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Honors Essay

Performing Askew: Milan Knizak's Actions from the Everyday to the Ritual

Introduction

The organizers of the demonstration wear unusual clothes instead of jewels – articles of daily use or pieces of fancy material sewn on ordinary clothing. parts of clothing painted with some color, preferably red or white, and the like. Every newcomer is given a thing to carry in his hand at all times, e.g., a piece of cutlery, a plate, glass, vase, teapot, piece of clothing, shoe, or the like. Walking down the street they pass a room with an open window, near which a man sits at a laid table and eats. They go on, and are led into a small room, where they are locked in...

The above is neither text from a novel nor a surreal news article. It is the first few sentences of a text describing the seminal action artwork *A Walk Around the New World, A Demonstration for All the Senses*, one of the Czech artist Milan Knizak's earliest action art works, and among the first Happenings to take place in Central-Eastern Europe.

The actions of Knizak from the early-1960s to the early 1970s show the artist's balance between the categories of the everyday and the ritual. The general trend is from actions primarily involved with everyday life to those more concerned with ritual. It should be noted that ritual in Knizak's work must not be confused with the liturgies of organized religion. The ritualistic inflections of Knizak's work, like his approach to everyday life, were personally defined. Both of these concepts will be explored in this paper in wider detail, in the context of specific actions.

This essay examines the shift in Knizak's work as broadly mapping onto the shift in Czechoslovak society, albeit with some differences, from the increasing possibilities of free public expression during the "thaw" to the increasing emphasis on private life during

normalization. In addition to the strict control of the arts introduced by normalization, most citizens began to live with, essentially, a public mask. They knew what slogans to say, which parades to participate in and which topics to avoid in public, in order to maintain their ability to carry out their private lives. In action art, this shift resulted in a focus on the body, and with existential preoccupations of immediate and direct experience. This resulted in a high value placed on the autonomy of the individual, a concept central to action art throughout the 1970s.

This essay places a reading of select actions and texts produced by Milan Knizak, gathered through a combination of library research and archival research in the Special Collections of the Getty Research Institute, into the wider art historical literature on Knizak and action art.

The art historian Amy Brygzdel, in *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, lays out a historical overview of Czechoslovakia which is useful for understanding Milan Knizak's work. She points to 1953, the year of Stalin's death, as an important beginning point when considering Central-Eastern action art. This was the beginning of the "thaw" throughout the Eastern Bloc, when censorship, travel restrictions, and surveillance, generally started to decline. This culminated in the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, which brought back political repression to the country, while "thawing" continued in Czechoslovakia until 1968. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia ushered in the policies of so-called "normalization", which reintroduced strict control of the arts by the communist regime.¹

Despite the relatively lighter censorship in Czechoslovakia throughout the 1960s, even abstract painting, which in Czechoslovakia was usually known as *art informal*, and focused

¹ Brygzdel, Amy. *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. (Rethinking Art's Histories. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 5.

primarily on evoking gesture, could not be shown in official galleries and museums.² Even so, the late Piotr Piotrowski, one of the most well-respected art historians of East-Central European art history, writes that the neo-avant-garde in the country viewed “official” art (Socialist Realism) and *art informel*, as a single, outdated tradition. Progress could only come through the rejection of painting entirely.³ While the rejection of painting in in the 1960s in the west is usually discussed as a rejection of the art market, no such market existed in the Eastern Bloc. Thus, in general, the “political” content of Knizak’s art was little more than a rejection of politics for deeper meaning. Piotrowski traces this idea in Czechoslovakia back to the Czechoslovak Surrealists, whose art was critical of existing society, but this critique avoided direct political engagement, favoring instead a complete critique of society as such.⁴ It is necessary to maintain this mindset when considering Knizak’s actions.

² Piotrowski, Piotr. "Mapping the Legacy of the Political Change of 1956 in East European Art." *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006): 215.

³ *Ibid*, 219.

⁴ *Ibid*, 220-1.



Figure 1: An example of one of the *Short-Term Exhibitions*, 1962-63. Retrieved from: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/178914?association=associatedworks&locale=en&page=1&parent_id=178908&sov_referrer=association

With this broad historical sketch in mind, it is now useful to turn to key details about Knizak's life. Knizak was born in 1940 in Plzen, Czechoslovakia. He was kicked out of art school and university for planning parties and then served in the army from 1959-62.⁵ He continued to paint and produce *Short-Term Exhibitions*, which were assemblages of everyday objects and trash left out on the street for the garbage collectors.⁶ In 1963, he formed the group Aktual Art⁷ with Jan Mach, Jan Trtilek, and Sona Svecova and began publishing samizdat

⁵ Wayne, Baerwaldt, Henry Martin, Dick Higgins, Geoff Hendricks, and Emmett Williams. *Under the Influence of Fluxus*. (1993), 60.

⁶ Jindrich Chalupecky in Knížák, Milan, and Galerie Ars Viva! (Berlin, Germany). *Unvollständige Dokumentation, 1961-1979: Some Documentary, 1961-1979*. (Berlin: Edition Ars Viva, 1980), 24.

⁷ The name of the group "Aktuální umění," translations to "Contemporary art." Later Knizak shorted the name to just "Aktual", and scholars either use this word to refer to the group or the common variants "A-Community" or "Aktual Community." They all refer to the same group.

(illegal self-published literature produced in the former Eastern Bloc, usually copied with a typewriter and then distributed by hand) and producing actions in order to inject new life into a contemporary art scene which they believed was in danger of dying out.⁸ Knizak was appointed “Director of Fluxus East” by George Maciunas and maintained contact with members of Fluxus, Allan Kaprow, and other European and American members of (neo) avant-garde movements. They sent each other mail, samizdat, books and 2D artworks known as “mail art”⁹ George Maciunas invited him to stay in the US for a while, and because of the more liberal atmosphere of the 1960s, he was able to leave the country. He stayed in the US from 1968 to 1970, talking with other members of the avant-garde and performing actions.¹⁰ A year before leaving for the US, he had moved out to the countryside, and when he returned to Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, he again lived in the countryside for some time.¹¹ He was unemployed throughout portions of the 1970s, which was illegal under communism, and he was often jailed for “disturbing the peace.”¹²

Although Knizak was chosen as the director of Fluxus East by George Maciunas and his work is often included in exhibitions of Fluxus work, it would be incorrect to view Knizak as a committed “Fluxus artist.”¹³ The idea of Knizak as a “Fluxus artist” is further complicated by the fact that Fluxus had no unified artistic program or identity to begin with.¹⁴ One could argue that George Maciunas’ mission to erode the binary of artist/non artist and to make art “productive”

⁸ Morganová Pavlína, and Daniel Morgan (trans.). *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*. 1st English ed. Prague, Charles University in Prague: Karolinum Press, 2015, 50.

