

Interview from Samuel Gross with Milan Kunc, 2014

In 2014 I went to Prague to prepare a solo exhibition by Milan Kunc. He had invited me to take the train with him to see an exhibition of his work in the heart of the Baroque old town of Olomouc, which is 250 kilometers from the capital. The following conversation was recorded on that train and published for the first time in the magazine FROG 14 (2014).

SG: What were your main areas of interest during your studies in Prague?

MK: I was very interested in Surrealism. Surrealism was everywhere here. I liked its attacks on bourgeois aesthetics. Its aesthetics were very lively and very sick. Disease is the opposite of socialist realism. As a communist, you have to be in very good shape. Healthy workers carry the red flag with ardor.

I had studied at the art academy for four years. In the eighth semester, however, I was thrown out. I was almost done with my degree. I didn't fit into the context. There were Socialist Realist painters there. Their palette was that of bad sauces: gray, light brown, yellow. The professors had to walk the line between Expressionism and Impressionism, but the main focus remained the work. The entire tradition of Catholicism and imagination was constricted by communism. Forced atheism did not allow the soul to express itself.

So I was seriously bored at the academy, but that's normal. As a student you're always bored. This problem is the same at all art schools. The art of the future is always associated with a form of opposition.

SG: Did you then continue your studies in Düsseldorf?

MK: I emigrated to Germany in 1969 for political reasons. In the East, the countries were a bit terrible, controlled by Moscow. It was like theater, a kind of performance. A normal person couldn't stay there. Only those who conformed could survive. I wanted to be able to explore the world. So I didn't go home with my parents at the end of a trip to Italy. I needed a little disorder. In post-war Germany there was a kind of slight disorder.

Without having any idea about the West German education system, I asked the staff of the Goethe Institute in Nuremberg, where I lived, what the best art school in Germany was. On their advice I sent an application to the academy in Düsseldorf.

I had created works that were painted with numerous strange fluorescent colors. Everything was static, but very psychedelic. I was immediately accepted to the school.

I enrolled in Professor Manfred Sieler's class. He had been on the Eastern Front. He was a strange but very warm figure. He could go completely crazy and start singing bel canto in the hallways. He actually had a voice like an opera singer.

In his class I made series of drawings. I wasn't too interested in life at the academy, but anything was possible.

At that time, Richter and Polke were the first in Germany to take a real interest in Pop Art. Richter had studied in Dresden. He was an intelligent person and a first-class painter. Polke had grown up in Silesia; I don't know what he was able to see there. Polke and Richter were friends; they founded what they called "Capitalist Realism." It was simply a form of European Pop Art. Together they formed one aesthetic party. The other party was the one led by Beuys. He had recognized Duchamp's genius. Fluxus was nothing more than DADA in a new guise. But Beuys had really good ideas against the establishment. His work with the fat on the chair was hilarious. The German citizens are this fat on the chair. It's a great art object, very radical.

SG: Did you know about Pop Art when you were still in Prague?

MK: I had seen a Pop Art exhibition in Prague, but I wasn't at all impressed at the time. Works by Warhol were shown there: silkscreen series of Coca-Cola bottles. I don't know what made this exhibition possible or what the communists thought about it. They certainly hadn't seen anything disturbing in it, because they didn't understand anything about it.

Information always overcomes all boundaries, even the most impenetrable ones. Later, in Germany, I visited the Museum Ludwig, and this time I was more interested in this movement. At first I was interested in the fact that Pop Art was figurative. I loved the very cheerful colors of most of the works. Chance also seemed to be an integral part of them. All this seemed to me to be related to what I saw in Surrealism. In fact, the Surrealists discovered everything. The Americans simply structured the movements and gave them their means. America had won the war; it felt obliged to fill its museums with very large-scale canvases.

Incidentally, I also came to the simple conclusion that Soviet propaganda and Pop Art were suspiciously related.

SG: But there is no ideology behind Pop Art.

MK: There is an ideology in Pop Art—the idea of a popular art: "That's art, give me a Coke!"

