

The Sense in Yawning

Mournful and curious twists of history have led to the presentation of contemporary art within former synagogues in central Europe. Rarely ever unused since the destruction of their congregations and not infrequently entangled today in legal questions of ownership and ethical questions of use, these synagogues reverberate with more than simply the oddness and tragedy of ruin but with the tension of contested space. Hollowed and worn from disuse, former synagogues such as that in Šamorín, Slovakia most powerfully speak (certainly more so than most memorials) of the not distant tragedy of the Holocaust – in this case of a Jewish community of 700 reduced by murder to 35. More than other abandoned and reclaimed sites, the former synagogue in Šamorín, now the At Home Gallery, is not emptied of its past, of the catastrophe of its abandonment – no matter how beautiful, even joyful, the interior space now appears. Within a town that has undergone five shifts of dominion itself this century, the former synagogue, now exhibition space, is a deeply unsettled space. According to Jewish law, it is in fact still holy and its secular use – whether as a warehouse during the communist regime or as the gallery today – is a desecration. For some, the profane use of the synagogue is not blasphemous enough and vandalism is routine.

To negotiate through such layers of history and meaning and theology and politics past and present represents a formidable challenge for anyone considering such a site's use. Generally, these issues and their elective meanings are suppressed, such as when a former mikveh (ritual bathhouse) is appropriated for a garage (in Šamorín) or a former synagogue is leased as a department store (in Velké Meziříčí). Desolate synagogues should remain so dictates the law given to Moses; weeds should be let to grow rampant within them. But the law does not account for there being no people left to grieve the decay, and the meaning of a place that should retain holiness in its very bricks falls beyond what could once be fathomed.

Visual art and memorials dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust too often, like uninteresting art of any subject, adhere too closely to the expected. Past exhibitions of installation art at At Home Gallery have built train tracks up to the building's door and filled its room with empty suitcases. At another former synagogue now art gallery in Trnava, Slovakia, Anton Čierny added, it seems out of a sense of obligation, the recorded sound of trains extraneous to his otherwise powerful installation. Once expressive, trains, suitcases, barbed wire have become among the rote visual vocabulary of the Holocaust. Artwork relying upon convention and easy emotion touches only that which its audience is prepared to feel. Thought or perplexity or fear – irritations that extend the significance of a work beyond the gallery wall – are rarely engaged. The challenge before the creative treatment of any subject is to elicit experience that remains vital over time and place. When the subject is human brutality that transgresses what has been thought imaginable and now ranks among possible, the insult made by lesser art is all the more disheartening.

Rusting and immovable, the intentional remnants from an exhibition this year at At Home Gallery have quietly become a permanent and pungent memorial. Staining and aging with the Šamorín synagogue, David Miller's permanent outdoor cast iron objects, as did the exhibition's temporary works, remind us, too, of the sense installation art can still make. There was whimsy in the work, as in the exhibition title "Yawning", a suggestion of irreverence. To yawn, though, is in reaction to insufficiency, an attempt to revive the body and mind with an exaggerated and sustained breath in and out. Such deceptively light approaches to a subject of such weight deserve a revisit.

Within the synagogue/gallery's airy main room, Martin Zet and Miloš Vojtěchovský toyed with motion and meaning in a collaborative installation of a kinetic object and sound. From where once a light fixture likely illuminated the sanctuary, the artists hung a functional fabricated fan extending too far and too delicately from the frescoed ceiling. Placed just steps within the entrance and positioned to graze a tall person's skull, the work was unequivocally strange and threatening. The object winked at transcendence with its reverse vents that swept air upwards as it slowly turned, but was more disturbing as type of instrument of execution. As a cross, and most vexing and jarring, as spinning on a swastika-shaped axis, the fan incited anger or, at least, agitated bewilderment. Waves of recorded sounds of beating feathers filling the gallery hinted of the otherworldly, that of human and animal voices perhaps of the earthly. These were interspersed at unnatural intervals with found sounds of machinery in motion – a freight elevator, airplane, shotgun – disquieting passages that more perturb than uplift. Zet's and Vojtěchovský's installation's profane and inflammatory elements electrified the neutered, sanitized synagogue/gallery space defying an easy veneration of art, much less of the former synagogue and the history it bears. The extraneous here set in motion a sense of the easy violence done to meaning, whether by disregard or ignorance or by the careless hurling of signifiers.

Wrestling with meaning, history, sanctity involved no struggle with the synagogue/gallery itself for David Miller and Charlie Citron. If Zet and Vojtěchovský posited uninviting warnings at entry betraying a hesitation to penetrate the space, Miller infiltrated the site from within, upon and around, establishing a permanent presence. His life-size, rusted iron casts of common, handled objects – bottles, buns, tools, a book – made weighty and useless come to bear meaning in their deliberate placement. Stout, crooked, tall, or prostrate, ten rough casts of bottles of cleansing agents arranged as if casually convening near the former torah ark took on the presence of characters even without their title “Minyan” (prayer quorum). Among the permanent works, rusted cast tools – a rake, a mallet, shovel, screwdriver – lean or rest in the building's landing forever waiting not to be used. Others – an ax, a scythe, a drill – are fixed upon the worn facade's raw spots. Two hefty detergent bottles stand constant vigil on a side set of stairs. As if forgotten, a cast leather-bound book lies upon the edge of the building's fence, its rust staining the concrete. Upon the disused gatepost, cast bottles of beer, slivovice, and whiskey together compose a reflective embodiment of the building they are set before. Playful, but knowing, these permanent works on the periphery reinforce the presence of the former synagogue/gallery to its very borders within a town and time that its existence baffles. Miller's cast iron objects somehow protect the place they now inhabit. They stand at once as unflappable sentinels for contemporary expression, and as new relics that attempt to approach and care for, cleanse, repair, preserve the absent belief and community that this site once sheltered.

Not engaged with this place in its creation or placement, Charlie Citron's set of photographs did not unveil the immanent as did the other artists' investigations. (This work's presence here, in fact, allowed an experience of the stark contrast between artwork placed to be best seen and that placed to reveal.) In continuous strips hung within the At Home Gallery's foyer, the photographs obscure but still show abandoned but not violated sacral objects from the Plzeň synagogue before its recent reconstruction. Citron sets up a metaphysical distance, the sense that one cannot get at the objects. Their transformation in a creative process of mutation – photographs of photographs blurred in boiling wax – could be taken as

history. Not particular to the Šamorín synagogue or At Home Gallery, the photographs address the precariousness of the neglected potency of symbols broadly.

As much as these works animated meaning, they could easily escape notice within the imposing emptiness and absence the synagogue/gallery itself possesses. The site is treated not as a neutral gallery, but as a locus of history and memory, of human endeavor, creation and folly and ruin. Miller's work is now part of its story. He, like the other artists, suspended unthinking reverence, risked offence and misperception, to recover meaning and experience already present.

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Charlie Citron, David Miller, Miloš Vojtěchovský, Martin Zet

At Home Gallery – Šamorín, Slovakia

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