium of classic painting (hung pictures). It was a kind of a paradox that he did this at the moment when painting in Slovakia returned to the scene actualized by the generation of young neoexpressionists. Čarný took the opposite direction. The domain of his creation were mirror objects that, at the beginning of the '90s gradually grew into the creation of his first installations. The concentrated work on mirror - objects reached its height in the short period of 1990-1991. The preparation of an exhibition in the deserted and devastated Baroque Pauline monastery in Marianka near Bratislava, in June 1990, was the immediate impulse. Čarný's interest in this specific material had a short pre-history. It began in 1984, when the first two mirror objects *The Faces* - were created in both cases he handled the mirrors in such a way that he cast doubt on their primary function: the reflection. By scratching parts of the back, the silver foliage, he created small islands of clear glass, complemented with painted eyes and lips so that the viewer was forced to confront his own picture with the details of a strange painted face. In the second face, he disrupted the mirror surface, turning up small

parts of the mirror so that the viewer saw his portrait doubled, or that it even completely disappeared. Both principles were further developed in his materially and ideally precise series of Masks.

What is interesting in the case of Čarný's mirror objects is their semantic level: it started with his Faces (two mirrors in 1984), continued with his Portrait (1987) and ended with the series of Masks (1990). While the word "face" could still be connected with the individual's self-identification (people are the only creatures in nature who can identify their reflected face in mirrors as their own), the nation "portrait" contains the feeling of distance from ourselves (the portrait is our picture seen by somebody else) and the mask is somebody else's face we use as a shelter even if we ourselves are the persons we want to hide from.

The excitement elicited by Čarný's solutions is based on his paradoxical use of the mirror. The material we expect to reflect our own image reflects instead – due to the artist's manipulation – the reverse of our expectations. The face we see is ours, but it doesn't belong entirely to us. The portrait disintegrates into a number of fragments and the Mask mirrors details of our image. At first sight the problem of identity and that of the revision of the content of this nation, is in the foreground (identity understood not as a fixed condition or mood. Identification understood as a process not yet completed, with the possibility of gradual or sudden changes due to plastic surgery or to gen engineering). Both of these aspects were the focus of interest of several Euro-American artists (C. Sherman, Orlando...) only in a much more radical form. Even if this problem

is latently present in Čarný's mirror objects, the artist himself stresses the possibility of the viewer's taking part in the completion of the artefact and the relationship between the opposites: natural vs. artificial, reality vs. illusion: "These objects represent the ground on which the viewer creates a dynamic composition by incorporating his own face and the surrounding world in it. Not only can I draw this reality into the composition and manipulate it, but I am also able to influence the environment reflected in the mirror (by installation, illumination, painting). The mirror object thus becomes the place of penetration of the artificial and the spontaneous and the viewer's position is in the intersection of both structures". The dependence of mirror objects on the environment in which they are installed was well documented by Salvator Mundi (1990), for the exhibition in Marianka. This work was successfully reinstalled in spaces that intensified its spiritual theme (St. John's Chapel, the Franciscan Church, Bratislava, 1990).

THE INSTALLATION - A TRAP

There is an inner logic in Čarný's changing from mirror objects to his first installations. This originated in the artist's experiences acquired during the installation of the exhibition in Marianka. A determinative factor was the emotionally and artistically strong milieu with a marked trace of time, the reality of which alone could have become an object of presentation (the milieu understood as ready-made, a found object). From the beginning it was clear (I was the curator of the exhibition) that the search for the revitalization of the found reality would be more important than

the artist's self-presentation. The mirror was an ideal material for this concept. Čarný used its ability to make the milieu part of the picture in the above mentioned series of the Masks. There the mirror objects still kept the character of an artefact able to live its own life as a work of art, with the possibility to be re-installed within the context of another exhibition or in another gallery space. The shift to a pure installation is readable in the two installations realized in situ – the Window and Smashing. While in the Window Čarný caught a fragment of real architecture reflected in a large mirror (165 x 150 cm) which actually turned into a drawing on the mirror, the Smashing was drawing by means of the mirror – the artist paraphrased the web of authentic cracks in the panes of a real window. He achieved the symbiosis with the milieu in a concentrated form in the minimalized but – emotionally very strong installation the Light Rod. A subtle mirror rod with of a diameter of only 10 mm, hanging from the ceiling of the room and ending a few centimeters above the floor. It changed, after being touched by a real sun beam, into a pulsating, gleaming line. This installation was not only one of the possible variations of the Light-traps, but – above all – the essence of the artist's way of thinking. The idea of the caught light symbolized his attitude of resignation from the position of the artist as a demiurge competing with the Creator. For Čarný his work is a process of searching and experimenting, the result of which needn't be a new reality of art. The attribute of novelty is in Čarný's work connected with his developing a new viewpoint that admits the re-discovering of the forgotten.

This qualitative novelty is in opposition to what we used to understand in the attribute "new". It is not only "up to date", but it also draws attention to things and phenomena that temporarily disappeared from the center of our interest.

Čarný's objects and installations are traps set for the milieu that surrounds us. He considers the artist's work to be a process of revealing the artistic qualities of the reality. In a certain sense we can speak of a broadening of the term "found object" by the term "found reality". Contrary to Duchamp's "ready-made" and the movement of the '60s (in this country it was the HAPPSOC of Mlynářčík and Filko) in Čarný's work this found reality has regained its artistic, aesthetic and emotional qualities. Confronted with his traps we are again able to enjoy seeing. It seems that the imaginary pendulum moving between the competing perceptualism and conceptualism of the art in the 20th century has slowed down the temporary rehabilitation of the eye. The temporality of Čarný's installations – they can survive only in documentation or in people's memories – underline his direction to the position of the artist as an observer and not the artist as a creator.

