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Behind the Synthetic Curtain:
The politics of plastic in Czechoslovakia

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At the end of the 1960s, as civil rights marches and student protests resounded across Europe and the United States, art institutions dramatized material and industrial innovation by featuring artists working in the newest plastics. Even as critics equated synthetics with kitsch and the denigration of cultural values, museum curators mounted a flurry of corporate sponsored exhibitions, including: 1967 *Plastics: West Coast* at the Hansen-Fuller Gallery, the 1968 *Plastics as Plastic* exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York City, the 1969 *A Plastic Presence* at The Jewish Museum, and the 1972 self-proclaimed *The Last Plastics Show* at CalArts. These curators seemed to follow the now iconic line of the 1967 film *The Graduate*, where a smug Los Angeles businessman tells Dustin Hoffman's character the following unsolicited advice: I just want to say one word to you—just one word—Plastics. There's a great future in Plastics.

Art museums and the plastics industry were closely tied during the so-called golden age of polymer chemistry, a historical moment when polymer research was so new that scientists were encouraged to experiment without focusing on end products, and chemical industries welcomed artists to propose novel ways of working with plastics. In the US context, this collaboration between art and science enjoyed financial support because synthetics were already regarded as a profitable investment. Chemical companies marketed plastics as new wonder materials that could satisfy any consumer desire and,

since the 1950s, Dow declared plastic "American as Apple Pie" in an advertisement campaign to domesticate synthetics as an integral—and natural—component of the American household. In the advertisement, the equation of Dow products with the cultural symbol of a freshly baked apple pie aligns plastics with American consumerism. The term "plastic" signified much more than a type of materials during the Cold War.

In this paper, I examine how artists and designers working in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic used plastics to navigate the material politics of the Cold War. Analyzing museum exhibition catalogs and collaborations between artists and chemists, I consider the circumstances in which Czechoslovak artists and designers gained access to the synthetic materials that were laden with the myth of the American dream *and* the Soviet production myth. Case studies of Artchemo and The Museum of Decorative Art's 1972 *Design and Plastic* reveal the stakes of creativity under normalization: experimenting with plastic allowed Czechoslovak artists and designers to propose a model of political agency that was allied with Western Europe, as well as ever evolving.

Czechoslovakia, officially known as the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, enjoyed a brief period of liberalization during the mid-1960s. After the country suffered an economic recession early in the decade, a program of decentralization allowed individual companies more autonomy to decide on prices and wages. Besides economic reforms, the so-called period of the Prague Spring also allowed for greater cultural freedom. Artists gained more opportunities to collaborate and experiment under the leadership of Alexander Dubček who rose to power in January of 1968, promising to remove everything that strangles artistic and scientific creativeness. It was under these circumstances that Artchemo 68/69 took place.

Artchemo was the first collaboration between artists and scientists to explore the aesthetic possibilities of plastics in Czechoslovakia. Initiated by the East Bohemian Gallery director Jaromír Zemina in 1968, Artchemo was a residency based in Pardubice, a city about 100 km east of Prague. Zemina chose Pardubice as the location for several freasons: the city was industrialized and known as the hub of Czechoslovakia's plastic production; it housed Synthesia chemical factory, the manufacturer of Semtex, a plastic explosive and major export of Czechoslovakia, and oil refinery Paramo; and there was already a precedent of artists travelling to Pardubice to consult polymer chemists and scavenge for material rejected from the factory. Zemina envisioned Artchemo as a mutually beneficial exchange between artists and scientists, and found an ally in Bohumil Svoboda CSc, a chemist and amateur artist with an interest to exploring plastics' physical and poetic potential. Under the leadership of Zemina and Svoboda, residency at Artchemo offered artists free accommodations for participants and their families, a stipend of 3,000 crowns for personal expenses, and an additional travel stipend of 500 crowns. Most significantly, artists were promised free assistance from specialists at Pardubice. In exchange for this expertise, artists agreed to leave half of the total numbers of works made during the symposium, with one work being the minimum, to the East Bohemian Gallery.

Czechoslovak artists had different motivations for participating in Artchemo. Some artists turned to plastics because they appeared to escape the historical, formal, and connoisseurial connotations of such traditional artistic materials as bronze or oil paint. Artist Miloš Urbásek, for instance, used polystyrol as a base for his paintings to consider how the material's interaction with light affected his already established visual

vocabulary of geometric abstraction. The use of new prefabricated synthetics allowed Urbásek to consider the interplay of the transhistorical principles of geometry with the historic specificity of a class of materials only invented in the 19th Century.

Certain artists were interested in the process of plastic production and the manner in which plastics' chemistry illuminates mankind's changing relationship to the natural world. These artists researched and instigated the creation of colored Plexiglas and factories around Pardubice began manufacturing Plexiglas in pink, green, yellow, and red-orange thanks to the artists' consideration of the sensory possibilities of looking through lightweight materials that are simultaneously transparent and colored. One of these artists, Milos Ševćik, made a series of brightly colored transparent Plexiglas bubbles that he then installed and photographed within the landscape of Pardubice. Ševćik imagined these bright bubbles as emerging from deep vents within the ground, creating an image for contemplating the toxicity of petroleum-based plastic manufacturing and the increasingly synthetic landscape of the Anthropocene.