⁹ Kristine Stiles, “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions (1998)” in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, ed. Paul Schimmel and Kristine Stiles (Los Angeles, New York: Museum of Contemporary Art: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 299.

¹⁰ Milan Knizak and Paul Wilson (trans.) in “Travel Book (2009)” In *1968-1989: Political Upheaval and Artistic Change*, edited by Claire Bishop, Marta Dziewanska and Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej W Waszawie, (Museum under Construction, No. 1. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art), 211.

¹¹ Jean Brown Papers, box 28, folder 34.

¹² Stiles, *Out of Actions*, 301.

¹³ See, for example: *Under the Influence of Fluxus, In the Spirit of Fluxus*, and the *Fluxus Codex*.

¹⁴ See: Elizabeth Armstrong’s “Fluxus and the Museum (1993)” in *In the Spirit of Fluxus* for a discussion of this.

was the primary goal, but, as Armstrong discusses, not all Fluxus members agreed with Maciunas, and tracing those relationships would lie outside the scope of this project.

According to Pospiszyl, Knizak viewed Fluxus as just another channel for disseminating his work, rather than his group. In fact, Knizak was often critical of what he thought was Fluxus' overemphasis on bridging art over life.¹⁵ In her article titled "Fluxus and the East," art historian and curator Petra Stegmann reports that the Czechoslovak public considered the Fluxus events in their country to be childish mischief-making, and did not see the artistic value in creating disorder when their everyday lives were full of incompetent and disorderly bureaucracy.¹⁶ The Fluxus "concerts" were not popular with artists either. Knizak and his circle considered the concerts to be too theatrical, relying on formal clothing, a stage, and failing to dissolve the hierarchy of audience and performer by turning the former into complete participants.¹⁷

¹⁵ Tomáš Pospiszyl, "Milan Knížák and Ken Friedman: Keeping Together Manifestations in a Divided World." (Post., MOMA.org, September 1, 2015).

¹⁶ Petra Stegmann, "Fluxus and the East (2014)" (*Centropa* 14, no. 1), 42.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 46-7.

It's Happening in Prague



Figure 2: *A Walk Around the New World*, photographed by Zdenka Zizkova: Image retrieved from: Kaprow, Allan., Lebel, Jean-Jacques, and Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai. *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966, p. 306

Knizak's action, *A Walk Around the New World, A Demonstration for all the Senses* (1964) is considered one of the first Happenings in the Czech context.¹⁸ The first element of the action arguably occurred before its proper beginning, when members of the Aktual Group invited their friends to participate. Even when simply sending letters through the mail, one could not escape the communist regime's attempts to force the public sphere into the private, and thus dissolve this boundary. Of course, mail was monitored and censored, but beyond this, the regime had promoted pen pal correspondence programs in the past in an attempt to increase ties between

¹⁸ Morganova, *Czech Action Art*, 56.

the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. These were part of wider cultural and tourism programs meant to strengthen ties across the Eastern Bloc.¹⁹ Although nominally instruments of “genuine friendship,” officials often supplied letter-writers with form letters that covered approved topics such as the presupposed Soviet-wide exultation of the accomplishments of the Cosmonauts.²⁰ Form letters meant to express more mundane, everyday thoughts were also provided. The historian of Modern Russia and Eastern Europe, Rachel Applebaum, provides the example sentence of “I really love music and have decided to learn to play the piano.”²¹ These programs destabilized trust in society by replacing genuine human interaction with a state-approved artifice. Further destabilizing trust was what art historian and critic Claire Bishop describes as “an atmosphere of near constant surveillance and insecurity.”²² Against this cultural backdrop, participatory art works were so dangerous as to be limited to only one’s closest friends.²³ With this in mind, it becomes clear why invitations were limited to word of mouth, and not mailed.²⁴ Yet, even if they would have made it passed the censors, word-of-mouth invitations were arguably superior. They lent a sense of authenticity to the action before it even began, creating trust before the action itself. If members of the public passing by chose to participate, they were given a “thing to carry.” The objects in this action functioned in part like invitations to participate. Again, against the backdrop of surveillance, freely welcoming the participation of strangers is an abnormal act. The text accompanying the action reads:

The organizers of the demonstration wear unusual clothes instead of jewels – articles of daily use or pieces of fancy material sewn on ordinary clothing. parts of clothing painted with some color, preferably red or white, and

¹⁹ Applebaum, Rachel. "The Friendship Project: Socialist Internationalism in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s." *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 485.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 496.

²¹ *Ibid*, 496.

²² Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. (London, New York: Verso Books, 2012), 130.

²³ *Ibid*, 130.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 133.

the like. Every newcomer is given a thing to carry in his hand at all times, e.g., a piece of cutlery, a plate, glass, vase, teapot, piece of clothing, shoe, or the like. Walking down the street they pass a room with an open window, near which a man sits at a laid table and eats. They go on, and are led into a small room, where they are locked in and left in inactivity for anything from five minutes up, according to their reaction or indifference. A great deal of perfume has been spilled on the floor of the room. They are now let out. What has happened to them was only preparation, a disturbance of their normal state of mind. The walk goes on. They encounter things – parts of furniture, clothes, etc. A musician lies on the ground and plays a violin. They reach a small place and art put in the middle of a circle. Around them the organizers of the demonstration run, shouting, roaring, cutting across, driving round on motorcycles and in cars. A chair comes down from above. They look at it and point. Then a man comes and puts the chair on a pedestal. All fall to the ground. After a minute another man comes, takes the chair down and sits on it. All get up. The participants are appealed to, to arrange a number of objects in a row. Each participant stands behind his own object. They are then asked to pick up their objects and rebuild the row 20 centimeters farther on. This is repeated as long as desired, according to the reaction of the participants. Now they walk back. A man stands at a wall, glazing a window. As soon as he is finished, he breaks it. In the middles of the street a woman lies on a mattress, listening to a transistor radio. The participants stop and are presented with a book, from which each one tears a page. Then they return their objects and leave. The first, active part of the demonstration is now finished. The second ends in a fortnight, and is different for each participant. Everything that happens to him during this period is a second demonstration.²⁵

First, one must acknowledge that this action is attributed not only to Knizak, but to all the members of the Aktual Group.²⁶ From the very beginning, this demonstrates Knizak's attempt to move away from the traditional understanding that art is the unique work of one creative individual, and towards a participatory model that characterizes much of the work of performance and related art forms. Yet this work contains many elements that reappear in Knizak's subsequent solo works.

