

BEDŘICHOVICE UPON THAMES

Interview with Kateřina Šedá

Yvona Ferencová, curator Moravian Gallery in Brno: The five-year-long project is coming to a climax. Over that period a number of events took place, often escaping the attention of the media and hence unknown to the public. As a whole, in terms of its scope, the project is almost ungraspable. Have your expectations been fulfilled?

Kateřina Šedá: The result surpassed my expectations. Although the principal goal at the beginning was to establish a new holiday in the village, even in my dreams would I not have imagined that my idea would materialize in this way, in the form of a new village square. In the middle of the village a real space for meeting has suddenly arisen which logically must have influenced the life of the locals. All of a sudden a change is here which cannot be overlooked nor ignored, so that it will vigorously affect even those who have been critical of my projects. As a result it will be possible to become engaged in many more shared activities in the centre – make a campfire, screen films, play table tennis or petanque, or just sit on benches under birch trees. At this moment I find it no longer important that each year on the same day people celebrate a holiday started by me as thanks to the new space they can now celebrate on virtually any day.

YF: Some unforeseeable and unexpected complications were very nerve-racking. What gives you the energy to push on at such moments?

KŠ: I could write a book about unexpected complications rather than formulate a short and succinct reply. I think that the fundamental problem in general is people's prejudices and their reserve – they form an opinion in advance without knowing anything about it or trying it out. When you then want to enter into a critical dialogue with them, and I am really interested in every opinion, it is impossible to receive reasonable arguments from them, only empty phrases. Yet, I have always been interested exactly in this group, and when a great critic suddenly appeared in the centre of my event and changed his view I was twice as happy. It is those moments that motivate me to continue along the path and not get annoyed by naysayers.

Another category is envy and gossip – you can't avoid them anywhere. Envy is often rooted in frustration, like gossip, so I stopped seeing it as a problem but as a normal part of the process. For example, during the project I was confronted with the funny idea that I am rich or that I got rich through the project. That I have an expensive car but to camouflage it I commute to the village on the bus. The opposite is true – I have no car.

YF: From a distance it looks as if you marked the village with a marker for other observers. How is the new situation accepted by the inhabitants themselves?

KŠ: From the project's start I had great supporters in the village who helped me and welcomed every event with enthusiasm. There is also a large group made up of those who joined slowly and gradually. And finally, I should not forget the critics who ignored the events. Each of them perceives the situation in a different way – somebody is proud that the village is more exposed, while others may find it annoying. And some will not admit what they are really thinking now – they would have to publicly change their original opinion and people don't like to do that.

YF: Your team of collaborators grows with every event. You can no longer manage without architects, designers, photographers, writers, etc., and an important part is played by your family. To this skeleton crew one needs to add the crowd of performers (bands, a theatre company, stall-keepers, vendors, etc.), let alone the participants themselves. Dozens of people. Such work takes extreme effort. When do you take a rest?

KŠ: I relax most when I go with David and Julie (my husband and daughter) for a walk in the woods, and I don't have to think about a thing – which unfortunately has not happened to me for a long time. And then during my pregnancy – the first four months in the second

pregnancy I felt so unwell that I could not even get up from bed. Although it was physically totally exhausting the brain seemed to have switched off and in this strange way I was able to relax. But I definitely would not recommend this experience to anybody...

YF: Alongside the new square Bedřichovice will also receive a new visual identity, flag, village signage and an orientation system. For posterity this small village will be associated with the British metropolis. The petrified Thames, a London telephone booth and bus will replace plaques and monuments, statues, which they are becoming themselves. Was this intended from the very start?

KŠ: When we first started to discuss the possible plan of the village square with the architect Jitka Ressorová, the absolute priority was to create a larger space for meeting and new activities in the centre of the village, and its London-like appearance came second. A common space for a larger group of people was a painful absence – in all the events which I organized in the village one of the main problems was the fact that when a greater number of people met in front of the civic centre they had nowhere to sit down and after a while they began to leave for home.

In February 2013, together with the village councillors Jaroslav Klačka and Ivan Vavro, the architects Jitka Ressorová / Ellement and David Zajíček and the graphic designer Radim Peško we tabled a proposal for the revitalization of the square under the title Bedřichovice upon Thames. The proposal was based on the idea of permanently transposing London's ambience to the village, and in this way transporting to England even those who had not been present at the original event. From my point of view, the selected form of the village square is perfectly suited for the location. Most of the inhabitants have in common the very fact that they have a job in the city, so the idea of moving the city into the middle of the village is a symbolic gesture. I hope that the new look of the square will motivate the locals to undertake new activities and create new traditions, as it is undoubtedly highly inspiring.

YF: Even Tate Modern itself is actively participating in the media campaign. Has the gallery collaborated in any way in the project throughout its implementation?

KŠ: Tate Modern played an essential role at the beginning of the whole project in 2011, but the subsequent events took place without its participation. When the idea of revitalizing the village square in the spirit of London came to fruition I again got in touch with the curators and they helped us with many things – for example we resolved together the exact composition of the surface in front of Tate Modern, etc. The curator Catherine Wood was excited by the idea that in the end the village will be metamorphosed after the London event and we agreed together to rejoin the project presentation with the place where it all started.

YF: During the project the politicians on the village council were even replaced. As far as I know this has been the first time that you got an insight into how the politics works. How important was this experience for you?

KŠ: The experience was essential as I am not a politician and do not understand political games. I entered the project with enthusiasm and open-minded thinking and for me it is always perplexing that for politicians many things are only a ladder to power, not to the people themselves. The fundamental basis of my creative work is to be independent and to strictly observe this, but politics is collective decision-making and the competition of one politician with another, personal interests, egos, ambitions and that is completely beyond the world of my things and actually even my thinking. On the other hand the world of art has equally bizarre mechanisms – I daily experience the pressure from curators, galleries, institutions, who and which give grants and finances and then want to determine how things will look – so that in some respects it is a comparable experience.