Čarný prepared several other installations based on the painting by means of the reflected light (Life after Life I., II., 1991, Painting by Light, 1992, The Transcendental Space III., 1992). These installations were visually close to some of the works of the constructivism in the period between two world wars (N. Gabo, A. Pevsner, L. Moholy-Nagy) and the kinetic art of the '60s (N. Schoffer, J. Le Parc), but spiritually they were more in opposition to them. While constructivism and

kinetism believed in the positive strength of the new technical innovations and were based on the vision of the technical in the service of art, Čarný's attitude reflects the experience and skepticism of the man in the '20s century. He doesn't reject the use of the technical, but the nucleus of his work is his attitude of humility to the world – to nature. He asks: "Can I sign my pictures? I am their initiator, but not more than nature is. Creating art is for me a continual interaction with the proceedings in nature but giving them new coherences in meaning". This idea was very clearly expressed in his drawing The Cross (1994).

In installation Minos (1993) work with the text is a dominant feature for the first time. Important is the linkage between the labyrinth (structure) and the labyrinth of the text (book) and the labyrinth of the text (book) and the library (labyrinth of cognition). The text written in phosphoric paint on the wall of a darkened room is the quotation from the catalogue to the exhibition (Between Object and Installation, Dortmund 1992). Its message is revealed for only a few seconds; we are able to read only fragments: "... guarantee of quick orientation ... to an unknown territory ... where is the North ... what is nearer..." In spite of the fact that the quotation's author is known, it is not the presentation of a specific text. What Čarný presents is more the feeling of being threatened by the chaos that reflects the overburden of communication in our world at the end of the millennium. Paradoxically, the word itself, that has been our support for a long time, is disappearing in the maze of the present. Its strong position within our civilization – where, despite its limitations, it was considered to be one of the most precise

tools of cognition – is now threatened. Though existentially serious, the Minos installation is visually attractive and emotionally stimulating. The changing of the light and darkness, the magic cast shadow, the letters as fragments of the message add dynamism and density to the meaning of the installation. The latest installation created by Čarný, especially for his retrospective exhibition in the Museum of Art in Žilina, closes one stage of his work but also foreshadows his future direction. It consists of 14 paper casts of one of Messerschmidt's (1976-1783) character heads. The casts are infected with putrefactive bacteria. The installation shows the process of decomposition that goes on in closed glass display cases. Its meaning can be read on several levels.

At the beginning there was the idea of recycling in art. Against all current artistic strategies that present the work of art as the result of the previous activity, Čarný's idea is to present the process itself. Thus he is linked up with the activities constantly present in the art of the second half of the twentieth century. But contrary to the overwhelming majority (beginning with Pollock and Y. Klein followed by representatives of the so called process art and later action art), he doesn't show the process leading to the creation of the work of art, but the reverse procedure – the decomposition of it. Even this attitude is not unknown in the history of art. We can mention Tinguely's self-destructing Homage to New York (1960), or Smithson's stone Spiral Jetty (1970) that gradually, under the influence of erosive processes, again becomes part of the nature it has been torn out of. Čarný has chosen the work of a

historical artist as the object of his demonstration. He returns to a new formulation of his ambivalent relationship to the values of culture, to the directing of art, to the meaning of creativity. On the one hand, he is aware of the natural human drive to creativity that has given rise to culture and civilization. On the other hand, he sees the consequences of abusing creativity that at present has become almost a synonym of hedonism. The current passionate desires for «creative» self-expression, has slowly grown to a point when we can speak about an excessive multiplication of art. In this threatening situation Čarný has chosen the tactics of recycling. He doesn't renounce creativity; he only directs it to the past, to history and to art history. He searches for forgotten ideas, revives them and returns them to the currency of culture. The Knowledge about the coherences and the historical context is one of the expressive features of Čarný's way of thinking and creating. The first homage to great personalities in the history of art (Breughel, Rembrandt, Picasso) appeared in the '70s. Formally interesting became the Act of Homage to the Nude (object, mirrors, 1990). This homage to Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* is a material paraphrase of the famous painting. The use of the mirrors and the installation of the object in the staircase of the room is a playful shifting, as well as a form of touching the mythical figure of the 20th century art. The principle of working with another artist's artefact has been thought to the end by Čarný on the occasion of the exhibition of the Group A-R (Bratislava, 1992). For the first time he didn't work with a copy but with the original artefact borrowed from

the depository of the Gallery of the Town Bratislava. He created a statement with light, using reflections of mirror fragments on a real exhibited painting from the beginning of the twentieth century. A similar principia of commenting on pictures from the GMB gallery was used for the installation for one of the exhibitions of the international project, *Close Encounter*. By projecting a lit picture onto a real one he created interesting visual comments (germination, multiplication, setting in motion) on the content and form of historical art (exhibition *Cultural Identity*, curator I. Jančár). The same procedure was repeated in the installation *Gallery* (the Museum of Art Žilina, 1995) in which painting with phosphoric paints was used for the first time. After his working with original artefacts borrowed from the depositories of various galleries – the act of adopting was not dependent on the quality of the adopted work (mostly that of local artists was used) Čarný returned to the work of a known and appreciated artist of high quality in his latest installation. F. X. Messerschmidt's character heads are an artistic and historical notion. They represent a work of art par excellence, fully adequate to our idea about its lasting value. Therefore it was possible to join the artificially induced process of decomposition (even under the assumption that Čarný naturally doesn't work with the original) with destruction and aggression. The idea of recycling in art is a positive idea. It is intensified by the statement of the English Franciscan, the scholar Roger Bacon (1214–1294), which Čarný adopted as the title of his installation. *Putrefactio ist omnium rerum mater* (Decay is the Mother of All Things). The statement in which putrefaction is

considered to be the condition for the rise of a new (different) quality refers us to mechanisms in which the natural cycle of life and death is coded. At the first sight it seems that this regulating mechanism can't function beyond the boundaries of the biological world. Wasn't one of the reasons for the fascination with a piece of sculpture (or a picture) based on the assumption of their eternal values? Isn't art the value that survives its creator and circumstances under which it was created? And still – even in culture there exist analogous mechanisms of regulation. If we exclude the deliberate destruction of monuments (for instance *damnatio memoriae*, iconoclasm...) there is still our natural ability of forgetting. This ability gives way to new ideas and offers us the chance of remembering and rediscovering. Within this context we can say that Čarný's installation works with the memory. The real process of decomposition (rotting) is in its metaphoric plane; a release of the historical memory and personal human experience, coded in the specific artefact.

