

The presented text focuses on the particular artistic practice employed during the realisation of the project *Prague is not Czech*, which was established as a collective exhibition within the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2019 (henceforth PQ). The authors of this project, who are gathered within the team *Intelekturálně*, decided to carry on with the Prague is not Czech travel agency and to transform it into a systematic socio-artistic research, which uses selected strategies of non-Prague reality as a ready-made and fills them with its own content. Since its very beginning, the project has been based on a concept of radical cooperation. Therefore, a collaborative approach towards creation represents the primary subject that is being reflected within this text (and which is itself a product of the cooperation of several people).

Thus, the gist of the presented paper is to introduce initial artistic approaches and fundamental strategies of the project. The following text, therefore, consists of a manifesto written by the initiators of the project and broader theoretical reflection. In the first section, entitled *What we do*, the authors describe the various forms of the presented project, conditions of its creation and its development. The text is then divided into four parts – according to the project's essential aspects: *Czechness*, *Participation*, *Scenography* and *Experience*.

Keywords: Czechness, participation, scenography, experience, Prague, travel agency, public service.

The Intelekturálně is a fluid collective that interconnects scenographers, visual artists, directors, musicians, graphic designers, theorists and production managers with the local communities. The main research strategy of the collective is performative spectatorship and ready-made appropriation. The collective holds the Imagination Award in Student Exhibition from the Prague Quadrennial 2019. For 2020, it became a part of *New Blood on Stage*, a mentorship and distributing platform of the Czech Cultural Network *Nová Sít*.

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Prague is Not Czech: Artistic Project as a Public Service

The Intelekturálně Collective

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Introduction

The following text sheds light on the structures of a particular artistic practice employed during the realisation of the project *Prague is not Czech* which was introduced as a collective exhibition within the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2019 (henceforth PQ). Rather than an expert case study, the presented paper propounds an experimental combination of a “manifesto” written by the initiators of the project reflecting its genesis on multiple levels and a draft proposal of its (theoretical) interpretation. In other words – while suggesting various possibilities of uncovering its diverse structures – each thematic section is introduced by the authors of the project and subsequently shortly developed by an art-theoretician who experienced *Prague is not Czech* during PQ in 2019. In this way, the connection of the authentic artistic paper with the “theoretical insertions” aims to offer various ways of understanding the project, which might/might not be applied while discussing and interpreting it.

More specifically, in the first section, entitled *What we do*, the authors describe various forms of the presented project, conditions of its creation and its development. The text is then divided into four parts – according to the project’s essential aspects: *Czechness*, *Participation*, *Scenography* and *Experience* – which are prefaced by a short manifesto written by the initiators of the project (Anna Chrtková and Andrea Dudková). Those parts further consist of a suggestion of theoretical reflection by the theatre researcher Amálie Bulandrová, who

approaches the project from the “outside” and describes it on the basis of her own viewer’s experience.

The section entitled *Czechness* is specific in that it approaches the subject by means of answering a short questionnaire compiled by the co-authors of the project. The *Conclusion* represents another distinctive part of the text – once again written from the perspective of the initiators of the project, it elaborates, apart from the synopsis of the text, the concept of public service, which, although articulated only at the very end, interrelates the whole article.

What we do

We are a travel agency and an artistic project at the same time. We are searching for the contemporary Czechness; most often through the medium of curated trips. We are a fluid collective that interconnects scenographers, producers, graphic designers, curators, actors, musicians, and theoreticians within the simple context of a travel agency. In *Prague is not Czech*, we are turning ourselves into workers of the company, into its officers, guides, location managers, DTP operators or just dialogue providers. By means of our actions, we are aiming to create a happy universe where the region of our origin or our social status dissolve in the shared activities, collective presence and common being.

