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TALK TO ME

Adéla Matasová and Forms of Communication

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Charlotta Kotik

Adéla Matasová is an inveterate traveler through real and fictional landscapes, through existing spaces or those she creates to suit her expansive imagination. She conjures new geographies to accommodate pieces that germinate in her mind, not yet finalized but already demanding a particular environment of a rather large scale - Matasová does not think small.

It has not always been that way, although Matasová's early enrolment into the Department of Monumental Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague bespeaks her propensity towards the grand scale and the inherent need for space. Soon after finishing her studies there in 1964, Matasová began to question the two-dimensionality of painting and her primarily abstract compositions started to grow as if morphing from within into rather high reliefs. Matasová experimented with various materials and techniques and created a number of drawings, prints and mixed media compositions to test all the possibilities available.

The artist's 1968 UNESCO grant to study in Paris came at a time when everything seemed possible - during the excitement of the Prague Spring. Her travels gave Matasová the opportunity to learn first-hand about the international art scene and confirmed her resolve to perpetually experiment and to engage the unexpected as a guiding spirit of her work. That she was able to follow that resolve even in the politically and creatively restrictive times of the 1970s, upon her return to Czechoslovakia and after the military invasion crushed the Prague Spring, attests to the significant strength of the artist's conviction that through

a constant search for self-expression one can construct an identity even in the most difficult of times. Reading all available literature, scientific journals, learning about research in natural sciences, although difficult due to the restricted flow of information, offered some possibility to extract knowledge from the fragmented missives and use it creatively.

The late 1960s also coincided with Matasová's growing interest in architecture and the work of some of the architectural iconoclasts such as that of the late 18th century French architect and social reformer Claude-Nicolas Ledoux.¹ Her approach to sculpture resonates strongly with the approach of an architect to the creation of new or alteration of existing space. Nevertheless, Matasová's preternatural feeling for space seems to have been ever present. Her need to inhabit three-dimensional space began to assert itself more fully in the 1970s, when the artist entirely abandoned the structural support of the wall and began to create spatial compositions to eventually move to the full-fledged installations of the 1980s.

The first materials used on this road towards large-scale works were paper, the essential support for both drawing and painting, flax-based paper pulp and water. The flax matter was transformed into sculptural entities through dipping in water and elaborately twisted, bearing marks of the artist's strenuous physical effort. The resulting formations were unique pieces that could have easily existed on their own - nevertheless Matasová empowered her pieces by grouping and exhibiting them in series which became an essential characteristic of most of her subsequent work. We are thus compelled to view the works by active physical participation; by moving within the installation space to observe the pieces in their entirety. This activation of the work by the viewer is an important feature that is more fully explored in the artist's recent work with interactive computer technology.

Much of Matasová's work is concerned with communication - be it the communication between the work and the space of the installation, communication between the artist

and the visitor, or the communication between the installation elements themselves.

It is almost ironic to use the title *Communication* to refer to the grouping of industrial looking objects covered in the flax based material that had become Matasová's staple since the 1990s. Again, forms were grouped to create an environment, but individually they offered commanding, almost archetypal presences. Although first installed in the New Hall Gallery in Prague in 1991 together with a large earlier work *Situation II*, it was a year later at Prague's Main Railway Station where a fittingly utilitarian environment offered an appropriate match to their austere industrial character.

As if the artist felt that the possibilities of an enclosed space were becoming too restrictive, Matasová soon stepped out into the open and with that move began to address the issues of public art and earthwork. With this outwards expansion, the artist took upon herself a challenge that would lead to some of her most monumental and memorable pieces.

In 1993, Matasová participated in the International Sculpture Symposium in Crete, Greece. In the work called *Communication* she would remain wedded to her industrial forms, making them increasingly austere by stripping their surfaces of the paper and flax mass and fully exposing their metallic surfaces and minimalist shapes. Installed on the stone esplanade at the edge of the sea, the form's large openings were fitted with rectangles of highly polished steel that reflected the ever-changing surface of water and formations in the sky. Here Matasová unwittingly paid tribute to Robert Smithson, the seminal figure of land art whose use of mirrors dominated much of his practice. Matasová's segmented reflections of the surrounding environment took on an almost painterly fashion as if pointing toward her past as a painter. The polished steel also produced reflections of the passers-by who could choose to enter the picture and communicate with both their self-image and the images of the landscape.