It was not by chance that Čarný turned to Messerschmidt. The phenomenon of Messerschmidt is alive in Bratislava. The majority of his cycle of character heads was created in Bratislava where the artist lived until his death. His influence is apparent not only in the local art history but also in the work of some artists. Beside A. Rainer from Vienna, inspiration by Messerschmidt can be seen in the work of performer V. Kordoš, (*Homage to F. X. Messerschmidt*, action, *Nové Zámky*, 1989). Messerschmidt's cycle of character heads is compatible with the language of art in the twentieth century, above all because

of its intensified expressiveness, the relationship between the mental and the spiritual and the extremely personal motivation of its origin. It is generally known that this cycle was created when the artist was seriously ill (paranoid schizophrenia?). He worked on it only out of his inner need, refusing not only to sell any of the heads, but even to exhibit them. And this work as the expression of his innermost feelings and the critical situation he was in, makes Messerschmidt a modern artist who anticipated his time. He deserves this primacy even on the assumption that he was concerned about his exceeding of the limits of conventional art of the period, and that he even thought of destroying the whole cycle. It is almost symbolic that Čarný turned to Messerschmidt at the time of the approaching end of the twentieth century – a century of the rise, the full development and the end of the Modern in art.

Jana Geržová (1995)

ALCHEMY OF MEDIA

In works of Ladislav Čarný (1949), analytical and conceptual resources are apparent, as also the deliberating playfulness of postmodernism. For his works, the strategy of recycling, experimental approach, usage of untraditional techniques and materials, processed character and blurring of media boundaries are symptomatic. In his case, to create means to explore, to contemplate about art, to formulate a picture about the world, essential questions and to express an attitude. Some fields he is occupied with have been defined since the end of the 80's – the light, mirroring, and relationship between the material and transcendental, interpretation of works, and the problem of communication in the information era. He belongs among authors who, besides the serious character of their statement, are willing to experiment and searching for untraditional forms of expression did not renounce of aesthetic dimension of their works. His works encourage for reflection, they surprise by their peculiarity and they are unusually impressive. By their spiritual coverage they resist the visual pollution of current era overloaded by pictures.

As an utter painter he researched the possibilities of painting in the second half of the 70's. Despite the painter's view remained decisive for him, in the beginning of the 80's he exceeded the boundaries of painting towards objects, from the beginning of the 90's he headed towards installations and then towards the media art. He worked with mirror, a tool for multiplying of illusion. It became part of the painting's terrain, a means of materialization of the world. The mirror finally overtook the painting

itself – by means of a role reflecting the surface of reality and as a visually attractive material with a strong metaphoric potential. The exhibition in Marianka in 1990 had initiation significance. The exhibition introduced mirror objects in an abandoned monastery. These exhibited objects activated the memory of the location and revealed its transcendental dimensions. Among them, also the object entitled *The Act of Homage to the Nude* (1990) in which L. Čarný interpreted the important work of Marcel Duchamp: *The Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912).

The work was regarded by the contemporaries as scandalous due to its diversion from cubist principles, evocation of the phase movement and the title written directly into the picture. L. Čarný objectified painting and transmitted it into space. He preserved the emblematic silhouette of the nudes, the analytic structure of the picture and the illusion of the phase movement. The transfer of painting into object, of a colourful surface into the relief surface of the mirror exceeded the level of material and media event. It verified the capacity of the iconic work and within it the problem of durability or aesthetic quality of the "retinal art" which Duchamp quit in order to restore the meaning of "thinking". The impressive interpretation includes reasoning of function of art as a beautiful deception, experimenting confirming the creative intention, innovation shifting the boundaries of creation, the work as an object and the history of art as the interpretation base. It provides a strong idea in an attractive form.

The mirror objects are based on interplay between the picture and its reflection. Their suggestive character lies in involvement or

damping of the mirroring effect by various minimal interventions. For instance blurring the mirror surface by scratching its reflective layer or by multiplying the mirroring effect by breaking or cutting the surface. L. Čarný studies qualities of the mirror, its ability to build, multiply, squelch and make the illusion of space unclear, dematerialize the material, make light more visible, to stimulate imagination and to disclose the spiritual. In the relief-like structure, revolutionary escape from art that took place by appropriation, shift of context and by ironic marking of ready objects and he also pointed out the paradoxes and consequences of his canonization.

At the end of the 90's and at the beginning of the millennium, L. Čarný worked with texts, language games and visual metaphors. He created the multi layered Hermeneutics (2006–2010), derived from playful references to the antique god Hermes and the philosophical direction focused on research of structures of understanding of being. The sculpture of the divine messenger the mediator between the supernal and earthly world, has been interpreted by him already in 1984 (Hermes as Janus), when he, for an illusion, painted his face on the back side of the plaster cast of the head – he achieved the impression of a god with two faces. Later he created versions of Hermes's heads in various materials by engaging their synesthetic qualities and also tautological language games and visual metaphors: Hermes - Halikos (salt), Hermes - Sacharatos (sugar), Hermes - Skuriasmenos (rost), Hermes - Keruchos (wax). Through features of materials, he made the changes of an idea visible. He emphasized the paradox of visi-

ble and invisible, whilst the memory of the artwork prevailed – while the rest remained hidden under cultural, symbolical and sacral sediments. The set of Hermeneutics encompasses a wider problem of communication, making oneself understood and of orientation in the world. The Shadow Questions (2009) also belongs into this set; they deal with essential existential questions. Every one of us is searching for answers to the following questions: “WHO AM I? WHAT IS OUT OF ME? DO I HAVE A GOAL? DO I HAVE THE RIGHT TO ASK? IS THERE A WAY? IS IT THE RIGHT QUESTION? WHERE DO I COME FROM? WHO AM I? IS THERE SOME SENSE?” The text written with phosphorous paint on a fluorescent surface, lit by UV light in a dark room becomes readable only through the shadow of the viewer. The layered words are gradually fading, finally only their echo remains. The Shadow Questions associate Plato's parable about the cage – virtuality, limitedness and incompleteness of knowledge – the not graspable character of the essence and limitation of subjective vision. They refer to a narrowed perspective of own view – perceived through shadow play of own existence.