Prague is not Czech is a travel agency that organises trips to discover authentic “Czechness”. It is a long-term process, within which the collective Intelekturálně (“Intellecturálně”) examines liminal forms of scenography, performance, and installation art, and which gradually transforms into continuous artistic research practice. This project initially emerged to represent Czech Republic at the student exhibition of PQ 2019. The first and the most visible layer of the entire concept were physical objects; such as a newsstand purchased and transported to Prague from the village of Žleby near Kutná Hora, positioned in the left wing of the Trade Fair Palace on interlocking paving precisely copying the defined space of 5x5 metres, surrounded by a brick fence, a seating, thujas, a parasol, etc. This installation turned into a temporary bureau of the travel agency, which, in the course of ten days, arranged six trips outside the metropolis for the visitors of PQ.

Each trip was prepared individually as an open-air event directed by different subjects – be it students of academies of arts or art groups (creative duo formed by director Michal Pěchouček and artist Rudi Koval; art group Czech; the team of Intelekturálně). Each time, only a very narrow audience group (consisting of individuals who bought a ticket) was taken to the chosen destination, e.g., to the Brdy forests, the North Bohemian industrial city of Ústí nad Labem (Aussig), the agricultural valley of Elbe,

Southern Bohemia, the Moravian metropolis of Brno or to the “village in the middle of Prague” – the Spořilov district. Afterwards, these trips were broadcast live back to Prague through mobile phones to a television screen standing inside the newsstand.

While each trip engaged a different artistic strategy, in the context of the practice of the tourism industry, all of them developed certain performative principles – e.g., the presence of couriers/tour guides of the travel agency at each trip; specific staged situations with actors at the trips *Vodník* (“Water Goblin”) or *Trampové a houbaři* (“Tramps and Mushroom Pickers”); more or less accidental conversations with the locals during the trips *Ústičko má šťávu a šmrnc* (“Aussig has juice and pizzazz”) and *Upcycling Reality*; or a strawberry dumpling workshop held at a private garden that ended the trip *Bez práce nejsou koláče* (“No pie to munch on without a hard work”). By using such diverse strategies, the whole exposition opened up questions concerning the problems of increasing social and cultural differences within specific geopolitical units, cultural centralisation and unification of urban space. In most cases, the authors almost did not intervene in the environment in which the trips took place. Thus, merely the enactment of a (real) situation in which the visitors (often also artists) and the general Czech public were usually mingled could be considered as the authors’ only intervention. Concerning the given facts, it is also possible to refer to the Artistic Research discipline while discussing the *Prague is not Czech* project: “The ethos of artistic research very often includes the needs of the artist to expand, to discover the political, social, cultural, ethnographic and ethical dimensions of her work, and to avoid the risk of falling into narcissistic self-expression” (Jobertová, Koubová 12).

The *Prague is not Czech* project was awarded the prize for Imagination in a Student Exhibition by an international jury. It also received great acclaim also from the general public. The team of authors then decided to transform the Prague is not Czech travel agency into a systematic socio-artistic research, which uses selected strategies of the non-Prague reality as a ready-made and fills them with its own content. As a result, *Prague is not Czech* realised a series of diverse activities in the course of 2019–2020: distinctive catering for the launch ceremony of an independent magazine, a thematic party of the independent theatre festival Malá Inventura, or a travelling advisory centre for the festival of young art Pokoje. Probably also due to the radical transformation of the financial and personnel background, the *Intelekturálně* collective gradually began to pose a bigger emphasis on their own perception than on one’s authorship. Thus, the collective creates a library of materials and objects while collecting visual material (the library is accessible via *Prague is not Czech* Instagram page) and develops dialogical, radically non-hierarchical and non-exoticising approaches to people living in other social, cultural and especially geographical environments.

For the *Intelekturálně* collective, a trip is an artistic strategy of how to observe and be

observed while not necessarily having to separate these two activities. The members of the team always prepare only the initial situation; they believe that everyone could be an actor, scenographer or director without the need to study at universities, have long-term experience or know acquaintances in the right places.

Czechness

“Prague is the melting pot of Czech and international culture. But as in most capitals, the gentrification erases specific qualities (as well as not-so-pleasant things) and creates the universalist, but the exclusive urban environment. Rather than arguing with Prague’s position, we focus on places that simply exist. Places where there is nothing, where nothing awaits and where no one expects us. In such places, we have to make some effort. Find our way of having fun, find the willingness to start a dialogue, or just gaze into space for two hours. We are observing while being observed and the notion of ‘Czechness’ helps us to understand what is real, local, and important.”