The performance artist Allan Kaprow anthologized *A Walk Around the New World in Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings*, which presents a theoretical development of the Happening. However, Knizak and Aktual's action does not fit neatly into this definition. Kaprow

²⁵ Kaprow, Allan. *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966), 305.

²⁶ Ibid, 305.

lays out a general theory of Happenings as satisfying the following conditions: blurring art and life as much as possible, inspired by anything except what is generally recognized as art, encompassing several different places, containing a sense of time which is “variable and discontinuous,” and occurring only once.²⁷ Additionally, the audience cannot only spectate, but must also participate, and the finished whole of the Happening should be understood as a collage of events in specific times and places.²⁸ Kaprow acknowledges that his own Happenings did not live up to all his criteria. They occurred in small interior spaces and the audience members, consisting of other artists and their friends, were often passive. They tended to view the Happenings more as “charming diversions” than “purposive activity.”²⁹ By contrast, Knizak’s *A Walk Around the New World* took place in a public space, and attracted members of the public who decided to take part in the activities. Knizak’s Happening was more successful in its inclusion of a wider variety of participants, however; it failed to live up to the criteria of “variable and discontinuous” sense of time.

While this term is vague in Kaprow’s theory of the Happening, the professor of drama Michael Kirby’s more succinct definition helps flesh out the meaning. Kirby defines Happenings as a “purposefully composed form of theatre in which diverse alogical elements, including nonmatrixed performing, are organized in a compartmented structure.”³⁰ By “nonmatrixed performing” Kirby is referring to any activity which involves a “performer-audience” relationship, yet without functioning under the matrix of “time, place, and character.”³¹

Traditional theatre relies on the audience accepting the difference between the actor and the

²⁷ Ibid, 188-91, 193.

²⁸ Ibid, 195, 198.

²⁹ Ibid, 187-8.

³⁰ Michael Kirby in Sandford, Mariellen R. (ed.) *Happenings and Other Acts*. (Worlds of Performance. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.), 11.

³¹ Ibid, 5, 8.

character being portrayed, and uses stage props lighting and/or speech from a narrator or the characters themselves to create this matrix.³² Once again, *A Walk Around the New World* fulfills the first portion of the definition, it is certainly nonmatrixed, as the Aktual Group is not pretending to be anyone but themselves, and gifts each curious participants a common, everyday object, but no instructions. This lack of instruction also fulfills Kirby's definition of the "alogical", which states that there may be a meaning attached to the different elements of a Happening, but this information is not shared with the audience.³³ Yet, *A Walk Around the New World* is not "compartmental". The Aktual Group and the other participants advance in a linear sequence from one event to another. Furthermore, the members of Aktual are dressed in the same special clothing for the duration of the action, and the same common objects are carried the whole time. These two elements establish a continuity, not necessarily as character-forming elements, but a continuity nonetheless, which collapses the "hermetic tendency" each event must maintain to satisfy Kirby's definition of compartmental.³⁴ Additionally, the text states that the act of sealing the participants in a room covered in spilled perfume is "preparatory," and is meant to alter their mental states. This means that not every element of the Happening can stand on its own. The actions demanded of the participants: walking, watching, carrying, bending down are also everyday activities. The only abnormal activity is the communal destruction of the book, so it would be presumptuous to read any portion of this action as ritualistic. This theme in Knizak's work is developed in later actions.

Several authors have noted the political content, or lack thereof, pertaining to *A Walk Around the New World*. The common western reading sees anything deviating from the work of

³² Ibid, 6-7.

³³ Ibid, 10.

³⁴ Ibid, 11.

the state-controlled artist union as inherently dissident. Art historian and critic RoseLee Goldberg wrote in *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, that is it “evident that performance art had functioned almost exclusively in the East as a form of political opposition in the years of repression.”³⁵ This analysis may be confusing the medium with the message. While Happenings were non-traditional art forms in both the East and the West, in the West, the purpose was often to challenge the notion of what art is, and untangle it from a commodity-system.³⁶ Since no comparable art market existed under the Communist regime, Happenings and performance-based art must have had different messages. As was mentioned earlier, in the communist context all political art was inextricably tied to the regime’s use of art for didactic and propagandistic purposes.³⁷

Besides this connection to the reigning governmental orthodoxy, Günter Berghaus, theatre historian and performance scholar, points to Knizak’s view that participation in political actions, such as protests, is partaking in a narrow activity and inevitably keeps the individual from exercising their full freedom, as a problem with viewing his actions through a purely political lens.³⁸ Instead, he views Knizak as hedonist, and the goal of such art activities as a way to clear the body of the “disease” of complacency.³⁹ It is easier to see this logic behind *A Walk Around the New World* than Goldberg’s logic of political protest. This logic is demonstrated in things like the decision to use an excessive amount of perfume to overstimulate participants’

³⁵ Goldberg, RoseLee. *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present. Revised and Expanded ed.* (World of Art. New York, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001.), 214.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 7-9.

³⁷ Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989.* (London: Reaktion, 2009), 232.

³⁸ Günter Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe” in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R Sandford, (Worlds of Performance. London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 360.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 360.

senses, the overwhelming noise of the encircling cars and motorcycles, and the momentary pleasure destructive acts (the tearing of the book, the breaking of the window) can bring.

The final element of this action is also worth exploring in more detail, especially in contrast to the work of other artists in East-Central Europe during this time period. In 1965, the Slovak artists Alex Mlynarcick, Stano Filko, and Zita Kostrova declared everything that happened in Bratislava from May 1st to May 9th to be an artwork, referred to as *Happsoc*.⁴⁰ These dates in the Eastern Bloc marked two important socialist holidays, Labor Day and “Day of the Victory over Fascism.” One reading of this choice is as an appropriation of the State’s ability to choose and define the importance of specific dates, but art historian Andrea Barotova argues that instead of an overtly political reading, one should view this choice as a result of working with “natural demarcations within the existing structure” of the calendar.⁴¹

There is a surface-level resemblance between this action and the end of *Walk Around the New World’s* declaration that everything which happens to the participants for the next two weeks is part of a second demonstration, but there are key differences. *Aktual’s* declaration functions completely outside of the “natural demarcations” within society’s timekeeping, and exists on a human-scale: the pronouncement only applies to those who voluntarily took part in the first action, rather than encompassing an entire city without their knowledge. Additionally, the Slovakian artists followed up on their declaration, in a tongue-in-cheek way, by combining statistics from the Municipal Office (the number of women, dogs, apartments, rivers, etc. in Bratislava) with photo documentation of the May 1st and 9th celebrations and distributing it all to members of the public.⁴² By contrast, *Aktual* was not interested in the “results” of this second

⁴⁰ Bátorová, Andrea. "Celebration, Festival, and Holiday in Former Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and 1970s As Art Forms for Alternative and Non-Official Art." *Centropa* 12.2012, 1, S. (2012): 78.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 79.