Čarný dealt with the problem of communication in his minimalist video installation – Hermeneutics (2009). He transferred a magnified image of female mouth on a lamellar curtain installed as a door – a passage to the other exhibition space. Poetic etudes based on stressing the female element transform the mouth into a gender attribute. The phonetic articulation brings messages of various meanings, from playful communication exercises through erotic connotations and manipula-

tive entries, up to pulling down the female myth of a woman as an emotive being. The mouth, except being a sensory organ and a communication tool expressing one's attitude to the world around, is also a carrier of secrets, a gate interconnecting the inner and outer world.

He reacted to problematic-like gender relations processed mainly by female artists through an interactive installation *Hoovering for Men* (The Cycle Houseworks for Men, 2001). He accepted an imaginary challenge and with his specific humour he converted stereotypes in division of work. He invited the viewer to take part in a game in which, while vacuum cleaning in a darkened room, the viewer could read the polemic passages from the text Meret Oppenheim written on the carpet with phosphorous paint. The text dealt with “competence conflicts” between men and women, of their roles, longings and expectations. The connection of high and low, male and female, spiritual and physical in everyday activity provides a decisive cognition – that overcoming conflicts, the problem of accepting each other and the stereotypes of gender roles lies in individual effort, in cooperation in a partnership. The first accommodating step in this process could be housework for men that should be made special, stimulating or intellectually teasing. L. Čarný suggested “work through game” – as a bait for men and a counterpoint of common housework done by women on daily basis – whilst he emphatically pointed out the inert character of conventions.

In the ready movies *Metropolis* (2006) he turned the strategies of visual communication upside down – he expressed his critical standpoint to the media era in an effective

form. He reached into media history – transformed a part of burgher living room into a projection screen. He projected magnified shots of the cult film of Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1926) on the surface of historical furniture (on the armchair he projected the face of the main heroine Mary and the factory workers were projected on the wall). The author inhabited parts of the interior with scenes from the film, into it he transferred the feeling of alienation a citizen of a modern city can experience from the heroic era of the technical revolution. He referred to analogies between visions of future in those times and of current times, evident in enslavement by technical progress and information technologies, on domestication and supremacy of media in the intimate environment and spiritual human sphere. Through his multimedia installation of decisive meaning – In the Epicentre (2010), he reacted on the breakdown of the vision of culture communication and fading of the spiritual in recent times. He formulated a parable about the role of religion in the information era. He created a sacral space in shape of an open octagon for three multimedia “video frescos”, into the epicenter of which the viewer is entering. The videos capture faces of children that represent three dominant monotheist cultures in history: Christian, Jewish and Muslim. The shots are overlaid by materials symbolic for the given culture (salt in the Christian, wax combs in the Jewish, Arabic gum in the Muslim culture). The crystalline layers of used materials create a diaphragm and a symbolic border between own culture and the rest of the world. Children, trapped in their own world are saying prayers in hebrew, latin

and arabic languages. This results in an uplifting polyphony of ritual singing dedicated for the very same transcendental essence, just named differently in each of three traditions. The work suggests a complex of questions related to the place of man in the world, the integrating and isolating role of religion in times of globalisation; faith as spiritual need, a tool for transformation, the strategy of survival or ideological weapon. It is the cathartic Epicentre of the beginning and end of existence – one of possible universal answers on never ending questions.

Helena Markusková (2014)

Ladislav Čarný is one of that generation of artists who appeared on our visual art scene in the mid-70s, and whose work is an important component of unofficial art from our period of totalitarianism. Until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 he exhibited mainly in alternative, non-gallery spaces. This was true also in most cases of colleagues of his, in the fields of painting and sculpture, who were focusing principally on analysing the expressive means and conceptualising the artistic utterance.

Having outgrown the limits of traditional media, in the late 1980s Čarný concentrated on exploring the impermanent and non-material phenomena of light. Integrating a mirror foundation, folios, and elementary surface sketches, he created impressive structural light surfaces. To these he attached wall objects made of heavily-scored and cut mirror surfaces, e.g. the series *Masky* (Masks) 1990. The problem of the postmodern fragmentarisation of the whole, using mirrors, was further transposed to visual games

with reflections, ephemeral effects, and manipulated rays of daylight. Researching the nature of reality and illusion, he was also in dialogue with art history: we may mention his work in the monastery at Marianka, e.g. *Akt, pocity aktu* (Act of Homage to the Nude, 1990), a mirror object on a stairs in homage to M. Duchamp. In subsequent spatial installations Čarný commented on classical paintings using an arrangement of illuminated mirror fragments, or with slide projection.

After 1989 Čarný regularly took part in presentations by the AR group, of which he was a member from 1991 to 2004. He had a number of solo exhibitions and presented his work at many important representative exhibitions of Slovak visual art at home and abroad, e.g. in Prague, Paris, Dortmund, Pittsburg, Seville and Hanover (at the Expo). In 1990 and 2001 he was awarded creative stipendia by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation in the USA.