There is an inner logic, not always readily apparent, to the development of Matasová's work. Her very first forays into art, better yet, into visual culture, were at the Technical College of Interior Design, a semi-vocational school that combined requirements for creative design with essential knowledge of the rules of production. At the school, an array of materials' demands was ever present, as was the need to learn the secrets of production and properties of various materials. This in-depth inquest into materiality also led to the discovery of all kinds of subversions to these material rules. Matasová's ability to envision and later realize her monumental and technically extremely demanding pieces and installation can be seen as partially rooted in this early experience of material exploration. Her inquisitive nature guided her from the very beginning towards the need to manipulate material to suit her momentary needs, allowing her to explore matter in the most innovative way, be it the medium of painting or, much later, digital technology. Her rigorous training in monumental painting at the Academy of Fine Arts, despite her later rejection of its usual classical form, brought an understanding of the essentiality of the illusionism of painting, acknowledged in the ever-changing views of the landscape surrounding. The sea and sky, capricious, changeable and always magnificent, as well as gentle hills, create an essentially painterly composition in the reflection of her large polished surfaces.

While participating in the exhibition *Inhabited Landscape* at the Klenová Castle in 1993, Matasová once again used the transformative power of reflection in the installation *Communication II*. This time, however, she engaged with smaller surfaces of the highly reflected steel she had used in Crete, placing them into the existing openings of the medieval walls – a residue of scaffolding from the time of the construction of the wall. The mirrors, themselves a significant feature of 17th century architectural history, offer a reflection of the landscape of the castle's grounds, but also of other elements of the building's construction and its environment.

Matasová states: *"Above all else an artist needs opportunities. One such opportunity came in 1993-94 with Communication II - Inhabited Landscape I. I was able to use the entire castle at Klenová and thus work within its enormous historical context. The monumental disposition of the space allowed me to work with the connected elements of the landscape and what would remain from our ancestors - for example the openings left after the original scaffolding."*²

Matasová also chose one of the fortification walls of the castle to install a grouping of steel rods as if they were growing directly from the ancient wall itself. Streaming downwards onto the adjacent lawn, these rods were accessible to visitors and when touched produced a gentle sound. After this first appearance of steel rods in her work, Matasová would continue to use the material to incorporate a participatory sonic experience in a number of her installations.

At a later piece, *Communication IV*, produced for the World Financial Center in New York for the Celebrate Prague Festival in 1994, Matasová wedded together her original large reflective rectangular elements and the steel rods, using large duct-like shapes such as those in Crete; this time suspended from the ceiling. It was a feat of engineering and the excellent cooperation of the host institution to integrate the almost primitive shapes with those already existing in the highly technological environment of the Financial Center.

The artist follows her essential dictum, formulated when describing her approach to this installation: *"I do communicate with the site which determines the character of the work from the very beginning. It leads to the contemplation about the project - every new site has its uniqueness, its own mystery."*³ While in Crete the reflective steel plates placed onto her duct-like structures were intact rectangles, in the New York installation groups of steel rods were grown from the center of the plate bending toward the floor. The spectator walking through the gauntlet of rods was encouraged to touch them, thus initiating an unexpected sonic and visual experience.

Matasová would have to detach herself from any existing architectural support with her next installation, *Rain Wall II*, at the International Sculpture Exhibition at Socrates Sculpture Park in New York in 1997. Without the historic walls of Klenová Castle, and without any walls whatsoever, Matasová decided to erect her own structure for her installation, producing two identical steel plates to create a steeple more than 20 feet high. Rods were threaded through two identical openings in the upper section of the structure and reached towards the ground, enabling visitors to activate them once again and create a shimmering soundscape.

In 1998, Matasová returned to Klenová Castle to install one of her most monumental works, *Rain Wall III*. Her installation was part of a groundbreaking exhibition organized by the Center for Contemporary Arts Prague, *Work of Art in the Public Space*. In her contribution, the outside wall of the historic granary, with its exquisite weathered masonry, is punctuated by a grid of clusters of thin steel cables cascading from small openings originally serving for airing the grain supplies. Unlike other installations made with this material, this one saw the rods placed outside of the reach of the viewer, reacting instead to the slightest wind currents to create an almost constant soundscape. The ever-changing quality of light offered a similarly captivating visual experience.

Soon after, in 2002, Matasová was invited to hold a visiting professor position at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado. There she would become captivated by the expansive space of the American West that had influenced artists since the mid-19th century when Albert Bierstadt noted the monumental scale of that part of the country in his paintings. Artists were drawn to the seemingly never ending distances and dramatic geological formations ever since, commemorating these sights in ever-changing forms and media, culminating in the Land or Earth Art movement of the late 20th century. Equally seduced by the monumental imagery of the American West, Matasová created a series of

large-scale manipulated photographs called *Fictitious Landscapes*. The existing locales were just a starting point to these works – the geographies of these places were reorganized, elements often edited out, and new features were brought in. Often the digitally manipulated photographs were enriched by man-made elements inserted into the composition – here again, Matasová reaches back to her practice of using mirrors in these imagined installations. The developing digital technology and her skillful computer manipulations of the original photographic negative resulted in images of an almost extraterrestrial nature.