⁴² *Ibid*, 79.

demonstration, but instead, on the effect it would have on each person, who would theoretically live their life a little differently for the next two weeks, as long as they remembered it was declared to be part of a demonstration. This would help bring about the “revolution in everyday life” that Knizak advocated for.⁴³ The choice to limit the action to only the participants showed restraint, and made participation in the “revolution in everyday life” voluntary. However, other action artists employed more robust methods to stimulate the reflection necessary to make such a revolution.

The Soviet Collective Actions Group (CAG) formed in 1976. In a characteristic action, invited members would stand in a field, without being told what was going to happen. After some time, a small activity would take place very far away from them, and then they would return to Moscow. Upon returning, they would write individual reflections on the event, compare notes, and try to determine its meaning.⁴⁴ As Bishop points out, this is a conceptual development from Knizak’s work, where it was assumed that participation alone was enough to permanently alter participants’ perceptions.⁴⁵ *Appearances*, an action completed in 1976, involved the participants waiting in a field and watching as the organizers walked a long distance, from beyond the horizon until they met the grouped participants. They then gave them a document saying they attended *Appearances*.⁴⁶ This is actually similar, albeit with the organizers and participants in different positions, to the beginning element of *A Walk Through Prague*, when members of the public walked up to the organizers and received an object, signaling they were now part of the action. The reflective writing and debate practice of CAG captured ephemeral

⁴³ Badovinac, Zdenka., Briški, Mika, and Moderna Galerija. *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present: Moderna Galerija Ljubljana = Museum of Modern Art*. (1st MIT Press ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 206.

⁴⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 154.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 154.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 155.

details like this, details which likely did not form a substantial part of the memories of *Walk Around the New World* in the minds of the participants. This shifts emphasis away from the fact that each participant had to make a choice whether or not to join and towards the arcane nature of the individual elements themselves. Yet the choice to participate in the action or not, which was really only a series of exaggerated everyday experiences, is reflective of the choice each citizen made every day whether or not participate in the activities of their daily life which upheld the status quo. There was no mechanism in Knizak's action to prompt the questions *why* they had decided to live a little differently for a few hours, so their memories would concern only *what* was different, which is insufficient to start an "everyday revolution."

Destroying the Everyday



Figure 3: An example of *Destroyed Music*. Image retrieved from: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/191647?artist_id=29427&locale=en&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

Beginning about a year before *A Walk Around the New World*, Knizak started his *Destroyed Music* projects. These projects present another example of his preoccupation with everyday objects, but also demonstrate how his activities gradually came to be ritualized. At first, these actions simply involved manually altering the playback speed on his turntable, but by 1965, Knizak started to rupture the surface of the records or affix objects to them.⁴⁷ The content of the actual record was accidental, and he used everything from folk albums to orchestral music.⁴⁸

These actions resemble Fluxus projects, for example, Nam June Paik's well known *Solo for One Violin* (1962), wherein Paik smashed a violin on stage. However, Knizak's *Destroyed Music* should not be considered as an attack on music, meant to destabilize its position as a high art form, as in Fluxus. Indeed, some American Fluxus artists also destroyed turntables, certainly not connected as closely as the idea of "violin" and "high art", due to what art historian and curator Caleb Kelley has termed a "radical disregard for culturally valued objects."⁴⁹ Instead, the model of destruction as a "way to think through" an object's relationship to society, common in Argentine conceptual art, rather than as a "spectacle" is more applicable to Knizak.⁵⁰ These acts of destruction were creative, and Knizak takes an optimistic view of fragmentation. In the book *Sound and the Visual Arts*, Knizak recounts that "it was nice for me, a nice experience to find out that music, even if it's turned down, broken, destroyed, whatever, is still music, it still has some kind of expression."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Knizak, *Some Documentary*, 142.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 143.

⁴⁹ Caleb Kelly, "Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction (2009)" in Spieker, Sven. *Destruction*. (Documents of Contemporary Art Series. London : Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery ; The MIT Press, 2017.), 99.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 20.

⁵¹ Bosseur, Jean-Yves. (ed.), and Broniarski, Alexandre. "Milan Knizak". In *Sound and the Visual Arts: Intersections between Music and Plastic Arts Today*, 64-77. (Paris: Dis Voir, 1993), 65.

Notably, Knizak says he had a very small number of records to listen to, and that his boredom resulting from hearing the same songs over and over again is what first caused him to alter the playback speeds on the turntable, which eventually lead to altering the surface of the records itself, and finally to breaking it.⁵² It was the repetition of an everyday activity *ad nauseum* that led to the discovery of a new art form. It was as if he was uncovering a possibility for expression latent in a mundane object, an extension of Duchamp's concept of the readymade.⁵³ Except, instead of "sculpture" being the latent meaning in everyday objects, Knizak saw "architectural structure" latent in "music," and in fact viewed these categories as partially interchangeable in his 1970's work.⁵⁴ In later years, when Knizak included the altered records in installation pieces, he argues that the viewer knows that music is still stored in the record, despite its broken and mangled surface, and that this act of looking brings the idea of music to the viewer's mind. Knizak describes this process as "beautiful,"⁵⁵ but it also reflects how the everyday object of the record has become a "ritual" object, in that the ideas which the object foregrounds in the viewer's mind is more important than the materiality or use-value of the object.

This concept of destruction also helps explain Knizak's activities without reading overtly political messages into them. The art historian Laszlo Beke, writing in the exhibition catalog *Global Conceptualisms*, provides one such example of a political reading. He construes Knizak's actions as activism, contributing to the liberal atmosphere of 1968 which eventually led the Warsaw Pact troops to occupy Czechoslovakia and implement harsh reforms. In order to characterize Knizak's actions in this way, he selectively highlights other destruction actions of

⁵² Ibid, 65.