1. *Where would you go for a trip these days? And why?*
2. *What does “Czechness” mean to you?*
3. *Do you embrace something that is considered a Czech stereotype?*
4. *Do you have any Czech guilty pleasures?*

Amálie Bulandrová, theoretical base, visitor

1. To our cottage in the Vysočina region, where there is a beautiful pub in the middle of the village of Malá Losenice; it’s really nice there. And a forest just behind the cottage – ideal in the summer heat.
2. A mixture of humour – wiseacre tendencies – indolence – creativity – and such a specific “stink” (in a good way).
3. Perhaps a great liking for beer and a certain feebleness.
4. Open-face sandwich!!! (potato salad – egg – ham – mayo – pickle)

Anna Chrtková, initiator of the project – co-founder of the Intelekturálně group

1. Recently, I was particularly interested in the locality near the village called Pohled (“sight”, but pohled is a word is used for “postcard” as well). As a part of my tourist experience, this destination is very attractive to me, especially due to the picturesque landscape in the area and the neighbouring territorial unit called Pohledští dvořáci (“The Courtiers of Sight”).

2. Being able to manage in any situation. Having wisecrack conversations, not necessarily while drinking beer. Loving nature, but only insofar that it doesn't prevent me : from building a highway or a PET bottle greenhouse. Working hard and being proud of it.
3. Bathing in ponds, walking in the woods and sleeping outside. Lately, I'm even discovering in myself the tendency to be a wisecrack.
4. Fried cheese, sometimes sausages and a good deal of pea porridge. And every time I hold a bottled beer in my hand, I feel somewhat cooler.

Andrea Dudková, initiator of the project – co-founder of the Intelekturálně group

1. For some time, I really want to visit the Macocha abyss. When I was small, my class and I were supposed to go there for a visit. But I got Chickenpox, so I did not go anywhere.
2. It is some kind of inexhaustible certainty. Just like the mustard as the last food left in the refrigerator.
3. I would not say it to myself personally, but in our kitchen, we have the collection of half-litre glasses stolen from several pubs.
4. I do enjoy the word *lahůdky* (delicatessen).

Marie Hájková, video-supervisor

1. The Blaník Knights Cave in Rudka Kunštát. It is a Moravian version of the Blaník Knights Legend, carved into the rock in a couple of months, donated by the biggest local butcher at the time of the First Republic.¹
2. Faintheartedness, beer patriotism, spilt green tablecloths with the Staropramen² logo, yellow draught lemonade, negation and eternal dissatisfaction, black humour, the midlife men with little crossbody bags, outdoor side-pocket pants with detachable leg parts, roasted chicken with canned peach, Richard Krajčo³ lyrics, nihilistic loitering. Sticking with traditions that could be beautiful and engaging as well as narrow-minded, strict and non-progressive.
3. I would say it is a fiery deviance more than a guilty pleasure: dissecting room and pigsty in Czech Television.
4. The *Hospůdka* (the familiar word for a pub) TV series, East-European Netflix film section (but I guess it is only in our geographic space), The *Trhák* movie and *Katka*

¹ The First Republic is the Czech term for Czechoslovakia in the years 1918–1938.

² Czech beer brand.

³ The lead singer of the Czech pop-rock band "Kryštof", well-known for its all-embracing lyrics.

& *Jindra*⁴ regular concerts in Hodonín spa town – that performance is always as transcendental as *Twin Peaks*.

Natálie Pleváková, sound engineer

1. I would love to visit Ještěd Mountain – actually, I am going there next week! On the very top of it, there's this transmitter tower that is also a hotel. It was built in the 1960s, and at that time, it was rather futuristic. So nowadays, to me, it seems that if I can go there and spend a night, I might wake up in what in those days would appear as a distant, probably amazing future, or in our terms – alternative present. And one can only hope that in this alternative present, there will be neither the corona nor the climate crisis.
2. Well, it is an assemblage of several things: Schweikism⁵, beer, pelargonium flowers, sleeveless shirts for men and last but not least: socks in open shoes. Advertising parasols on the outdoor seating of the refreshment bistros. A stinky cosiness.
3. That is a hard one. Maybe ... dumb humbleness and modesty?
4. All the above-mentioned stuff packed together with sauerkraut and a portion of dumplings.

