

# Common Sense

CHARLES ESCHE

**IN MID-SEPTEMBER** a crisis long brewing in the financial sector suddenly broke into popular consciousness with the headline-grabbing news of imminent and actual bank failures, steep declines in world stock markets, and a whole litany of interrelated woes by now too familiar to recite here. While the consequences of this meltdown remain largely speculative, the financial free fall has been broadly trumpeted as a major media event, and governmental forces around the globe have been scurrying, for want of any alternative vision, to put the free-market genie back in the bottle. Such coordinated action from public agencies that had for years proclaimed their uselessness in the face of market logic was a sign of something new: The tenor of the times had changed, almost overnight.

Suddenly, questions that might have seemed like idle “critical art” catch-phrases before the crisis took on an unanticipated urgency. “How do we want to be governed?” and “Who if not we should at least try to imagine the future of all this?” have accrued new and more profound resonances.<sup>1</sup> Who is the “we” being spoken of here? was always a salient query, only now we must further ask, What might this “we” do in straitened circumstances? For the dramatic response of “our” democratic representatives to the breakdown of the financial system forces some kind of snap judgment as to what kind of changes the crisis might herald. The decline of the globalist, corporate, and antistate variant of capitalism, in the face of both this crisis and insupportable climate change, seems like a relatively safe prediction (though it would be foolhardy to underestimate the blindness of the surviving Milton Friedmanophiles). For now, it is hard to imagine the world returning to the glory years of conspicuous consumption or once again embracing gangster oligarchs with quite the same uncritical fervor. That such excesses served the art world’s economy very well for nearly two decades is not, of course, a matter of debate, and historians will no doubt reckon whether we (the art world) used the opportunities such an unprecedented influx of surplus wealth afforded wisely and critically enough. But that is a matter of art-historical judgment, while 2008 is more interesting to view within a broader historical narrative that places it in the context of other watershed years in the postwar era.

Two moments relatively close at hand could lend insight into the kind of change the present crisis may indeed portend. The years 1968 and 1989 mark the culmination of two previous—and distinct—crises that went on to change



Július Koller, *Univerzálny Futurologický Otáznik (U. F. O.)* (Universal Futurological Question Mark), 1978, black-and-white photograph.

the world. The cities of Prague and Paris are veritable synecdoches for the opposing poles of what 1968 came to represent. Though the causes and outcomes of the popular stirrings in these European capitals were entirely different, in retrospect what was being demanded in both places, on both sides of the wall, was similar: the restoration of a human dimension in political and economic systems that were perceived to be self-preserving, manipulative, exploitative, and uncaring. In both cases, too, the resulting failure of the movements for reform produced symptoms that came to define cultural possibility for years to come. While the former Czechoslovakian capital witnessed the final dousing of hope for “socialism with a human face,” in Paris the failure of collective action produced a new leftist politics of sentiment, more committed to cultural change than to wresting control of the means of production. Before Soviet tanks crushed the Prague Spring, many people, loyal Communists, still believed that socialism was viable—that it needed a thorough and substantial reform, of course, but that it was certainly a more humane system than Anglo-American capitalism with its deep class, race, and gender divisions. After 1968, it became clear in Prague and elsewhere in socialist Europe that popular pre-1938 egalitarian desires would never be fulfilled under the existing order. It also became clear, on both sides of the wall, that any kind of resistance would need to change tactics—get personal, go underground—or else one might as well give up and back the winners.

By 1989, nothing much was left of the politics of '68. The year in which the Berlin Wall fell and “real socialist” Europe ceased to exist could have been foretold in the Prague Spring twenty-one years earlier. Except, strangely, right up to the moment of Communism’s collapse, no one had a clue it was actually going to happen. In retrospect, we can see 1989 as having engendered a total change in the “common sense” of a new, globally connected society. In place of socialism, with its rigid ideological division and political impossibility, there was sudden and unexpected possibility: National boundaries could change, old heroes could rise again, and a lucky few could make untold millions out of a simple handshake with a befuddled or corrupt government official. Yet at the time, in Paris as elsewhere in the West, 1989 marked, for most citizens, little more than a string of newspaper headlines and a sense of new territories to explore. Busy with a financial crash that precipitated the global corporate age now in crisis, the West only slowly awakened to the import of a unipolar world and the US government’s declaration of a New World Order. Economically and politically, the old states of Western Europe carried blithely on their integrationist path, unprepared for the rapid unraveling of social democracy as the pressure of state intervention on capitalist practices, already greatly reduced, was now totally removed. Among artists, an odd kind of reaction set in, involving experimentation and risk but confined within both more defined national(ist) values and a