Plastics' behavior at different temperatures—namely its malleability—also inspired artists to consider it conceptually. Jozef Jankovič explored how the tactility and plasticity of plastic illuminates human organization and political identity. In his 1968 sculpture *Hands*, Jankovič uses wood, resin, rubber gloves, and acrylic paint to depict a mass of anonymous hands reaching out of a cubic base. Bands of white, blue and red paint delineate the hands into three groups, introducing variance into the otherwise undifferentiated and mass-produced gloves. Color here offers a critique of Soviet influence over Czechoslovakia along with the malleability of national identity because the tricolor composition evokes the adopted flag of Czechoslovakia, itself a modification

of the Polish flag and the flag of the Kingdom of Bohemia. Jankovič would explore these themes further in his 1970 work *The Moving Hands*, where motorized gloves, this time unified through neatly applied red paint, rise and fall in a repetitive motion. The motorized movement animates the gloves into a mass of reaching hands, which pulse in an automated rhythm. In contrast to the prior work where the tricolor composition and surface texture introduces difference into the gloves, these hands evoke an unconscious mob striving, yet unable, to break out of their red uniform—the enforced dream of communism from the Soviet Union.

The two works were made only two years apart, yet Jankovič created *The Moving Hands* in a political climate much different than his initial experiments with plastic. Just as Artchemo was preparing for its first exhibition in the fall of 1968, the Soviet Union led Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia on August 20th, 1968. The economic and cultural reforms of the Prague Spring were terminated. Increased centralization and tight censorship ushered a period of normalization, or the attempt to restore Czechoslovakia's compliancy with Soviet control.

Within this tumultuous political climate, Artchemo participants found that the odds were stacked against them as they prepared to mount a public exhibition. Due to censorship, curators were unable to distribute pamphlets or advertise Artchemo, limiting the public's awareness of the collaboration. Artchemo's official goal of exploring plastic for its expressive potential became contentious as new economic reforms stressed the importance of increasing Czechoslovakia's plastic production to free themselves from dependency on West Europe's synthetics and meeting production quotas—a goal that Artchemo did not appear to contribute to directly. Finally, many of the artworks created

during the Artchemo residency did not fit the newly reinforced aesthetic of Socialist Realism. Artchemo sculptures such as Jankovič's *Hands* were doubly threatening under normalization. The artwork comprises rubber gloves that could be worn by factory workers—the material in this case is a literal tool of production that is repurposed for art. Jankovič's depiction of a mass of anonymous hands and the tricolor bands of the Czechoslovak flag challenge Socialist Realist ideals of a unified Eastern European collective working in advance of the USSR. Plastics identity as a transformable material defied Socialist Realism's emphasis on stable form and figuration.

Despite these obstacles, Zemina pushed for another iteration of the Artchemo residency in 1969. He wrote to local officials at Pordubice with the following plea:

> I therefore ask you once again, even more earnestly than I did last year—please receive these artists among you so that they do not feel like mere guests at Pardubice. Help them find an environment which liberates the artist. In this sense all is not yet lost. Let us seize what there remains of this opportunity and use it to the utmost. If we don't do this, we could possibly lose this opportunity forever, a fact which deserves to be seriously borne in mind.

Despite Zemina's best efforts to establish Artchemo as an annual residency, the project was discontinued after only two years. Its only public event was a nationwide seminar on the theme *Plastics in Art,* which took place in Pardubice in March of 1969 and featured works from the first Artchemo symposium. Many of the chemists and engineers at Pardubice lost interest in working with artists or helping them solve technical problems during the changing political climate of normalization, and artists were left to complete their contractual agreement on their own. Since many of the works created at Artchemo were too large and expensive to move, several artists stored their projects in the attic of the East Bohemian Gallery. Lack of funding limited the gallery's activities and it was

only in 1994 that these works in plastics were rediscovered during renovation, highlighting the gaps in archives and cultural memory from the period.

While Artchemo marks the first—and only—collaboration between artists and scientists working in plastic in Czechoslovakia, it would appear that design in plastic was a more lucrative creative pursuit during normalization. The Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, for instance, launched an initiative in 1972 to survey and showcase Czechoslovakia's design in plastic. The museum presented its gathered research in the publication *Design and Plastic*, an exhibition catalogue showcasing its titular material of study through its design: its neon cover, white ring binder, and numerous transparent dividers are all made of plastic. Today, the catalogue is often described as a work of propaganda because curator Milena Lamarova's essay contextualizes the project within Czechoslovakia's fifth five-year plan and a history of Socialist design stemming back to the work of William Morris and the Arts and Craft movement in late nineteenth-century Britain. Yet the catalogue's identity as state propaganda becomes complicated when one actually flips through the volume. To begin, the text is published bilingually in Czech and English—significantly, not in Russian. Furthermore, there are actually very few Czechoslovak designs featured in the volume, and the few that appear are listed alongside examples of now iconic designs from Western Europe. The Panton Chair from West Germany exemplifies the "interstitial" possibilities of designing in plastics: rather than designing a traditional chair structure comprising a seat and legs, or distinctive supporting volumes, Panton's chair appears as a unified and colorful abstract line that renders visible the meeting point between the human body and its supporting furniture, as well as the act of reclining in space. Czechoslovak designers, meanwhile, were hired to

design specific pieces of furniture. In contrast to the Pantone Chair, Marie Grygarová's 1972 Children Chair, emphasizes function in its small scale, clearly defined structural components, and much more conservative design.