Eva Sýkorová, business relationship manager

1. Basically anywhere. I would get on the local train and get off at the tenth station. And I would let myself be surprised what would be awaiting me there and in what I could read about the surroundings that would surround me.
2. Fried cheese, beer, short-sleeved shirts, but unfortunately perhaps also xenophobia, racism, homophobia. It's something like the beauty and the beast.
3. I'm rather discovering something more and more Jihlava-esque in me. That is to say, something from my hometown.
4. Fried cheese. Shots. Beer. 70s' Czech chocolate dessert with liqueur. Mushroom picking. Wandering in the forest. Watching football.

⁴ Moravian party-song duo.

⁵ The term derived from the *Good Soldier Švejk* novel's main character, Švejk, who could be characterised as an "unlucky and simple-minded but resourceful little man oppressed by higher authorities" (Wikipedia.org).

Participation

“In our Prague and non-Prague homes, we search for collective consciousness. Besides (and in spite of) working across various theatre and artistic professions, we co-create the events with spectators and locals. The line between the authors and the perceivers is thick; we are operating inside of it, so that this line becomes a specific meta-reality. Within such a field, there are neither divisions nor borders that would separate the artist/spectator/participant, local/visitor, Prague/non-Prague. Who gives advice to whom? Who learns from whom? Who creates the narrative? Sometimes it is important to fight off the fear of choosing the haircut from the provincial salon catalogue.”

For the *Prague is not Czech* project, the phenomenon of cooperation/participation, which has been receiving more and more attention in the last twenty years or so, is of crucial importance. Projects and installations based on artistic cooperation and participative art (i.e., creative participation) are today often seen not only in smaller independent galleries or expositions such as the biennial or quadrennial but also in prestigious gallery institutions. This type of artistic practice conceives the strengthened position of the viewer as a starting point, and its projects are built mainly on the activation of groups or individuals who become co-creators in the course of the event.

As the curator and art theorist Jan Zálešák explains, we can (simultaneously) observe a double tendency within the so-called turn to cooperation:

[...] first, it is an increased interest in a “horizontal” cooperation among people who claim a similar status in the art world – a cooperation at the level of artists or curators. And then there is a cooperation of a “vertical character”, i.e., such in which people with unequal status participate in the realisation of the project – on the one hand, artists (curators) and on the other hand people outside the professional field of fine arts. That is, a kind of artistic practice which is today commonly referred to as participative art. (10)

The first of the mentioned tendencies demonstrates the overall concept of *Prague is not Czech*, since the trio of authors decided to invite a number of art practitioners and theorists to the organisation of individual trips, who further autonomously realised their ideas about “curated reality/situation”⁶ in their chosen locality. Apart from the initiators of the project, we can thus consider as co-creators at the so-called “horizontal level” also the students of Department of Alternative Theatre at DAMU, Theatre Faculty at JAMU, Studio of Intermedia at FaVU, the artistic-anthropological group Czech, and others. The concept of “vertical” cooperation is then carried out by the very idea of individual trips, which were attended by random visitors of PQ, in order to establish contact with the residents of the given locality by means of a certain activity.

⁶ It is in particular the manifestation text by Guy Debord, which brings the notion of “constructed situation” in the discourse about cooperation in art. For more on this topic, see: Václav Magid. *Konstruovaná situace a její okamžik v čase. Sešit pro teorii, umění a příbuzné zóny* 4–5 (2008).

According to Zálešák, collective and participatory artistic practice is usually associated with some form of engagement, once we encounter “[...] a tendency to suppress artistic autonomy in favour of efforts to achieve changes in everyday life (in public space, ‘in the real world’) and with a critical attitude towards the functioning of the art world, in which the individual genius of the author further remains the key point of reference” (10). This quote is once again reflected in the ideological concept of the *Prague is not Czech* project, in the effort of its creators and co-creators to draw attention towards the isolation of smaller (local) centres from the capital and to the socio-political consequences of this chasm. Nevertheless, it is not about utopianism – an attempt to change the social system as a whole – but about minor (temporary, provisional) interventions conceived on a local scale.

