

## End of Fun?

*“I work with the materialization of ideas. We can call it sculpture. And the sculpture might be made of smoke, light, sound, books, old beer bottles or feathers.”* Krištof Kintera

They say that artists are like canaries in the coal mine, an early warning sign that something isn't right, giving the miners time to get out of danger. Because artists usually have heightened sensitivity and perception, looking at the world from a different perspective than pragmatic technocrats, economists or politicians, they often have the ability to see things before they happen. If we agree with this analogy, then it certainly applies to Krištof Kintera. Except that instead of a canary, Kintera would prefer to see himself as a raven.

Kintera maintains that art has the capacity to “*clarify the human mind*” [1]. For him, it's a tool for facing reality and creating the conditions for dialogue — directly, without an intermediary. His sculptures, drawings and installations are characterized by provocative, even punk impertinence, originality, unexpected absurdity and irony. They may be lapidary, minimalist objects, but they can also be technically demanding, motile, chattering, maybe emitting smoke or sparks, and they might be enormous and completely engulf the viewer. Any material whatsoever is able to serve his purpose, as long as he sees in it the potential to tell a story: dead batteries, scrap metal, plastics, other various types of waste. Nor is he afraid to use products of nature, such as branches or even taxidermic animals. He loves to pry open old TVs, pick through the guts of discarded computers and extract their cables, printed circuit boards, circuitry, transistors and chips, which he then transforms into sculptures. Sometimes, like in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Kintera creates a situation in which we are prompted to ask: What happened here? Deconstructed bicycles are incapable of the function they were made for, broken street lamp lies on the ground yet still shines, a coconut bounces around the floor, a tangle of wires has mutated into a bizarre animal.

Kintera definitely falls into the category of “engaged artist”, one who keenly probes the social environment and the mechanisms by which it operates. He conceives his exhibitions as total happenings, with the potential to turn even a serious, conservative gallery upside down. He also likes his shows to reveal the chaos of the studio in which his objects are born, to didactically show how his objects come into being and what is behind them. That's why in 2012 he began continuously shooting the film *Hands Tools of Brain* of hands in the studio — grinding, screwing, welding, glueing, painting, destroying, creating and assembling elements of future sculptures and installations.

The roots of everything he does today can be traced back to the 1990s — a time of enormous social change after the Velvet Revolution brought to Czechoslovakia not only freedom and democracy but also the birth of a consumer society along with all its accompanying phenomena. In the years 1992–1999 Kintera studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, and at this time he was active in the performance group Jednotka (Unit), which operated in the expanded field between visual art and theatre. They did various types of experimental theatrical appearances, public performances, happenings, and even private “ritual” events and actions, meant only for the group's internal purposes.

At that time, Kintera was active mostly outside the gallery environment, occasionally engaging in subversive street art. One of his earliest significant works from this period was *Plumbuman* (1995–1998), a mysterious figure dressed completely in lead and dwelling in a lead-lined abode. Maybe he was taking shelter there in anticipation of some atomic explosion? Plates of heavy metal would protect him from lethal radiation — if he didn't first die of lead poisoning. In the video that accompanied this installation, *Plumbuman* (obviously Kintera himself), weighted down by an ungainly lead suit and helmet, sets out on a small excursion around Prague, where he is confronted by the bewildered reactions of unsuspecting inhabitants. The threat of some catastrophe and the ambiguity of situations in which we find ourselves because of our own actions remains a leitmotif of his work.

Kintera has always been interested in how to balance on the edge — between auditorium and stage, public and private space, galleries and the street — and how to quickly change and alternate stances. In *Live Broadcast* (1998), he installed on a street lamp a screen that for one month wirelessly projected a direct transmission from his own flat. Passers-by thus had the chance to observe the artist in his everyday activities. The monitor was not labelled in any way nor did it provide any information. Anonymity usually gives more space to the work itself, at the expense of the presentation of the artist and his personal life, which in this case created an interesting loop of paradoxes. In *About Us Without Us* (1996) he again worked with the opposite poles of empty and filled space: In a deserted metro station he installed a sound recording that he had made when it was in full swing. In a similar way he re-created the space of the large hall of the main post office in Prague. With his small intervention, the empty space gave the impression of being populated, even at times when no one was there.