Returning to the powerful seduction of reflection as well as the now almost endless possibilities of digital technology, Matasová began to engage again in the reflective surface, both large and small. It was here that Matasová started work on the interactive pieces that occupied her in the early 2000s, in which digital sensors placed underneath a geometric mosaic of mirrors would respond to the observer. These mechanized meditations on space would appear again in the 2004 exhibition *Hidden Images* installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Boulder, Colorado. The elastic membrane of the wall-mounted surfaces, bathed in oceanic blue light, would become activated when observers entered the space, beginning the motion of elements underneath the membrane. This work recalls imagined topographic maps, returning to Matasová's work with digitally manipulated topographies.

In the 2008 catalogue for the exhibition at Kampa Gallery, I characterized Matasová's installations that use the computer mechanized reflective surfaces as greatly expanding the accustomed definition of technology based or computer art. I still see them in this way. These works combine advanced digital technology with an essential participation of the viewer to activate the spaces they jointly inhabit.

While in Ireland, participating in the Cill Rialaig Art Project in 2008, Matasová developed a complex piece titled *Talk to Me*, combining performance, photography and video.

Inspired by a poem by Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachman, titled "Bohemia Lies by the Sea" – where the poet is taking a "poetic license" ad extremis – Matasová traveled the coastal areas of Ireland with a backpack fitted with the Czech map. Communicating with the passers-by as well as spending time in the solitude of a local cemetery, she contemplated not only the complexity of human interaction but also the influences of geography on the fate of the nations.

In 2010, Matasová began the series *You've made your bed, now lie in it*, recorded with documentary photography, in which she placed her body under the weight of wooden pallets, tucked precariously underneath boulders alongside the beach in Greece and perched amongst the branches of olive trees. The site specificity of the performance once again reaffirms Matasová's interest in space and in the communication between works and their context, interacting with and becoming herself a feature of the space much like the elements in her installations.

Although I am particularly fascinated by Matasová's large-scale projects, both realized and imagined, I cannot miss the opportunity to praise her contributions as an educator. Her varied experimentation with materials and media must have influenced her ability to understand different approaches and techniques in the work of her students and to encourage them on the way to achieve their goals. Three exhibitions, the first installed at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in 2014, the second at the White Unicorn Gallery in Klatovy in 2016, and the third at the Brno House of Arts the same year, were conceived by Matasová with a group of artists all of whom were her former students. These projects brought together photographers, installation artists, sculptors, those working with mixed media, and computer technology artists. Her capacity to accommodate input by all participants is a testament to Matasová's ability to integrate ideas stemming from diverse artistic philosophies into a coherent unit while respecting all the individual differences. It is, in many ways, a conceptual work in and of itself, growing out of the experience of an open-minded teacher and an equally open-minded artist.

While inserting her work into any space, large or small, by the use of large installations or computer-driven wall pieces to morph the space, Matasová takes the ownership of the given locale and through that of our perception of the place. This new recognition of given reality, if there indeed is such a thing in absolute terms, testifies to the individuality of each viewer – the perception of the works is as manifold as are individual viewers. Ultimately Matasová offers not only an aesthetic experience but also an impulse to reevaluate our ways of seeing and perceiving the world around us. With a true generosity of spirit, she leads us towards the questioning of our conventional value system and enables us to see the world anew in a much richer alteration.

Charlotta Kotik
Curator Emerita, Brooklyn Museum

- 1 Matasová further comments on her approach to architecture: *"I was inspired by this fictional historical perspective as well as by new impulses. What fascinated me the most at the time was Michel Ragon's 1963 book Where Shall We Live Tomorrow on the architecture of the future and related architects such as F. L. Wright and his ideal city designs, Paolo Soleri, Japanese architects Kisho Kurokawa and Kiyonori Kikutake as well as architect William Katavolos. Back then, I would discover new fantastic forms and approaches to the organization of the world as a single human organism."* Personal comment of Adéla Matasová, March 2019.
- 2 Catalogue for the exhibition *Talk to Me*, Kampa Gallery, Prague, 2008, unpaginated.
- 3 Charlotta Kotik, "Variable Places – Czech Art in New York", *Ateliér*, two-weekly journal of contemporary Art, 7, 26, 1994/12/22, 1–1.

Adéla Matasová
INTERFACE

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