

# IS CZECH HOMEMADE ART OF THE 1970s KITSCH OR MATERIALIZED ICONIC EXPERIENCE?

## **Abstract**

The idea of this essay is the analysis of Czech homemade art of the 1970s as kitsch and as iconic experience in Jeffrey Alexander's sense. I will introduce several approaches to kitsch objects and compare them with homemade art pieces. In second part of my work I will write about social icons and iconic experience and try to answer the question if homemade art is iconic. Next to the facts and conditions that Alexander writes about, I will establish another category of icons – icons of homemade art - where the role of viewer (the person who creates icons by her aesthetic or emotional experiences) and the role of artist (the person who materially creates art and puts certain social meanings into it) coincide into one. These kinds of icons are more intensive because their social meanings and the ways of their experience penetrate and circulate in one circle: “experience – creating – experience”. In last part of essay I will take a look at homemade art of the 1970s in contemporary society.

## **Czech homemade art**

Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, notes that people want to have (artistic) things spatially closer to them and if they cannot afford an original, they buy a copy, a reproduction. The quality of the art piece is changing into quantity and with the process of technical reproduction the object of art loses something from its authenticity. It is no longer an original but it is a copy meant for market (Benjamin 1979). This occurred in Czech society in the 1970s. The era of normalization in 1970s was typical for its forbiddances, deficiency of everyday products and limitations of freedom. All these factors can be seen both in terms of social structure and in the cultural sphere. The field of (high) art as well as the field of everyday personal experiences was affected by this era - by repressive state and government, by prohibitions of certain activities, in particular (Western) art and culture. This lack of “world culture” affected the aesthetical dimension of (everyday) being. People did not have access to Western art and culture; they did not know contemporary world trends and ideas. What was characteristic for this era was the absence of almost everything. Sometimes, people even could not buy what they really

wanted and needed. These facts gave rise to something that we call *homemade art*<sup>1</sup>. This kind of “art” is made from the things from everyday life – clothes, bottles, beer caps, jackstraws,... just from everything that can be (re)used. From these things, people created various objects – flowers, animals, small figures, home decorations or home tools. They made it in their homes, outbuildings and weekend cottages. The motto for them was “everything can be used” (Činátlová 2010: 158). Homemade art is designated for home decoration, for making our homes more beautiful and comfortable. In the term “homemade art” itself is contained not only art meant for home but also home-art in the sense of domestic or national art (Veselý 2007).

Homemade art is bound to the concept of leisure time. I write “concept” because in socialistic society leisure time had its own regularities. People could not spend their free time in any way they chose. They had to draw new power for their work and use this time for self-development. The state established several institutions to control and to organize leisure time (ROH<sup>2</sup>, Socialistický svaz mládeže<sup>3</sup>,...). This sphere of time can be easily controlled by state in contrast to intimate private sphere (Činátlová 2010). But every person needs her own private sphere. A safe and politically correct escape to the private sphere is the practice of artistic bricolage. Bricolage was the social phenomenon, the symbol of this era. The socialist state advanced this activity through various television shows (*Receptář nejen na neděli*) or magazines (*Dorka, Praktická žena, Vlastní výroba bytových doplňků*,...). The bricoleur is lord of his own home world – he made his home more beautiful by homemade decorations. He is both artist and craftsman. The specific category of bricolage is *homemade art*.

Homemade art is something between “folklore” and “popular” and it is close to kitsch and concept of DIY, or “do it yourself”. This kind of art almost seemed mass produced, since all the pieces were very similar<sup>4</sup>. But this mass production not consists in manufacture production but in process of neighbor’s forwarding and copying. In contrast to bricolage, it has an aesthetic dimension. This aesthetic is somewhere on borderline of art and kitsch. It has its own folk aesthetic, which is produced by collective creation, where we can see the unreflected institutional base of society. Homemade art does not try to create some tradition; regardless, it carries the collective memory by its (social) meanings. What is characteristic is the fact that homemade art is separated from any kind of tradition and mostly is not for sell.