SG: Ultimately, after a while you joined Beuys's class.

MK: One day when I was hanging up my drawings in the hallway of the art academy, a man with a hat came up to me and asked me if I wanted to join his class after asking me where I was from. Beuys told

me that he had been to Prague and was familiar with Czech culture. The legend is well known: his accident, his imprisonment. His imprisonment, which in a way was an opportunity for him because it allowed him to come back with a completely new program, . . . etc. So he was very interested in me joining his class. Behind his jacket and his strange hat, he thought he already understood everything about my work. He wasn't very funky, but interesting. Sure, sometimes he sang, like Sieler, but wrong. By the way, if you sing wrong, you have to sing. The rooms of the academy in Düsseldorf were very nice, but the students felt a little lost there. Basically the professors left them hanging. There were also classes taught by abstract artists like Rupprecht Geiger. He was a pretty touching professor, a kind of fluorescent abstract. He painted just this sun on a gray background on very large canvases. There was Uecker too. He did nothing but hammer in nails, literally. Götz spent his time working on canvases with squeegees. It was pretty strange.

Beuys always had a lot of students, sometimes more than 350. He was like a guru; he corrected students while leafing through their papers. Richter was a little different; we could exchange ideas.

It was a pretty fun time. There was Spoerri's restaurant where everyone always met. Düsseldorf was also a very boring city. You know that in Prague there are many hills and parks, while Düsseldorf is completely flat. The cars go on green and stop on red. Rain, Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Volkswagen – that's it. Those are the keywords. You could add medications and IG Farben. Schubert, Goethe, and Beethoven were followed by Mercedes-Benz, Audi, and Volkswagen. That too is post-war Germany, I must say.

SG: What form did your work take at that time?

MK: I started with what I called "Embarrassing Realism." You know those series of paintings with soldiers, the dog with a bow tie, or the picture with the parrots and a phone ...

SG: Where did the idea of Embarrassing Realism come from?

MK: I wanted to find shapes, colors, and a composition like in old master paintings, but it absolutely had to have a contemporary subject matter, so that's where the idea of Embarrassing Realism came from.

SG: Is the contemporary embarrassing?

MK: The contemporary is always embarrassing, always. There is nothing more embarrassing, whether you love or hate the present moment. Everyone has to pay taxes, manage their waste, fill out customs declarations, be under the control of the state. All of that is embarrassing. In your work you are obliged to be serious. You have to be serious. That is perhaps the most embarrassing thing. I was pre-punk. I created pictures that nobody had ever made before. I painted Stalin on the phone with a burning Moscow in the background. I

put this portrait in a gilt frame. The painting was reminiscent of the propaganda paintings from World War II. It was a form of political aesthetics. Richter was shocked when he saw this painting. He didn't understand how one could paint Stalin. He asked me if I was serious. I told him I wanted to paint something unforgettable. Richter thought I was joking.

This portrait was not monumental; it was very bourgeois. At that time I always wore a tie. For my part, I wanted to look like a petit bourgeois in this very liberal Germany, in this consumer society in which I had every freedom.

SG: Were these works a way of testing the boundaries of this society?

MK: Yes, of course. Basically, the only thing that was really forbidden to me was to use a military aesthetic. The war was over, although the Cold War was omnipresent.

I've always worked a lot, happily and with a lot of pleasure. I made collages, cut out stencils, such as the Coca-Cola logo, to which I added a hammer and sickle. Then I used these stencils everywhere, on objects or canvases. That was my trademark! I tried to make a name for myself outside the confrontation between Beuys and Richter. I wanted to find my own style, my own, somewhat marginal position. It's always good to be on the margins, outside the mainstream.

SG: How were your military works perceived?

MK: You have to remember that I often hung these soldiers in my bedroom. I had to see those works I had taken so long to make. I continually improved them.

SG: What did your girlfriends say?