Gradually his field of observation widened, from visualising the phenomenon to visualising the process (physical, chemical, biological) and opportunities for reading it anew in terms of an interpretative shift. Čarný also turned to working with phosphorous, especially in the form of script as a symbol of developing knowledge (wall projection *Minos*, 1993, Trnava) and later also wall paintings, as part of Jana Geržová's cycle *Umenie aury* (Art of the Aura, Trnava Synagogue, 1995; painting with phosphorous, citing Goya's paintings from the House of the Deaf Man). Using a regime of light and darkness, he directed not only the repetition of events but also the processual qualities of the installation; he felt an ever-growing fascination with the material

transmutations of the object. This is evidenced in one of his most important works, the spatial installation *Putrefactio est omnium rerum mater* (Decay is the Mother of All Things, 1995, Žilina), for which he created 15 mouldings of one of the characteristic heads by the celebrated Austrian baroque sculptor F. X. Messerschmidt, injected them with putrefactive bacteria, enclosed them in glass cases, and left them to the fate of the spontaneous process. In a strange way he thus revitalised “dead” portraits, whose form was changing throughout the duration of the entire exhibition, under the influences of heat and humidity. Here the artist freely took inspiration from the alchemical term *putrefactio* (rotting), as an essential stage of transmutation, so as to at the same time to represent the merry-go-round of birth and dying. The original material, that is to say, dies off in the “nigredo phase”, dissolving into primary matter, so as to enable a new quality to develop. The process of “alchemical” transformation of matter was further projected in a further installation of ice sculptures which cyclically dissolved and then refroze, thereby changing form and configuration (*Transsubstantácia – Transsubstantiation*), in the exhibition *Barok a súčasnosť* (Baroque and the Present Day), SNG, 1998.

In the course of a few decades Čarný’s work has taken shape as a permanent dialogue with art history and culture, and as a spiritual re-evaluation of “myth-creation”, the phenomenon of *chef d’oeuvres*, and the recycling of ideas. In this connection he focuses primarily on the problems of, firstly, how diverse meanings correspond, and secondly, the possibility or impossibility of communication, going from sim-

ple speech acts to a quest for the points of convergence of different religions. Here too he often returns not only to works by others but to his own, so as to put “the Shem” in them again, to revitalise and change them, and in new circumstances to transmute their meaning. It is the meaning, as the primary interest, which afterwards influences the medium used, the technique, the material, and the context of presentation of individual works. For example, in his objects *Relikviáre* (Reliquaries) he combined in a parodic language the historical form of the reliquary with a new content: the first Duchamp ready-mades, which not only recorded a fundamental turn in the history of modern art but themselves became new and revered “relics of modernity”. More and more, Čarný was attracted by the material transmutations of the object to the point of immaterial dwindling, the pictorial confrontation of the real, the simulated and the virtual. His exhibitions usually consist of interactive installations, whose photo- and electro-luminescent phenomena, including the light image, expect the viewer to stop and make his/her own interpretation. Here is a semiotic enclave which is open, with varying degrees of comprehensibility, to everyone. More educated viewers naturally have an advantage, because they can discover a richer context of meanings.

Čarný’s visual language is pervaded by cultural symbols, historical and contemporary, contents which have to do with appropriation and adaptation of finished works, from classical sculpture to 20th century cult films. Simultaneously, he reorganises the cultural codes in new contexts and absorbs them into his personal creative idiolect. These

tendencies were manifest in the installation *Zjavenie písma* (Revelation of the Letter, SNG, 1999), where he returned to light as an immaterial mystical medium and also to the message of the Bible. A thought on how fragments of cultural texts circulate in public space was projected into an argument against statements by Marcel Duchamp, and light was again used as a text, in the installation *Vysávanie pre mužov* (Hoovering for Men, 2001), where a vacuum cleaner slowly disclosed to the viewer Čarný reading something: the content was a citation from a lecture by Merett Oppenheim, opening up opportunities for feminist discourse.

His shift towards ever more sophisticated processual forms of visualisation afterwards led to the solo exhibition *V. I. P. Visual in Process* (GMB, Bratislava, 2004), whose most effective aspect was the interactive contact with the viewer. At issue here was the problem of monitoring, with the real object being confronted with its light image in direct transmission, and the text in its sonic form memorised by a live parrot. With this spatial set of “three staged model situations of connected communication” Čarný reaffirmed his abiding interest in juxtaposing “the real and the virtual” and in text as a communicative element in art. He also confirmed that, within the range of neoconceptual processual creations in contemporary art in Slovakia, he occupies one of the primary positions.

Zygmund Bauman refers to four characteristic patterns or models of the postmodern personality: the observer, the tramp, the tourist and the gambler (*Reflections on the Postmodern Age*). We might uncover elements of each of these types in Čarný as an artist, but the

essential point is that he extends this gamut with the type of the alchemist. He works with the transformation of matter and aggregation and with the magic of light, and also, one might say, with the spell-binding formulas of words. Like the alchemist, Čarný too proceeds from certain processual rules, combinations of materials and precise compounding of ingredients, and he attempts to foresee the resultant form of his artwork and its effect. To a certain extent he is always taking a risk, since he will not necessarily always succeed in his original purpose. Like the alchemist he must count on a generous contribution from chance, his co-creator: there must be a moment when “the stars are favourably aligned”. Often he works with transcendent themes of mystical purport and searches for symbols and codes whereby he may impart them. With some hyperbole one may say that Čarný is an artistic Paracelsus, who seeks out and simulates the capacity of matter to change into other forms and thus to demonstrate that nothing is permanent, that everything undergoes change – including meanings and their communication. And let us not forget that the goal of alchemy was not just “to change lead into gold”: it is also a process of individuation, the so-called unity of opposites in man’s unconscious, with the aim of achieving inner spiritual balance. That is ultimately how C. G. Jung too understood it. “*Aurum nostrum non est aurum vulgi*”: the work on change is an analogy of work on spiritual change in the human being, which is to say, in oneself.