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<sup>1</sup> Term “homemade art” is *terminus technicus*. It indicates Czech art of 1970s which people made in their home. For more information see [www.domaciumeni.cz](http://www.domaciumeni.cz).

<sup>2</sup> Union of Revolution Union.

<sup>3</sup> Union of Socialist Youth.

<sup>4</sup> Similar themes, patterns and design may have been caused by the popular manuals in television shows and in magazines.

Typical is also reinterpretation of classical art – bricoleurs imitate old classical art by using cheap materials (e.g. empire clock from plywood).

If we take a look back to the art history, we can find two similar ways in art from the form side: folk art and art brut (“discovered” by Jean Dubuffet). All of these kinds of art are made by people without artistic education - by amateurs. But folk art and art brut have their own museums or galleries, by time they became an institutional art. Homemade art still waits for its institutionalization by experts of art theorists and historians. We can find even another kind of art what is similar to homemade art – pop art. It started as low art, sometimes people called it kitsch. By time, it entered into galleries and nowadays, it is “real art”. What is similar between pop art and homemade art is the influence of commercial art (homemade art was affected by “Brussels style” which was showed in world exhibition EXPO in Brussels in 1958) and inspiration by film and comics. In American pop art it was action heroes, in Czech homemade art it is ant Ferda Mravenec, dwarfs or popular character from Jaroslav Hašek’s novel soldier Švejk. Curator of first homemade art exhibition in 2007 Pavel Veselý notes that “homemade art is something admirable like Andy Warhol’s Cambell Soup” (Veselý 2007: 6).

### **Aesthetics of homemade art and concept of kitsch**

It is very important to talk about the aesthetic dimension of homemade art. When we take a look at some pieces of homemade art we might almost doubt if it is “real art”. Does it really have an aesthetic dimension (from an artistic point of view)? Czech theorist of aesthetics Jan Mukařovský, in his essay *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, writes about the conditions that are needed for aesthetic perception: (a) the object of our perception has to assume by itself, (b) it has to be pleasing and (c) it has to assume by its form (or – in Alexander’s words – its surface) (Mukařovský 1966). Homemade art accomplishes all these conditions except (b). But aesthetic experience does not have to be only positive. Umberto Eco wrote an entire book about the negative side of aesthetics – *The history of ugliness* (in Czech 2007). Even if some object evokes negative emotions or feelings, it is still an aesthetic experience. So in the case of homemade art we can say it has some aesthetic dimension, both positive and negative.

The category of the aesthetics is connected with the category of *taste*. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) connects good taste and bad taste with the role of education. If a viewer wants to judge a piece of art, she has to have a certain social ability based on (good) education. In other

words, she has to have cultural capital and has to know the symbolic codes through which she can understand art. Regarding this point, Bourdieu talks only about high art and the parable is from the sphere of elites. He argues that aesthetic experiences and certain kinds of taste depend upon social class. If we consider homemade art, we can see that it is related to the middle class. This class created and aesthetically experienced homemade art as something nice and beautiful. In contrast, for elites and the intellectual classes, homemade art is kind of kitsch or just “nice but stupid home decoration”. “Kitsch look” creates the main character of homemade art.

Umberto Eco (2006) argues that kitsch is meant for lazy audience what desires for beauty but does not want to lose time with interpretation of art objects. That is why objects of kitsch exist – they do not bother with recognition but just subdue to effect. Viewer thinks she consumes an original whereas it is only an imitation. According to Eco, kitsch became a “stimulation of certain effects, for example reaction on play, religious or erotic processes” (Eco 2006: 69). In these cultural contexts, art becomes integral part of society and everyday life. So kitsch is not about art but more about lifestyle and attitudes. Kitch is object that tries to develop certain effect, but does so throughout foreign experiences. In this point, kitsch defined by Eco and objects of homemade art are different. Homemade art uses authentic experience – authentic materials from everyday life – and does not constrain any beauty or emotional feelings to its audience.