⁵³ Ibid, 68.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 67.

⁵⁵Ibid, 69.

Knizak's, such as *Destruction of Books*.⁵⁶ Placing these actions back in the wider context of Knizak's work shows that they were not activist gestures, in which Knizak criticized the regime with coded but potent symbols, as Beke implies. In an unpublished interview hand-dated 1966 – 1967, and reproduced in *To Live Otherwise*, Knizak holds that destruction of paintings, books, sculpture, fridges, cars, televisions, and clothes “eliminates,” but also “liberates” and “purges.”⁵⁷ He then declares “destruction as a change in our way of thinking.” Granted, in the same interview he mentions that destruction can also function as “a small scale demonstration to warn of the possibility of similar events occurring on a massive scale.”⁵⁸ Yet, taken together, these points demonstrate Knizak's optimism in society's ability to come away from large destructive actions more robust.

Personal Ritualism



Figure 4: Milan Knizak performing *Demonstration for One* (1964). Image retrieved from: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/178921?artist_id=29427&locale=en&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

⁵⁶ Laszlo Beke, “Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, ed. Luis Amnitzer, Jane Farver, Rachel Weiss, László Beke (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 45.

⁵⁷ Milan Knizak, *Zit Jinak: To Live Otherwise*, (Prague: KANT, 2018) (unpaginated), 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

Destroyed Music provides a microcosm of the shift from everyday action to ritual action.

Another early action, *Demonstration for One* (1964) is often discussed in ritualistic terms by art historians. In it, Knizak followed a set of pre-written instructions:

Stand still in a crowd, unfold a piece of paper, stand on it, take off your ordinary clothes and put on something unusual, e.g., a half-red, half-green jacket with a tiny saw hanging from the lapel, a lace handkerchief pinned on the back. Put up a poster that says: *I ask those walking by to please crow while passing this place.* Lie down on a piece of paper, read a book, tear out the finished page. Then stand up, crumple the paper, burn it, sweep up the ashes carefully, change your clothes, and leave.⁵⁹

This action differs from *A Walk Around the New World* in a critical way: Knizak makes a point of changing his clothes after all the activities have been completed. This instruction was not included in *A Walk Around the New World*, where the clothes functioned more to identify the organizers among the participants. Pavlina Morganova, one of the most important scholars of Czech action art, highlights the strangeness present in the elements of this action. They contain a “secret purpose not revealed to the viewers” according to her, and she compares Knizak to a shaman, whose specialized clothing affords him a new place in society.⁶⁰ She holds up this work as exemplary of the idea Knizak expressed in various manifestos that the artist is similar to an “apostle, magician, or god” whose goal is to ask: “Is art’s purpose to teach people how to live?”⁶¹

While the heightened emphasis on the use of special clothing supports the reading of this action as more ritualistic than *A Walk Around the New World*, Morganova neglects to mention the various ways it also connects more deeply to the everyday. For example, Knizak performed

⁵⁹ Morganova, *Czech Action Art*, 57.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 57.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 59.

this action in a public square instead of a neighborhood with narrow streets. This widened the audience of the action, and also eliminated the problem of figuring out who was trustworthy enough to invite which plagued the earlier action. In fact, this action is bolder than the earlier action precisely because of this. Anyone could be watching and documenting his strange behavior. By going to where the public is already gathered, instead of inviting an initial group of trusted individuals to an action, Knizak is emphasizing his desire to completely blur art and everyday life, as the public going about their daily routines does not have to change anything to encounter this “artwork.”

Actions such as Mlynarick’s appropriation of a wedding as one of his artworks serve as a foil to this action. In discussion about this appropriation, Mlynarick elucidates the role of ritual in everyday life with the example of the peasant that dresses up in special clean clothes for church on Sundays and then attends this “festive ritual.”⁶² In this example, the changing of clothes and location demonstrates a clean break between the “extraordinary” and the “everyday.” By inventing his own rituals, rather than appropriating existing ones, Knizak avoids this dichotomy, allowing him to nest ritual inside of the everyday.

The action encapsulates everydayness in the sense that the comparative literature scholar Daniel Just uses it in “Art and Everydayness,” where he argues that art that is meant to reproduce everyday life must operate between the twin poles of “too artistic” or “not artistic enough” in order to be effective and to “render visible [what] is in fact already there.”⁶³ Tearing out the pages of the book, burning them, and then sweeping up the ashes is removed enough from everyday activity to be recognizable as “art” by a general public, but not so strange as to alienate

⁶² Bartorova, “Celebration, Festivals, and Holiday”, 80.

⁶³Just, Daniel. "Art and Everydayness: Popular Culture and Daily Life in the Communist Czechoslovakia." *European Journal Of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 6 (2012): 704.

them. The question follows, what invisible reality is Knizak making visible? One can interpret this in a narrowly political way, that he is drawing attention to just how little freedom is available to Czech citizens by acting out an exaggerated version of the everyday act of reading, but one can also interpret it as a comment on the paucity of the imagination of the public, who, out of deep-seated complacency, never think to alter their routines. This reading recalls Berghaus's understanding of Knizak's work, and allows one to see the conceptual similarities between *A Walk Around the New World* and *Demonstration for One*. The material continuity is evident in the fact that the main elements of the latter: the specialized clothing and the slow destruction of a book, are just subtle reworked elements of the former. Searching for such continuity is justified by Knizak's own description of his art works. In 1979, he stated, "Not one single one of these things or actions or whatever they are should be considered a work (if I can even allow myself to use the word at all). My entire existence is an attempt to remain in flux, invisible and whole. All of these things are merely traces, the dust and scraps of a struggle that should never cease."⁶⁴

⁶⁴Knizak, *Some Documentary*, 6.

Expanded Ritualism



Figure 5: Sonia Svecova's famous striptease at the end of 2nd *Manifestation of Aktual Art* (1965). Image retrieved from:

<https://post.at.moma.org/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&query=2nd+manifestation+of+aktual+art&commit=Search>

While the seeds of ritual were still hidden in everydayness in *Demonstration for One*, they blossomed with the *Second Manifestation of Aktual Art* (May, 1965). This full day action ended with Aktual member Sonia Svecova slowly undressing and tossing her clothes into a previously prepared fire. Jindrich Chalupicky, among the most prominent art historian and critics of this period, mentions that participants sang “banal national folk songs” while this happened. Yet, instead of advancing a political reading of this action, Chalupicky writes that the viewers had just participated in “a symbolic form of the ancient rite of the burning of a virgin.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵Ibid, 32.

Not only is this an example of Knizak's work being read in a ritual context, it is also a notable example of the restraint characteristic of his work. It is possible that restraint is also generally characteristic of Czech action body art, especially when compared to the much more violent Viennese Actionists, whom the important Czech body artist Petr Stembera repudiates.⁶⁶ The clothes of Svecova were a stand-in for her body, allowing the sacrificial ritual to take place without causing her harm. As such, even in this highly ritualized act, the seeds of the everyday are visible. Undressing is an everyday activity, but to do so in public assumes a rapprochement with the audience. It is an action based in trust against the backdrop of the ever-present secret police. The curator Zdenka Badovinac mentions this in regards to the Body artist Jan Mlcoch, active in the 1970s, and despite the freer atmosphere of 1965, the same logic applies.⁶⁷

While to whom or what this "sacrifice" is supposed to appeal – Chalupecky does not answer – the material aspect of the ritual action could have been grasped by everyone present. Interestingly, photographs of the action show several children present (just like in the earlier *A Walk Around the New World*), possibly underscoring the ritualistic nature of the event, situated in an art context, as opposed to the potential erotic reading.

This idea that Aktual's actions could be seen as some continuation of an ancestral past is important. The communist regime, after seizing power in 1948, began to construct a version of Czech art history that supported the socialist reading of history, and thus their right to rule. The party-controlled journal *The Visual Arts* dubbed French, Russian and Czech Realist painters of the 19th century friends and supports of the proletariat.⁶⁸ Czech painters, extending as far back as the Hapsburg empire, were praised because they took inspiration from Czech folk life and

⁶⁶ Badovinac, *Body and The East*, 24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 24.

⁶⁸ Svasek, Maruska. "The Politics of Artistic Identity. the Czech Art World in the 1950s and 1960s." *Contemporary European History* 6, no. 3 (Nov) (1997): 387.

“taught [the people] to love the Czech people, the Czech countryside and Czech history.”⁶⁹ In light of this, Svecova’s stripping, interpreted as “an ancient rite,” offers an alternate way to connect with history. This symbolic pathway back into history bypasses the construction of history given by the “official” art historians, and goes around, instead of confronting directly, the regime’s view of art.

Doubling the Everyday

After such an action, one might assume that Knizak would further develop the explicit ritualism *Second Manifestation of Aktual Art*. Instead, in 1966 he produced an equally memorable action without a recourse to ritual, along with Jan Mach, known as, *An Event for the Post Office, the Police, and the Occupants of No.26 Vaclavkova Street, Prague 6, and for all Their Neighbors, Relatives, and Friends*. Packages of everyday objects and letters with instructions like “get a cat” were sent randomly selected tenants of an apartment building. Additionally, things like coats, paper airplanes, and books were left in the hallways. Finally, Knizak and Mach sent movie tickets to everyone, with reserved seats that would have placed them all together in the theater.⁷⁰

The logic of this action is essentially a “doubling” of the everyday. Instead of a single paper airplane one might fold in a moment of boredom, one finds several suddenly scattered outside. Instead of choosing when to go to the movies themselves, items from the mail, an everyday system of communication, *tell them* what time to go to the movies. Despite the fact that ritualistic actions were a part of Knizak’s working method of this point this action commits to the

⁶⁹ Ibid, 388.

⁷⁰ Aktual and Alex Zucker (trans.) in Knizak, Milan. “A Case Study: Artists Intervene in Everyday Life” (1966).” In *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, edited by Hoptman, Laura J and Pospiszyl, Tomáš, 120-1. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002.), 120.

everyday in both materials and meaning. Eventually, the tenants contacted the police, and organized a meeting between Knizak and Mach and the tenants so that they could explain themselves. The tenants generally did see the action as art, and their responses ranged from distress, because they believed the packages were bombs, to anger, over having to clean the hallways, to a sort of acceptance.⁷¹ Dominating the conversation, however, was a man in the army, who wanted them jailed.⁷²

Knizak and Mach weathered the meeting without reprimand, but the simple “doubling” of everyday life pointed out the profound crisis of social trust in Czechoslovakia. Under communism, society was supposed to be classless and public and private life were to be blurred, yet this simple action reveals how reality contrasted with the communist vision. It represented an invasion of privacy and was thus treated as a threat. In Just’s exploration of “everydayness” in communist Czechoslovakia during the 1970s, he claims that official regime film and photography supported the narrative that everyone in the state found happiness though the simple actions that make up everyday life, and that if one was unhappy, the way to remedy this was to more fully embrace these simple activities.⁷³ Ironically, *An Event for the Post Office* gave this opportunity to the tenants, and it can be seen as a precursor to this official narrative. The *Event* prompted them to embrace the simple joys of watching a film or finding a new book, but they rejected it. This reveals their implicit understanding that the motivations for engaging in everyday life matter a great deal. The tenants reified this understanding by questioning Knizak’s motives, and one wonders how often a similar process played out among the public a few years later, when the prompting came from the government instead of artists. Indeed, Bishop points out

⁷¹ Ibid, 121.

⁷² Ibid, 121.

⁷³ Just, “Art and Everydayness”, 710.

that one can read a “sly social goal” into the *Event*, as meeting at the theater would prompt conversation that otherwise would not happen, potential touching on topics of social control.⁷⁴ Bishop also concludes that it is difficult to determine whether the *Event* was a success or not.⁷⁵ Given the memory of the police investigation, it would certainly have slightly altered these tenants approach to everyday encounters with mail, trash and random chance, and if Knizak’s goal was ultimately for people to “live a little differently,”⁷⁶ it was certainly a success.

In 1968, Maciunas invited Knizak to travel to the United States. He was able to get a travel permit, thanks to the loosened restrictions on travel under the president Alexander Dubcek. Despite receiving travel approval, Knizak’s trip was not smooth. He was imprisoned briefly in Austria, during which he began to turn inwards and wrote texts reflecting on the nature of personal existence.⁷⁷ Still, Knizak eventually arrived in the US, and he met with Maciunas and the American Fluxus artists. Since he was in the US, he missed the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, ending the liberal policies, and chose to stay in the United States until 1970. Ultimately, he returned to Czechoslovakia of his own volition, despite the policies of “normalization” that were put in place to bring the country back under the control of Moscow. He expressed disappointment with the art he saw in the U.S., believing that it had become trivial, and still retained vestigial theatrical forms.