MK: They sometimes felt something like disgust. I moved more than twenty times, sometimes to squats, sometimes to condemned buildings, still in good condition. But finally, when I was looking for a cheap apartment, I came across one whose last tenant, an old lady, had just passed away. I asked if I could leave the furniture and everything there in the same condition. So I lived as if I had been taken in by this old lady. I hung and created my works in these rooms, on the wallpaper.

That was the perfect setting for my Ost Pop works.

SG: Was it during this Ost Pop time that you came up with those signs that are painted like signs for a march?

MK: Yes, most of them have a camouflage pattern on the back. That's a kind of metaphor for reality. On the front are consumer products, but with a hammer and sickle painted on them, and on the back military motifs with camouflage. I often carried those signs around the city

alone, but I also put on performances with friends. For example, in 1978 we went to the pedestrian area of Wuppertal, Friedrich Engels's birthplace, and paraded around with the signs. That Saturday, like all Saturdays, people were doing their usual shopping. The passersby were a little upset. The manager of the nearby McDonald's, an American, was completely hysterical. The police came. It was weird, it was Pop. With these elements of Ost Pop (a strange combination of capitalism and communism), I wanted to express that commerce and ideology had united in love.

SG: You told me that your works became flatter after you had settled in New York for some time.

MK: I used the term Pop Surrealism in the East Village in New York. For me, this term corresponded to the time that followed Ost Pop and Embarrassing Realism. At that time of Pop Surrealism, my works were painted very carefully, with numerous details and different levels of psychology and interpretation. They had a very Mannerist tone. I painted with very bright colors. I was strongly attracted to Walt Disney and Botero at the time. Fine brush strokes were very important to me. They were very smooth and shiny. I used fluorescent paint. The quality of my paintings shocked some of my friends at the time.

SG: Maybe that was because the key idea of the time was freeing oneself from restrictions?

MK: Yes, but I never thought that I would have to free myself from anything, whatever it might be. For me, freedom is in the details, in exploring classicism. I love this discipline imposed by the tradition of painting. I believe in the value of originality. Art is obliged to be a kind of magnet so that the audience wants to see it again and again. Some of my works really got on people's nerves. I still don't understand why. I am sometimes cynical, or in any case sarcastic, but that's not a bad thing. I always paint everything seriously. I am often also gentle and nice.

Take a look at this catalogue from one of my exhibitions in New York. We're in the middle of the '80s, when I was painting like the old masters, primarily portraits and vanitas motifs. Do you think people laugh when they see some of my works?

SG: I think that some of your works are related to the tradition of short stories and black humor.

MK: That's true, because I didn't want to be analytical, but rather to create syntheses. I also wanted to stay NORMAL. [In 1979, Milan Kunc and his friends Peter Angermann and Jan Knap founded a group that they called NORMAL. One of the points in their manifesto was: "NORMAL makes only one picture, not thousands, out of one idea."] I think that an artwork should contain part of reality, like the part that vanitas motifs express.

SG: Were you never afraid of the concept of the decorative, like some of your friends from that time?

MK: No, I think the decorative arts are very progressive. The decorative arts allow the return of aesthetics.

I have often been told that what I do is kitsch. I came up with the following statement in response: "Whoever thinks my works are kitsch is weak."

The question of "low art" and "high art" survives, even if there is no longer any reason to make that distinction today. The audience always has the impression that they have to separate things from one another. The 20th century has opened up an enormous range of possibilities and personalities, but despite the scale of developments, things haven't really changed.

I am a classical artist. I paint in an elegant way. I hardly care what the audience says. I paint the metaphors of the reality of our time.

Advertising and television are kitsch, but not my works.

I am an artist, an inventor. I want to create masterpieces. I think if you are an artist in the American style, with assistants who produce the works in very large, elegant studios, then that's kitsch.

I love de Chirico very much. I think the fact that he takes himself so seriously makes him very funny and likeable. He painted himself as a soldier and a knight with a sword. That is very funny. I think that irony is an indispensable element for artists.

I have another statement: "An artist has a duty to always be enthusiastic."