Another theorist, Clement Greenberg (2000) argues that kitsch is opposite to high culture or art. He calls for research of relationship between aesthetic experience and social and historic contexts in which the experience exists. According to him, kitsch arises in middle class environment as an answer to request of cheap, fast and (most of all) not difficult entertainment. Most of people coming from villages to cities seek for such art which imitates high culture and thus produces its own system of tradition. What is most important for kitsch art according to Greenberg is massive sales mechanism which generates pressure to each person and goes further to every part of culture. In this point we can say homemade art is not kitsch in this sense. Because very important attribute of homemade art is that it is unmarketable. Homemade artists create their art just for home-need. It can be given (but in this case it is very often that endowed person has similar or even the same art object at his home since the pattern of homemade art are very similar) or artist made it only for his own home. But homemade artists never sold their art – it is meant for their own homes and for their own pleasure.

Czech theorist Tomáš Kulka (2000) defines kitsch by three points: (a) kitsch represents objects or themes that are generally considered beautiful or having a strong emotional charge; (b) these objects or themes have to be immediately identified; (c) kitsch does not enrich the associations connected to it. “Real kitsch” has to contain simplicity and comprehensibility so that the viewer can immediately identify what is in the picture or sculpture. Simple image/object has to be objectively accounted as beautiful and emotional. So people dissolve in front of pictures with children running on the grass, pictures with puppies and kittens, pictures with sunrise or sunset etc. These images provoke expected reactions of dissolving.

If we take Bourdieu’s argument about the role of social class and Kulka’s definitions of kitsch, we can say that homemade art is definitely an aesthetic category but that it does not belong to field of high art. But on the other hand, it is not real “low” art or kitsch either. In spite of Kulka’s third point, homemade art associates with many social experiences from everyday life. Objects of kitsch are empty, they do not carry any social meaning. They are just imitations of something else. To the contrary, homemade art involves many social meanings both from its creators and viewers. This art is made from very known and close things that viewers can recognize from their everyday life. Home artists transfigure things of everyday use into new form and meaning. When viewer looks at flower created from plastic plates, he can also see the same plates that he has at home and eats dinner from them.

### **Homemade art as icons and iconic experience**

A person’s living environment – where he is practicing certain activities – is very important. It is also a matter of which material objects we have surrounded ourselves with. These objects represent our beliefs and values. All these things can be aesthetically judged; therefore, they determine the aesthetic dimension of our being. Every object, artistic and otherwise, has two layers – surface and depth - so it can be experienced in two ways (Alexander 2008a). The first way is through aesthetic experience. The viewer is touched by the materiality and (surface) form of the object. The second way is through the process of immersion to a deeper layer of the object, where the viewer can find and recognize social meanings. By this certain process of immersion, any object can become an icon. Icons are “symbolic condensations, they root generic, social meanings in a specific and “material” form. They allow the abstraction of morality to be subsumed, to be made invisible, by aesthetic shape. Meaning is made iconically visible as something beautiful, sublime, ugly,

even as the banal appearance of mundane “material life”. Iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value.” (Alexander 2008b: 782). What is important is the fact that both aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects can become iconic. Thus, it doesn’t really matter if homemade art is art or not – it can be an iconic experience anyway.

Alexander talks about kitsch as well. He noted that social icons can be hierarchically arranged and defined not intellectually but by reference to object’s shape and feel. “What seem merely to be imitations are called kitsch; they are icons that do not stimulate or facilitate immersion and identification” (Alexander 2008a: 9). As I wrote earlier, homemade art is iconic and has two layers of piece of art, in contrast to object of kitsch which is flattened and lacks process of immersion. Icons are created by society to remember some outstanding event, thing, individual or to recovery from some social trauma. In our case of homemade art, we should acknowledge the era of 1970s and 1980s, the time of communist government. It can be labeled as social trauma – as I wrote before, it was time of lack of everything and time of forbiddances. If we take a look to homemade art, people created these objects from accessible materials and final art pieces memorialize that time. Especially nowadays when various homemade art exhibitions take place in museums or modern design shows (e.g. Designblok in Prague) .