Further evidence of this creative programme is Čarný’s most recent exhibition *Schrödinger’s Cat / Cat’s Schrödinger* (Galéria

19, Bratislava, 2017), which I would like to focus on somewhat more closely. This comprised a complex set of spatial installations, consisting of large paintings connected with mirrors. Here Čarný again made his appearance as a creative artist who is fascinated not only by the stimulating works of the past but also by the secrets of natural laws and the efforts of scientists to formulate their essence. He used tested principles of catoptric effects, via a mirroring of paintings on narrow prisms with a triangular profile, and simultaneously he employed effects of lenticular printing. It was as if he wished to recall the fact that what we see always depends on the position of the one who is looking and on how he/she looks, and that the mirror in this equation always has the role of an unknown, magical threshold to another reality. The artist accordingly marked a line on the floor as a border, where the viewer should stand so that the paintings hanging before him/her might be uncovered in all their metaphorical paraphrasis. Čarný here exploited the fact (which Umberto Eco had already elucidated) that a mirror may be used as an information channel. It can be a prosthesis extending the reach of the eye, because if it is positioned at the correct angle, it will bring us close to what from our given standpoint we do not see (the periscope principle). “Behind” the painting, which the viewer is just then looking at, via a generated semiotic phenomenon Čarný has uncovered a further hidden image painted on the averted side of the vertical profiles, whose fragmented painted stripes are unified in a comprehensive “new” image on the surface of the mirror. This process of uncovering the hidden image is

bound up semantically with visualisation of the paradoxes known from quantum physics. That allows for the concurrent existence of many different and manifestly contradictory situations, existing in a kind of shadow or potential reality. Thus the cat in the box, as the famous quantum physicist Erwin Schrödinger formulated it, can exist in a state which is simultaneously alive and dead. Subsequently, thanks to the mirror, Čarný’s pictures of Schrödinger’s Cat and its antipole Cat’s Schrödinger function as a visual illustration of this paradox. At the same time they remind us that in a certain sense this is true of all living things, and that the very face of the author of this famous paradox itself mirrors the symbol of death: the skull that it conceals within itself. In connection with this, a further work of Čarný’s at this exhibition – a citation of the head of Jesus from the Grünewald Isenheim altar – was no coincidental selection, rather it reversed the significance of the preceding work: the expressive features of the suffering *Ecce homo*, thanks to the mirror as a magic threshold, changed to the timeless face, flooded with a golden glow, of the eternally living Christ from his Resurrection scene. This mutual relativity of life and death seems to have a final confirmation in Čarný’s third visual stratagem, entitled *Halbstein*: two parts of the half-torn face of the famous physicist Albert Einstein, as if torn in two between theories seeking to explain the courses of the world in the concepts of different ideas of time, i.e. Newtonian mechanics and quantum physics. Via the mirror, however, his serious expression changes immediately to a citation of his popular sarcastic portrait with stuck-out

tongue. It is as if he were mocking all those who throughout his life had underestimated his intellect and ability to see what others did not see.

At first glance Čarný's visual games and working procedures might seem somewhat anachronistic, when compared with what is currently in mode: the straightforward activist gestures, the reduced language of neoconceptualism, or on the other hand the formally elegant effects of electronic art. However, it is evident that he has returned to the traditional medium of painting precisely because of its expressive "emotionality", which is unmatched by anything else, and through which it has given substantial form, as it were, to the ungraspable paradoxes of quantum physics. It is as if he wished to remind us by his choice of medium that the painters too, alongside the scientists, long ago discovered a variety of visual paradoxes and were able to demonstrate them using their own techniques. Hence in this exhibition also he has shown that he continues to feel (and for him this is primary) a certain responsibility towards such ideas as metaphor, the meaning of the work, tradition, interpretation, depth of the semantic message, even while his approach remains anchored in conceptualism. Insofar as he defends the traditional right to an art conceived not only as a weapon but also as a path to transcendence, he poses a certain alternative to the apodictic mode of some current artistic trends. From this perspective he may give the impression of working in an ivory tower, defending the artist's personal emancipation and defying the new functions of art. But this attitude also, I think, remains legitimate in contempo-

rary art, because it undermines the values of the mass-consumption society by its own means, only less inconspicuously – and from an opposite side.

Zora Rusinová (2018)

Ladislav Čarný biography

1949 born in Žilina
1968 – 1974 studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava
1992 teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava
2008 professor

Highlights of exhibitions:

Galeria Mastachaba, Krakow, 1991
Coupolle Hausmann, Paris, 1991
Expo, Sevilla, 1992
Mattress Factory Pittsburg, 1995
Jitro kouzelníků, NG Praha, 1996
Barok a súčasnosť, SNG – GMB, 1998
Ad laudem artificis, SNG, 1999
Szlovák fotografia, Ernst Muzeum Budapest, 1999
Slovak Art Free, CS. pavilon, Bienale Venezia, 1999
20. storočie, SNG Bratislava, 2000
Expo Hanover, 2000
A-R Group, Ludwig Museum Budapest, 2002
Pasce a ilúzie, Nitrianka galéria, 2009
Mesiások, Modem Debrecen, 2009
Zero Years, Freies Museum Berlin, 2013
Galéria E. Zmetáka, Nové Zámky, 2014



In the Epicentre, detail: Muslim prayer, Arabic gum



In the Epicentre, 2010,
video installation, 3x
DVD player, 3x projec-
tor, 210x290x267 cm



In the Epicentre,
detail: Muslim prayer,
Arabic gum



Homage to Duchamp - Reliquaries:
Bicycle Wheel, 1998, 130x89x24 cm



Homage to Duchamp - Reliquaries:
Bottle dryer, 1998



Homage to Duchamp - Reliquaries:
The Well (Urinal), 1998, 120x48x54 cm



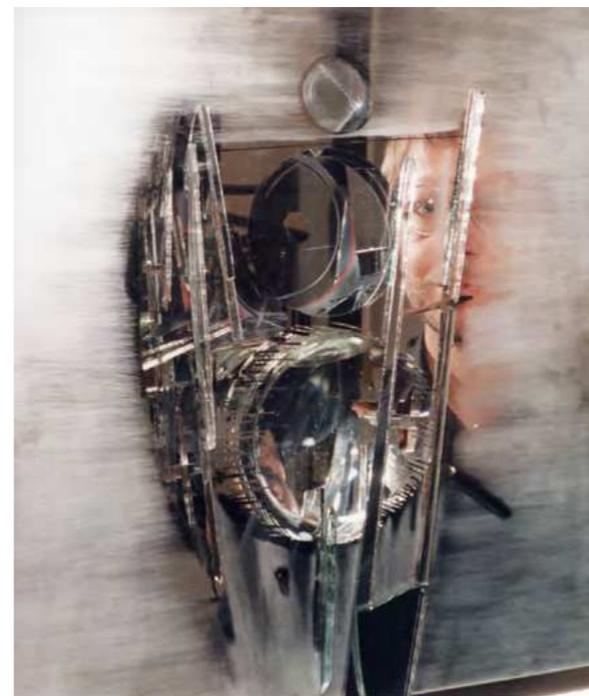
Homage to Duchamp - Reliquaries:
Why to sneeze?, 2010, 80x38x38 cm