Scenography

“We are not designers. We refuse to hide ourselves inside the black boxes or white cubes, we do not need to build something that already exists outside of them. We create a situation that lives on its own. The set could be a local pub, a strawberry field, socks in open shoes, the Kofola lemonade or fried cheese. Together with its inhabitants, owners, or users, they create a complex environment which acts as a vibrant, active agent in one’s individual reality.”

Let us recall that *Prague is not Czech* was created as a national exposition – i.e., as a project representing the domestic scenography at the international exhibition of scenography and theatre space (PQ). In this context, it is thus obvious to ask what type of scenography the exposition in question actually embodies?

First of all, it is important to note that “scenography” is a term of a highly variable nature, the meaning of which was (is) shifted on the basis of the cultural-historical context. For example, in our territory, scenography established itself as an independent artistic branch during the first half of the 20th century, above all thanks to the architect and stage designer František Tröster. As Czech theatre researcher Barbora Příhodová explains, it was mainly the work of the scenographer Josef Svoboda that – at the beginning of the second half of the century – popularised scenography as an exclusive artistic discipline (25). Thus, the term scenography has been commonly used in our country since the 1960s, when it was traditionally understood in connection with stage design, perspective-architectural creation and the common tendency at that time to integrate science and technology into the art world, ads Příhodová (25).

On the other hand, for instance, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* published in 2009, we find a characteristic that widens the perception of scenography

as “manipulation and organisation of the performative environment” (4). Also, the American theatre historian Arnold Aronson in his book *Looking Into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* brought attention to the multidisciplinary concept of scenography, by strongly distinguishing the term from a similar notion of “stage/set design” and characterised it as follows: “Scenography [...] carries a connotation of an all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage” (7). In this particular context, the *Prague is not Czech* exposition embodies the very effort to break scenography free from its close connection to the theatre stage. Furthermore, it aims to present it as an overall visual, spatial and auditory organisation of a theatre (or performative) event, potentially encompassing all the senses as well as the dimension of time, that allows for a dynamic process of changes which occurs during the event (Ibid. 7–8).

Considering the tendency to broaden the semantic field of the term scenography and the overall change in thinking about this discipline, we are probably not even surprised by the transformation of the largest exposition of scenography: while until recently, the PQ was exhibiting mostly physical artefacts related to the formation of the scene and documentation (scripts, designs, models, costumes, props, etc.), the latest years of the event have the air of a performative festival. Yet, this tendency is not manifested only in the numerous accompanying events, workshops, performances, etc. Even within the exhibition installations themselves, we often encounter distinctive scenography structures, which exist both in the frame of the exhibition space and within the environment of the surrounding landscape or the socio-political situation, and which are based on the performative action of their actors as well as of the visitors/co-actors. These “theatricalized environments” offer a variety of experiences to the visitors and often do not fall within the category of theatre performances (Aronson, *Exhibition* 11).

Against the background of such PQ expositions, we may characterise scenography as a transdisciplinary practice of artistic arrangement of performative spaces, specific for its variability within time, space, and interaction with its actors. Rather than creating other categories for new – non-traditional forms, we are witnessing the expansion of existing meanings.

Experience

“We respect what is around us. We do not have a plot, a text, a scenario. We work with the non-expected; we expect meetings with locals, diversity of opinions. Our target group consists of retired people, farmers, provincial officers, Ukrainian cleaning ladies, tuning enthusiasts, home chefs, active hikers, gardeners, kindergarten teachers, ice-cream sellers, ice-cream eaters, beer lovers, coffee drinkers, vegetarians as well as meat-eaters.”