The question of consumerism — the world of products, gadgets, commodities, and everything that goes along with it — became an integral part of his artistic vocabulary relatively early and continues to a major source of inspiration. Above all, he deals with the world of things that surrounds us, and it has always been more natural for him to create sculptures from the waste of civilization than from Carrera marble. In 1996 he created an artificial house pet and named it simply “To” (It). This creation recalls a giant computer mouse on small wheels. Kintera took “It” out on a leash for walks around the city, into shops and so on. He says: “*For me it was mainly about taking it outside of the typical exhibition environment and seeing what would happen when you bring this thing, which in the safe setting of a gallery wouldn't unnerve anyone, out into the real world among people. And obviously it functions in a completely different way. Out on the street you are not seen as an artist but rather as a madman with some white egg on a string that dogs bark at.*”<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1997–98 Kintera sought a way to intervene in the chain of production and consumption with *26 Appliances*, which looked beautiful but were completely useless; they could only consume electricity and occasionally wiggle on their own. Using the name of the fictional company “Utitool”, he then offered these devices in electronics shops around Prague. What interested him was how to erode consumer stereotypes, such as the general perception of certain brands or types of products, as well as what happens when you deconstruct known objects, transform them into something else, anthropomorphize them, or somehow give them a new (non)logic. Absurd things grew out of this, such as *I Am Sick of It All!* (2003), a grumbling plastic bag fully loaded with purchases, or *Something Electric* (2004), a coconut

plugged into an electrical socket that trembled and bounced around on the floor. He created other objects that examined whether household appliances could have some kind of intimate life.

A need to address the public with short statements, written texts or voice he implemented with his humanoid *Talkmen* (1999–2003), which utter a tape-recorded monologue. The figures with featureless faces startlingly ask ingratiating childlike questions. In 2000 he created a series of 60 templates that he used to spray-paint small figures with simple messages on the walls of buildings (he collectively titled them *Elements*). These low-tech works are a succinct embodiment of all known problems in the world, yet at the same time they are light-hearted and funny. They are illustrative of how important a connection with text is for him. It may be just a word or a pun, or sometimes an absurd proclamation. The point is never conclusive; he intentionally leaves room for interpretation. Kintera hopes that when we get beyond the facade, there will still be something more to think about.

One of Kintera's recurring motifs is the most common type of energy of all time — electricity. He works with everything relating to electrical current, from wires and cables to lighting fixtures, and he thematizes the very process of energy consumption and production. In 2003 he created the sculpture *Máme na to!* (We Have Enough for It!) from 300 kilograms of potatoes connected by electrodes, which produced enough current to power an LCD monitor. A metaphor for the planet's squandering of energy is the 4-meter *Out of Power Tower* — a phantasmagoric skyline composed of thousands of dead batteries. Various and sundry lamps and light fixtures have served as material for a number of his sculptures. He even found a way to turn an ordinary street light into a heartfelt homage. Titled *Memento Mori: Of One's Own Volition*, the street light illuminates the sky below the Nusle Bridge in Prague, standing as a reminder of all the people who have decided to end their own lives by jumping from this bridge. The initiative for this project came from Kintera himself, who also financed the project and donated it to the city of Prague. Another work, *Bike to Heaven* (2012), is a memorial to the great promoter of urban cycling Jan Bouchal, who died beneath the wheels of a car. It consists of a tall street light from which a vertically mounted bicycle points towards the sky and rotates in the wind along with the light fixtures.

Kintera has always been interested in concepts that are not immediately obvious on the surface, yet fundamentally determine and shape the course of things. He is cognizant of the similarities between the ever more complicated innards of technological devices, wiring, cables, collectors for the pipes through which energy flows, and the micro-structures of plants, root systems, mushroom mycelia. In this way these motifs gradually started appearing in his sculptures, which led to the birth of an extensive project on the theme of post-nature. The sculptures began to appear motifs that led to the birth of a large-scale project on post-nature. Fascinated by the aesthetics of old natural science illustrations and exhibits, he created a wondrous fragile/delicate world of artificial flora and fauna, all from old transistors, printed circuit boards, copper wire and plastics. These mutated components of electrical waste form new species of animals, for which he even invented quasi-Latin names.

Preparations for major solo exhibitions required the creation of larger and still larger objects. With the help of his colleagues Richard Wiesner and Rastislav Juhás, Kintera created in

2012 an enormous structure from various round items (Christmas decorations, bouncy balls, exercise balls) titled *Démon rustu* (Demon of Growth). The object evokes uncontrolled proliferation, with its title relating to the enticing concept of perpetual economic growth, which in reality is actually frightening. In a similar way, a monumental apocalyptic vision of nature, *Postnaturalia* (2017), emerged from electronic waste. For the exhibition “Nervous Trees” at Prague’s Rudolfinum Gallery, he created a 7-metre pyramid from eighty washing machines called *We All Want to Be Cleaned* (2017), some of which were continuously in use. (The exhibition was seen by 162,000 viewers and became the most visited exhibition in 5 years.)

Kintera is gradually adding new tiles to the extensive mosaic of his work. From his seemingly banal scenes, like in a convex mirror, our reality is reflected; serious questions, messages and existential anxiety are hidden. He impugns our optimism about relentless progress and the sustainability of a comfortable consumerist lifestyle. It’s as if he would like to remind us that “chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man”.<sup>[3]</sup> His raven cackles, “*We have a problem, a big problem*”, and maybe it’s time to start thinking if it isn’t time to rise back up to the surface.