⁷⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 135.

⁷⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 136.

⁷⁶ Knizak and Zucker, *Primary Documents*, 120.

⁷⁷ Hendricks, Geoffrey, Mead Art Museum, and Mason Gross School of the Arts. *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University 1958-1972*. (New Brunswick, N.J., London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 115.

The Everyday and the Ritual in New Contexts



Lying Down Ceremony. Retrieved from:

https://www.moma.org/collection/works/178953?association=associatedworks&locale=en&page=1&parent_id=178908&sov_referrer=association

Knizak's actions became more ritualistic while he was in the United States, perhaps as a result of his prison experience and as a reaction against the trivialization he experienced in American performance art. Exemplary of these actions was *The Lying Down Ceremony*. The instructions for this action state: "Everybody is lying on the floor with a kerchief on their eyes. For a long time." This action was completed on December 17th, 1968 in Old Gym, Douglass College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick. In his invitation, he stipulated that "everybody who wants to participate must do everything that is wanted (like a church)."⁷⁸

Notably, this action didn't require the manipulation of any objects besides the handkerchief. This action emphasizes the loss of the use of sight, a sense necessary for everyday life. The importance of this action is made apparent in the context of Knizak's understanding of

⁷⁸ Hendricks, *Critical Mass*, 113.

access to art as fundamentally relying on the senses, explained in his mid-1960s manifesto, *Ten Lessons*. As art historian Anu Allas explains, for Knizak, an engagement with the senses is necessary for two reasons: they are eternal, and contemporary art is quickly becoming undetectable by any sense, and is dissolving into ordinary life.⁷⁹ Allas elucidates how his vision differs from other neo-avant-garde artists, such as Kaprow, Ben Vautier, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who positioned the source of art in their respective political and historical contexts. Knizak bypassed the present moment, connecting art to a universal human quality: the senses. By focusing on humankind's universal methods of perception, which continue to function regardless of socio-political surroundings, he is distinguishing his art practice from the other neo-avant-gardeists. Furthermore, Allas brings attention to how Knizak also differed from the "Concretism" of Maciunas, and of other artists working in East-Central Europe, by asserting that art increasingly consisted of something more than concrete reality, what Maciunas and the others would have written off as "illusionism."⁸⁰ This leads to a reading of *Lying Down Ceremony* as an anti-*Walk Around the New World*, whose complete title, it's important to remember, was *A Walk Around the New World, A Demonstration for All the Senses*.

Participants in *Lying Down Ceremony* also understand it to be a radical break with previous performance art. One described the experience as a "Non-Happening," and explains that the bodily position and blindness stimulated deep interior exploration, creating "a very intricate pattern of thoughts and emotions woven together to keep for the future."⁸¹ Another participant described the action as "self-revealing," and themselves as a "new born child" who had placed

⁷⁹ Allas, Anu. "Our Imaginings Unite with Reality: Ideological Encounters in Milan Knizak's *Ten Lessons* (2018)." In *Globalizing East European Art Histories*, edited by Anu Allas and Beata Hock, 149-161. (Routledge Research in Art History. New York, London: Routledge, 2018), 153-4.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 154.

⁸¹ Hendricks, *Critical Mass*, 114.

total trust in Knizak.⁸² The language used in these reflections demonstrates that they understood the action in highly ritualistic terms, as a method to undergo personal transformation. While acknowledging the poignancy which the participants describe the action, as well as its simplicity, it still existed in the realm of art.

People were invited to it, a well-worn convention in Happenings, Fluxus events, and related performance art, in contrast to earlier actions which confronted the strangers in public, additionally; all the proceedings were videotaped, and the participants later reviewed the tapes.⁸³ Documentation itself was also part of Knizak's work, even those most focused on the everyday. In fact, surviving photographs of *A Walk Around the New World* show that the photographers sought several different views of the events, and were not just providing straight-forward documentation, but attempting to find the most pleasing or affective angles.⁸⁴ What is surprising about the presence of a video camera during this action is that it turns the Old Gym into a sort of stage, with a video camera constantly "watching," standing in for an audience.

The idea that participation in an action should be forced also seems to go against the spirit of Knizak's earlier actions. In fact, he had actually explored this idea in earlier writing. In a document titled "Principles of Action Art According to M.K.," Knizak wrote that there were two kinds of participation. The "less valuable" involves forcing the participant to do something, but not just anything. Knizak says this method should involve "insult" to the participant, and that the attempt to regain "normal status" provides the impetus for the action itself. Knizak provides examples like locking the participant in a basement or covering them with paper.⁸⁵ Understood in this way, the ritual dimension of *Lying Ceremony* becomes even more obvious. The

⁸² Ibid, 114.

⁸³ Ibid, 114.

⁸⁴ See Appendix

⁸⁵ Jean Brown Papers, box 28, folder 34.

participants are forced to the ground, but the only way “out” of this situation, the only way to recover their “normal status,” is through inward exploration. Standing up would immediately end the action, rather than providing the creative tension that generates the action.

The decision to take a more authoritative approach with this action was likely influenced by Knizak’s surroundings (recall that the instructions for *Lying Ceremony* included the phrase “like a church”). The legendary *Flux-Mass* took place in 1970, and Knizak was aware of the idea from his close contact with Maciunas and the other Fluxus artists in the US. This “ritual readymade” essentially involved parodying the mass of the Roman Catholic church, complete with “priests” in gorilla suits, laxative “hosts,” wine, smoke bombs instead of candles and chanting replaced by a variety of human and recorded noises.⁸⁶ Art historian Hannah Higgins writes that the event was meant to call attention to a perceived stiffness in the Roman Catholic ritual. Performing the “ritual readymade” involved research into each aspect of the ritual, resulting in an event which appealed to all the senses and to every level of intelligence,⁸⁷ with the appeals to bodily sensation and sound representing a mode of learning that is at odds with the “rational,” “literary” instruction common in the western education system.⁸⁸ The goal of the performance, understood in this way, was similar to *Lying Ceremony*: to open up the participants to new ways of experiencing the world. In both cases, the couching of the event in authoritative language forces the participants to engage with objects (*Flux-Mass*) and their own thoughts and feelings (*Lying Ceremony*).