In the context of contemporary tendencies in thinking about theatre, the described exposition could be perceived through the lens of the so-called “theatre as experience”. This approach towards theatre is based on the phenomenological philosophy, mainly represented by Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger, whose ideas were further developed, for instance, in the research of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. What we encounter here is an effort to conceive the world, not through an abstract scientific perspective, but contrarily, from the viewpoint of the first person – the subject. The fundamental question is, how does the world appear as a phenomenon to people who interact with it? In the context of theatre studies, this approach manifests by an attempt to capture the experience of the viewer in its first essence, “[...] that means before it starts to be processed at the intellectual level. During the analysis of a performance, we actually carry out an artificial reconstruction [...] of a performance or an event; we choose, arrange, and to a certain extent also remake this ‘experience’ and its elements” (Bernátek, Drozd, Havlíčková Kysová 50, 51).

The underlying question defined above could be further abstracted, and the term “world” replaced by the notion of “scenography”. We could thus ask about how scenography appears as a phenomenon to people who interact with it. Followingly this, we will be mainly interested in how the scenic solution affects us sensorially; whether we like it in the first place, what we feel when we look at it, which states it evokes in us etc. In this way, phenomenology stands in opposition to semiotics; it puts an emphasis on the sensorial impression of theatre, which is reflected primarily in shifting the focus towards the spectator. Simply put, theatre (or, in our case, a scenography exposition) appears to the viewer’s senses, deliberately adopts the role of something that is to be seen, heard, or possibly felt differently (e.g., tasted).

Picking strawberries – which was the objective of one of the trips organised by the Prague is not Czech travel agency – could thus be understood also in terms of “scenery as a lived space”. This term was introduced by the Australian professor of art, Thea Brejzek, who uses it to describe an increased activation of public space and its perception as a theatre space – that is, a phenomenon dating back to at least the 1960s (33–52). In its context, the theatre practitioners began to participate in urban discourses by abandoning the physical limitations of theatre buildings and proscenium stage and started to enter the spatial/political area of the city. In the same way, the authors of the *Prague is not Czech* project strived to reflect the separation of the small local centres, villages and their inhabitants from the capital, and the often very deep chasm of opinions between the inhabitants of cities and rural areas.

The aforementioned could be further demonstrated on the example of the trip *Aussig has juice and pizzazz*. It was a collective “experience” of the city of Ústí nad Labem, which included a guided tour of the city (or rather its outskirts), a

snack made from local ingredients, a visit to a renowned second-hand shop and fashion advice given by the author of the trip, and other adventures. However, the seemingly neutral walk had its socio-critical overlaps, which emerged against the very background of the unmaintained neighbourhoods at the periphery, i.e., the devastated houses and “industrial squats” along the river Elbe. This ostensibly stable, yet actually variable scenery formed by architecture, infrastructure and the people inhabiting it worked as a means of focusing the attention of the audience on a specific (urbanistic) problem of the chosen locality: “Typically, scenery adheres to the spatial organization between the space of action and the space of observation, immersion or participation” (Brejzek 34).

Conclusion

Going on with the manifesto prefaces, the project *Prague is not Czech* aims to achieve temporary “happy universes”, where the experts from the field of art and creative sector (artists, managers, producers, culture workers and their friends) meets the non-Prague population in a framework of a semi-fictional institution, “the travel agency”. A tourist, researcher or participant of the trip, who does not expect a standard comfort during his or her travels and does not require a certain level of readiness of the visited place for “strangers’ eyes”, opens up, in such unusual conditions, to unexpected encounters and conversations. This socio-artistic practice is used as a tool for setting up various unexpected situations and thus instigating encounters of people from different social and cultural strata. This development leads us, the collective, to adopt an unusual statement, a “public service”, but also to develop the change on a personal level – in our approach to the perception of the space and people that surround us. We can repeatedly make use of the experiences gained in this way and hence participate in the construction of new futures – such as those in which local specificity represents an added value and a space for dialogue; and not only a marketing slogan.

According to the theorists’ development of each manifesto preface, the project merges the attitude to scenography with a socially oriented or participatory art, mixes the artistic expression with lived reality and bridges the individual experience (being “a tourist”) with collective practice. Although it was established as a one-time exhibition combining several more or less autonomous artistic subjects, its character as a temporary travel agency based at the Prague Exhibition Grounds during PQ 2019 enabled it to link diverse views on both artistic and non-artistic activities in a specific space.

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