Portrait, 1987, mirror, wire, 60x50 cm



Mask N°1, 1990, mirrors, 50x44 cm



Mask N°2, 1990, mirrors, optical glass, 55x45 cm



Mask N°5, 1990, mirrors with broken up foil, 50x44 cm



Hermeneutics (2006-2010) Hermes -
Halikos (salt), 48x23x25 cm



Hermes - Sacharatos (sugar), 48x23x24 cm



Hermes - Skuriasmenos (rost), 50x23x28 cm



Hermes - Keruchos (wax), 34x24x34 cm



Mimicry for the Naked Body, 1983,
acrylic paint on a naked body, video



Mimicry for Worn Clothes, 1984, oil painting on clothes, video



Rembrandt
(Parable of the Prodigal Son), 1989,
acrylic paint,
cardboard,
mirror, reflected
light, 74x100 cm

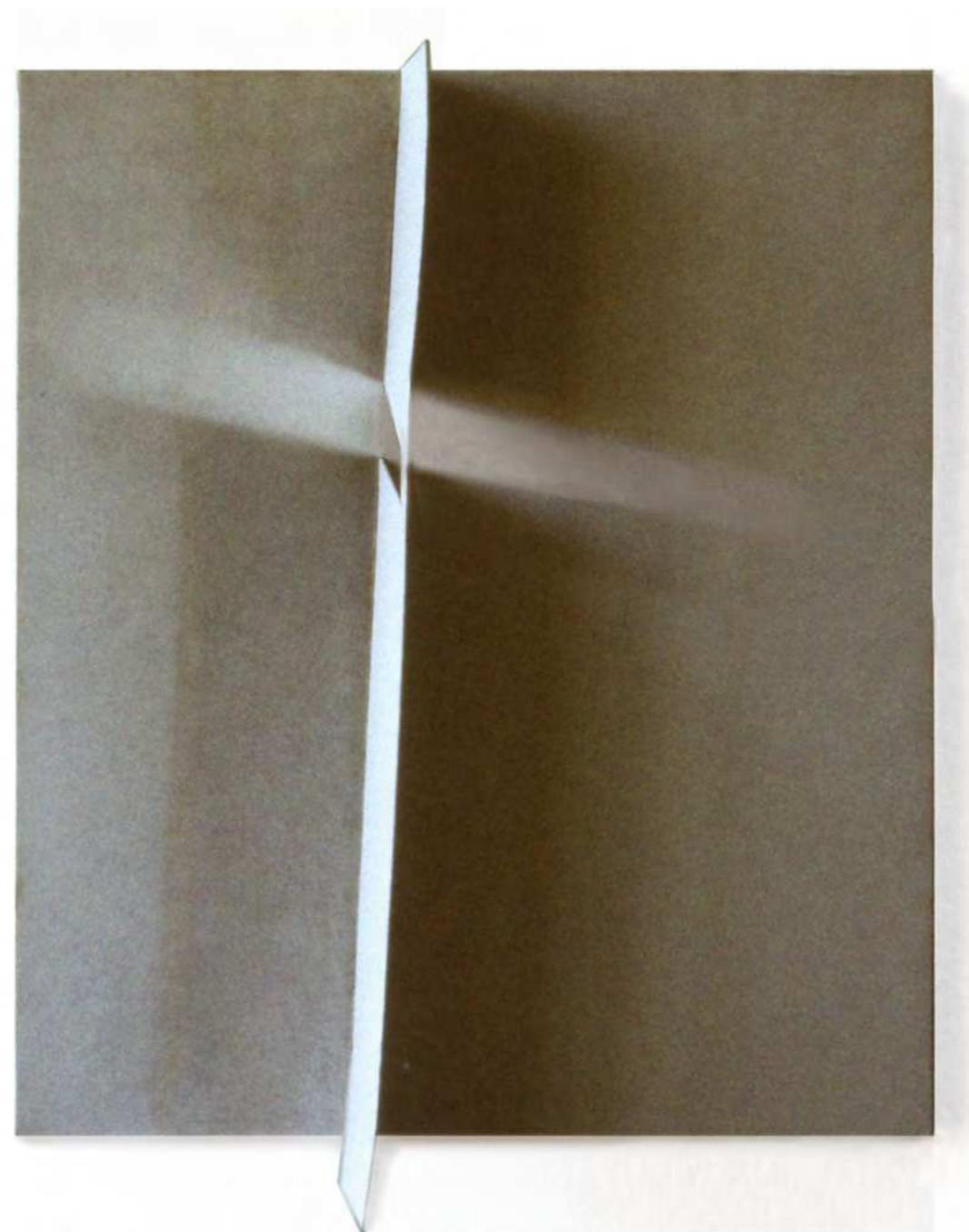
Ovulus, 1989,
acrylic paint,
mirrors,
reflected light,
shadows, 85x90
cm



The Last Canvas, 1986-
89, acrylic paint, mirror,
cardboard, daylight and
shadow, 75x 75 cm