The idea of two layers of art is analogous with Roland Barthes’ denotation and connotation. Denotation is everything that pictures present – it is just the description of the picture. Connotation is more complicated – it is the thoughts and associations developed by the picture. If denotation is the surface layer of the picture then connotation is the inner layer that insists upon deep analytical interpretation. Similar principles come from Erwin Panofski. First, he simply describes a picture, then he develops an iconographic analysis, and at the end, he develops an iconographic interpretation.

What is significant about the aesthetic experience is feeling and emotion. Through our feeling and emotion, both positive and negative, we participate in the iconic experience and the development of icons. Behind our feelings, we can find what makes social structure

Jeffrey Alexander, in his essay *Iconic Experience in Art and Life: Surface/Depth Beginning with Giacometti’s Standing Woman*, talks about the role of artist (the creator) and the role of viewer. He argues that the artist puts some of his own meanings into a work of art but audience-viewers do not care (and may not see) these meanings; instead, they develop their own meanings by (aesthetic) experience. “We (viewers) are unconcerned with who the model was, with what the artist felt like on that day, where she did her work, or the political events of the time. As the artist draws us into this deeper level, the aesthetic object becomes a

symbol, not a specific referent for some specific thing but signifier that points to all “such things”. It becomes a collective representation, an ideal-type of object, person, or situation” (Alexander 2008a: 6). In the case of homemade art, the situation of roles of artist and viewer is different. Artists are viewers and viewers are artists at the same time. This fact breaks down the strict distinction between the sphere of creating art and the sphere of experiencing art. If we say that first, art experience is aesthetic, and after that certain immersion discovers inner social meanings, in homemade art this process is double-sided. The same people create works of art and the same people judge and aesthetically experience this art. So the (social) meaning inside of the piece of art is still the same (or at least similar). The interplay between the surface and the depth of the object shrinks into one process of a certain experience, both creating and aesthetically judging art.

In spite of the absence of a tension between surface form and deeper structure, homemade art is iconic. Social icons are full of feelings, knowledge and evaluation as is homemade art. People can recognize known things from their own homes and even the same works of art (art patterns were very similar or completely the same). It represents the era of normalization and remains at the basis of social life at that time. Homemade art objects become symbols and collective representations.

The iconic experience of homemade art presents a distinctive category of icons. These kinds of icons are more intensive because their social meanings and the ways of their experience penetrate and circulate in one circle “experience – creating – experience”. So my argument is that the process of immersion to searching for social meaning of object is (in some cases) not necessary for producing of (social) icons.

### **Homemade art in Czech contemporary society**

After decades, homemade art is returning into Czech society and culture. In contemporary society, it is very popular and modern to produce art by concept of “doing yourself”. Artists are done with conceptual art and they turn attention to remaking of found things. The evidence of this trend can be winners of prestige Czech art price Cena Jindřicha Chalupeckého Vasil Artamonov and Alexey Klyuykov. Their winning art installation is composed of relicts of industrial production founded in abandoned factory zone. The juror of Cena Jindřicha Chalupeckého, curator and art theorist Charlotte Kotíková said that “installation has both ironic and nostalgic effect”. Homemade art has exactly the same effect – for some people it personates ironic and ugly communist part of Czech history, for others it

is nostalgic reminiscence of their childhood and “old good times”. Stuart Hall (in Sturken, Cartwright 2009) writes about three positions of viewers when they look at art objects:

1. Viewers can identify themselves with hegemonic position and accept dominant meaning of image.
2. Viewers can negotiate about interpretation of image and its meaning.
3. Viewers can take an opposite stand to ideological position and reject image.

Contemporary Czech viewers are divided into two groups according to generations – young viewers (age 20 – 40) and older generations (age 50 and more). Older viewers are laden with collective historic memory but young people do not remember the communist era so much. They are young people who produce contemporary art and design. And they are young people who again “discover” homemade art as something ironic but modern-retro. They take a second position according to Hall – they negotiate about social meaning of homemade art and put another – different – meaning into it. In contemporary design, we can find obvious inspiration from homemade art. Iconic experience of this art is changing. In this point, roles of artists and viewers are separated as Alexander writes about. New viewers put completely different social meaning into homemade art objects by process of immersion. What the meaning will be we could see after five or ten years later.

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