Despite the vast disparity in resources and creative environments between Czechoslovak designers and those working in Western Europe, curator Lamarova's act of listing Czechoslovak designers alongside those from West Germany, Italy, and England redraws the political map of the Cold War to feature Prague and Bratislava as two dynamic nodes within an international network of designers utilizing new synthetics to reinvent the built environment. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the exhibition "Design and Plastic" ever actually took place. The Museum of Decorative Arts was taken over by the Soviet-run Ministry of Culture in 1968 and closed to the public from 1970 until 1985. Exhibition announcements and photographic documentation are missing from the museum archives; their absence suggests that the catalogue may be the sole iteration of the exhibit and that one cannot look to the physical space of the museum as the site of Lamarova's curating. Under normalization, publishing functioned as an act of curating; the portability of the book allowed exhibits to became nomadic.

Locating where the catalogue editions were mailed illumines the identity of the target audience for *Design and Plastic*. During the early 1970s, curator Lamarova mailed editions of the catalogue to several art museum and national libraries across the United States, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Library of Congress. Mailing the catalogue served as an act of soft diplomacy: the museum catalogue is steeped in the pretense of the production myth and the fifth five-year plan, yet it addresses art and legal administrators in the US to observe

Czechoslovakia's alliance with Western Europe through its design in plastics. Given that US advertisements branded plastic "As American As Apple Pie" and the country's trend of mounting museum exhibitions of artists' work in plastics, synthetics offered a common language, or a ground for translating, across the material and cultural differences during the early 1970s.

Yet the term plastic held more promise in Czechoslovakia than a Cold War alliance with Western Europe and the United States: the material offered a model for political evolution. Thermoplastics give and receive form; their phase of malleability is a transformation in response to—and a resistance to—its mold, or environment. Under Soviet control, Czechoslovak artists turned to pliable materials to explore the ways in which a collective could rise up against authoritarian control. One example is the artist Jan Svankmajer, who was censored under normalization and forbidden from making animated films. He reflected on the period in his 1991 film *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* which presents the affective impact of Soviet control through stop-motion animation. In one scene, an anonymous man reaches into a pail of gray clay and forms a figure of a male worker. He proceeds to repeat the action, placing a series of identical clay workers on an assembly line. The workers move along the assembly line as though towards a purpose but the camera reveals a noose at the end of their ride. The workers' pliability offers no resistance to the noose and they disintegrate back into a uniform lump of clay. In the film, the clay worker appears dispensable and lacking in individuality; significantly, it is the softness of the clay that makes the worker susceptible to totalitarian molding and exploitation.

Svankmajer’s material politics is rooted in a longer literary tradition looking back to the science fiction writer Karel Čapek’s influential models of Bergsonian evolution. Čapek’s 1920 play *R.U.R.*, or Rossum’s Universal Robot, takes place at a factory where artificial people, called roboti, are produce out of synthetic organic matter. The roboti appear satisfied to work for the factory overlords, but eventually organize a hostile robot rebellion that leads to the extinction of the human race. Čapek revisted this plot arc in his 1936 novel *War with the Newts*: this time, a sea-dwelling race of newts is enslaved and exploited by humans. The newts comply for a while but quickly gain human knowledge and rebel, leading to a global war for supremacy. What the robots and amphibians have in common is that they are both described as plastic; their synthetic material allows them to remain in an active state of becoming where they transform their surroundings and enact political change. Observing the lack of protagonists in Čapek’s works, scholar Charlotte Sleigh argues that the synthetic robots and newts offered Czechoslovaks powerful models for conceiving the entire social body as a potential work of evolution. Despite the constrictions imposed by the oppressive political conditions of normalization, the plastic social body was a fragile but fluid entity, capable of effecting change upon the future evolution of humankind.

To conclude, I would like to move once more between the material and the poetic dimensions of plastic to consider how new synthetics served as a model of political agency within Czechoslovakia. While complex plastics were inaccessible to artists under normalization, most encountered Chemlon, a synthetic fabric produced in Czechoslovakia. Given that clothing and accessory designs in Chemlon were limited, people transformed the material by hand, individuating their consumption practice. The

synthetic material was therefore not imbedded in the throwaway consumer culture of the United States; chemlon objects remained in constant reinterpretation and evolution through Czechoslovak practices of everyday life. The metaphor of plastic also illuminates the nominal significance of The Plastic People of the Universe, a rock group which formed only a month after the Soviet invasion of 1968 and who inspired future president of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel to pen Charter ’77, a bill of international human rights. The social revolution they inspired was already promised by their name: rather than merely conjuring the superficiality of American popular culture, their use of the word “plastic” evokes a vision of a universal social body in an endless state of becoming.