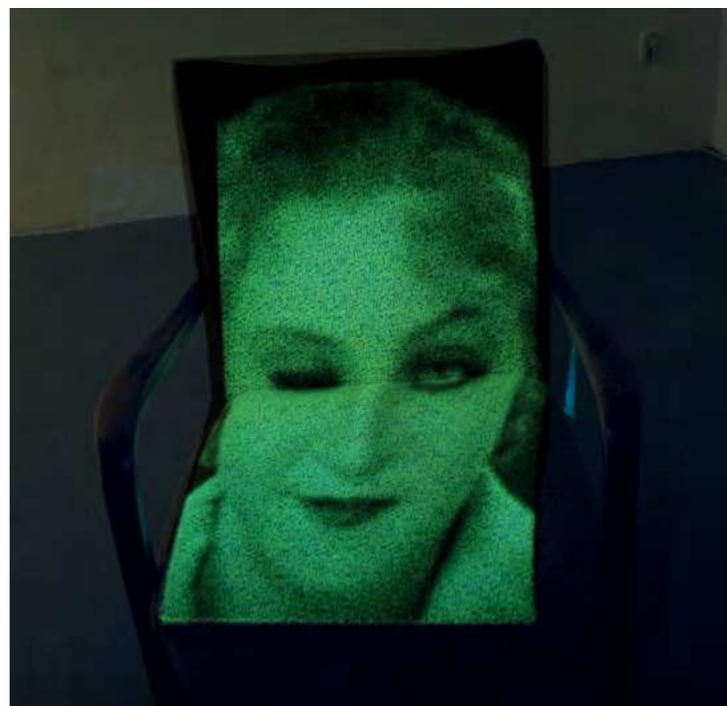
Salvator mundi VI., 1990-
2013, mirror, rope



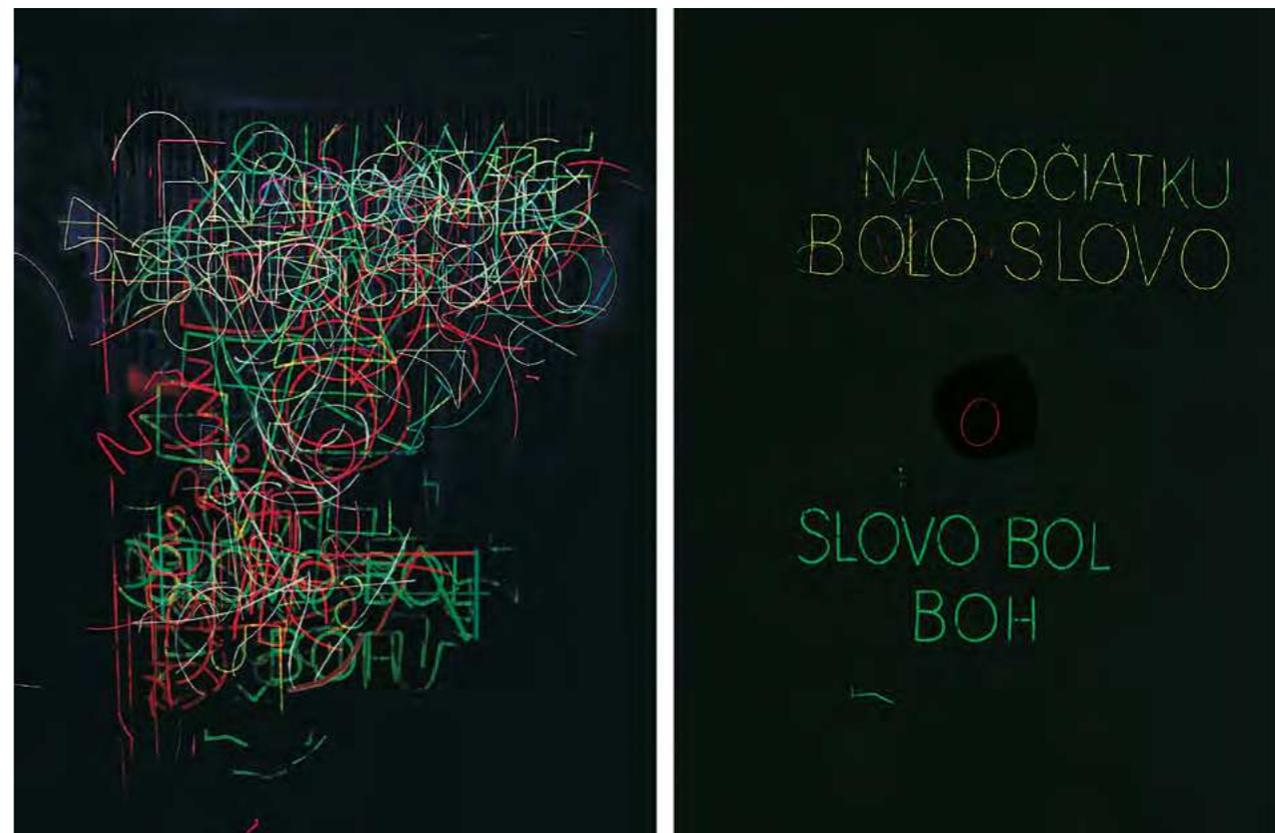
The lighting Cross, 1987,
on the left: drawing in
pencil, paper; on the
right: drawn real daylight
and shadow, 56x50 cm



Putrefactio est omnium rerum mater (Decay is the Mother of All Things), 1995, 15 casts of character heads after F. X. Messerschmidt, paper pulp infected with putrefactive bacteria - process of decomposition, closed display cases; full view of the installation in the Museum of Art in Žilina



Metropolis, 2006, ready-movies



Revelation of the Letter ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"), 1999, painting with fluorescent and phosphorous paint, light regime (ultraviolet rays/darkness), installation in the SNG Bratislava



Conceptual Painting,
light period, installation in
the Synagogue in Trnava,
1995



Conceptual Painting,
dark period, painting with
phosphoric paint on walls
(according to Goya), full
view, installation in the
Synagogue in Trnava,
1995



Conceptual Painting,
dark period, detail of
installation



Schrödinger's Cat, 2017,
lenticular print, 125x83 cm



"Halbstein", 2017,
installation, 2x acryl
painting 210x100 cm,
mirror 210x195 cm



"Halbstein", detail,
painting /mirror



Grünwald's Jesus, 2017,
installation, acryl painting
210x200 cm, mirror
210x200 cm