The austerity of *Lying Ceremony* compared to *Flux-Mass* might cause one to conclude that Knizak was not interested in artistic exploration of such spectacular proportions. However,

⁸⁶ Hannah Higgins, “The Ritual Readymade and Other Lessons of the *Flux-Mass*” in *Critical Mass*, 120.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 126.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 126.

there is some evidence to the contrary. Among the Allan Kaprow Papers in the Getty Special Collections is the text for an action titled *Ritus*, which is divided into two parts. In the first, participants are invited into an empty room where they watch the organizers undress and then have their bodies painted bright colors (reminiscent of the multi-colored clothing from earlier actions). After examining the painted bodies, the participants observe a river that has been dyed many colors, and are then taken to a street, where multi-colored papers are strung up. In the second part, they are led to a clearing where a bonfire burns household furniture, then their bodies are covered in pieces of fabric so they cannot see and they are led around by the organizers. Contradictory messages play from loudspeakers. One plays simple instructions, such as “get dressed” and “get ready,” while the second explains recent government accomplishments and a third, poetic descriptions of summer weather. Eventually, everyone stops, and follows instructions of the loudspeakers, which tells them to, among other things, fold paper airplanes and throw them into the fire, all while shouting slogans like “I want to be happy,” “I want a new apartment,” etc. Suddenly, the fire is doused and everyone stands in silence, and the action is over.⁸⁹ This complex action demonstrates that Knizak was capable of conceiving something like *Flux-Mass*, but that he preferred to invent his own rituals rather than adopt “readymade” ones.

The decision to make such a simple action in the United States can easily be seen as a reaction against the institutionalization of Happenings and Fluxus that Knizak commented on while there. In his travel book (*cestopisy*) he writes that the way to correct this is by either making these art works a “compelling ceremony, a ritual” or let the actions dissolve into everyday life.⁹⁰ He mentions that artist in New York are only performing for other artists, and

⁸⁹ Allan Kaprow papers, box 68, folder 10.

⁹⁰ Knizak, “Travel book” in *Political Upheaval and artistic change*, 214.

writes American Fluxus off as too theatrical, still performing on a stage.⁹¹ His thoughts on the *Flux-Mass* are negative, saying that it “wasn’t even fun.”⁹² In the afterword, he is back in Czechoslovakia, and writes about drinking, getting into fights, having rock concerts banned, and being interrogated by the police. He considers all this activity superior to his time in the US.⁹³

Conclusion: The Return and the Height of Ritualism

Bishop asserts that Knizak’s voluntary decision to return to Czechoslovakia was due to his desire to once again have an “Oedipal father” to provoke.⁹⁴ She comments that his actions took on a more ritualistic, individual nature, similar to the emerging Czech Body artists, and attributes this to impossibility of performing in public during the Normalization 1970s.⁹⁵ While this may partially explain Knizak’s move towards ritualism, her reasoning simplifies the situation. As the previous quote from the *Travel Book* mentions, Knizak was still provoking the police, and was jailed dozens of times throughout the 1970s.⁹⁶ More likely, Knizak saw in the US the natural evolution of an art that completely appropriated the everyday, and was able to do so without causing anyone besides a small group of artists to think differently about their lives, and reacted by excising the everyday from his art and formulating rituals instead.

Still, the drastic change in the nature of Czech society during the 1970s cannot be overlooked. The early years saw the trial of Hans Sohm for possessing documentation of Knizak’s actions, and Knizak’s method of art-making officially condemned.⁹⁷ Art historian Marian Mazzone points to actions like *Stone Ceremony* as representative of his new, ritualistic

⁹¹ Ibid, 215.

⁹² Ibid, 218.

⁹³ Ibid., 219.

⁹⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 139.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 139.

⁹⁶ Mazzone, Marian. "Drawing Conceptual Lessons from 1968." *Third Text* 23, no. 1 (2009): 83.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 83.

practice. It involved the participants making a small circle of stones in the countryside, then walking to the top of a hill while humming, and finally looking back down at the circles. Mazzone notes participants were pre-selected, and that the *Stone Ceremony* was “mute” and “meditative.”⁹⁸ She also mentions that Knizak also took up advanced mathematical study in the 70s, where he could inhabit the space of his mind and thus act freely, without observation by the police.⁹⁹ This action is meant to demonstrate the immense change in Knizak’s work under normalization, but, in fact, most aspects were not new. As was aforementioned, his first Happening, *A Walk Around the New World* consisted of a core of pre-selected participants. Actions like *Ritus* had taken place in the countryside before, and *Lying Ceremony* was quintessentially “mute” and “meditative.” The more important difference here is that, in *Stone Ceremony*, domestic, or everyday objects, are no longer employed. Stones do not have everyday uses like clothes or books. If *An Event for the Post Office* typified the use of the everyday environment, *Stone Ceremony* was the opposite. Each element was ritualistic and removed from life, and the action represented not primarily a compression of Knizak’s activities, but a change in direction. Later actions, such as *Five Stones*, also involve instructions for stones: first arranging them in different shapes, then painting them, and then imaging them in personified situations, for example, “as aristocrats” or “commoners” as well as in different spaces, from “Prague” to “the mind”¹⁰⁰. The remaking of his art in a ritualistic context eventually resulted in the reconceptualization of earlier actions, including *A Walk Around The New World*. It is retitled *Aktual Walk* (1989) and the phrase “hold in your hand a hard to imagine object” replaces the use

⁹⁸ Ibid, 83.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 84.

¹⁰⁰ Knížák, Milan. *Actions for Which at Least Some Documentation Remains, 1962-1995*. (Praha: Gallery, 2000), 282.

of physical, everyday objects in the “original” action.¹⁰¹ This epitomizes the shift from the everyday to the ritual, the real to the imagined, the physical to the mystical.

Milan Knizak produced art comparable to the western avant-garde out of necessity. *Short-Term Exhibitions* resembled Kaprow’s environments. *A Walk Around the New World* was a Happening before Happenings had arrived in Czechoslovakia. Even *Destroyed Music*, with its innovative exploration of sound and materiality, was born not out of contact with other artists, but out of a boredom that blossomed into art. Normalization and the prohibitions against art in public eventually forced Knizak to turn inwards. The individuality at the core of his art was not destroyed; instead of manipulating the everyday in order to affirm the autonomy of the individual, Knizak turned to the materials of ritual. Or phrased another way, when the everyday no longer had the power to affect, Knizak progressed, reevaluated, and found another way to challenge monotony.

¹⁰¹Ibid, 325.

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Appendix

A Walk Around the New World, photographs by Zdenka Zizkova. All images retrieved from:
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/178924?association=associatedworks&locale=en&page=1&parent_id=178908&sov_referrer=association



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8