happy acceptance of the existing art and media system and its growing financial rewards. More radically, 1989 presented an overwhelming challenge to key Western European cultural beliefs—that the economy should stand in service of society; that Europe is at the center of things—a challenge that now can be seen to have turned things upside down just as thoroughly as the belief system in the former socialist world had been upended.

Today, we may ask whether we will we look back on 2008, as we do on 1989, as a year in which certain tides turned and the “common sense” of an era was irrevocably shaken. Will the present crisis fatally disturb a shared belief in the structures that govern the social and political decisions that we (most of the world) are asked to live by, although as differently privileged subjects of the global economy? If there is such a failure of belief in the free market as an unalterable force of nature—ironically, a consequence of the curtain’s having been drawn back on men behind the scenes busily making all kinds of alterations to that very market in order to save it—then the vainglorious curatorial questions with which we began this discussion might not seem so solipsistic after all. If the years ahead consist of dour, pragmatic power brokering over what little remains of yesterday’s excess, then the “we” who were invoked in those art projects might well register our discontent through collective actions against those who will inevitably still be enjoying the fruits, if shrunken, of corporate (antimarket) capitalism. If, however, 2008 proves that things can be different, then might not the idea of doing things differently be given a new lease on life, in society as a whole, however disruptive real change might be? Might our new state of uncertainty open up questions of accountability and public good, especially in the state-sponsored cultural field, that are valuable for contemporary art’s fraught relation to life, politics, and power? Of course, the coming change won’t necessarily benefit the processes of emancipation. Indeed, populist nationalist politics probably has more chance to succeed now than at any time since the 1930s, when analogous economic decline and fear were the harbingers of a terrible new cultural politics. As art has long been a litmus test of the maintenance of minority forms of social freedoms, its actions and institutions might be called on to perform this function once again in the event of more sinister political developments. Moreover, the usefulness and legitimacy of the art world are tested in times of crisis, and its (public) institutional forms can be expected to have different expectations thrust upon them as private funding sources dry up, the state becomes more active, and publics make new demands. In these circumstances, the very nature of the public sphere is likely to be tested using different, as yet unclear criteria.

Two thousand eight, everyone seems to agree, has proved an epochal year. But is its significance on the order of 1968, when political impossibilities shifted the core motors of social change to the cultural and emotional field and to artistic experimentation, or is its significance more on the order of 1989, when real political change ushered in an era of social (and arguably artistic) reaction and stagnation? Probably it is neither, consisting as it does of its own unique economic element, in which the invisible hand of the market that has sustained our society since 1989 is exposed as an ugly, manipulated fiction. Yet 1968, and Prague in particular, feels closer than any other historical moment, at least as I write this. Despite the understandably elevated hopes raised by Barack Obama’s election to the American presidency, his room for maneuvering is going to be primarily on the cultural and emotional level; the prospects for instituting progressive economic policies at a time of scarcity and decline seem poor. While

the failure of globalist capitalism has proved—one hopes, once and for all—that greed isn’t good even for the greedy, many, especially in Africa and parts of Asia, will suffer fates still worse than those that befell them under the hypergrowth model of globalization. Yet there is no obvious moment of possibility to be felt around the corner, no concept of renewal that might transform the “common sense” that Western subjects of globalization still share. In this political sense, Prague, and not Paris, seems more the model. The dead hand of the old regime is trying desperately to “normalize” the situation—as though no one remembers what “normalization” meant in the Czechoslovak autumn of 1968.

If what I am arguing here has any truth to it, then a special burden now falls on the voices of cultural production, given the emphasis post-’68 on new forms and new distributions of the sensible, to invoke the theorizations of Jacques Rancière. Those voices will be called upon to dig deep and indeed reimagine the future of all this, perhaps for a grander public cause than was thought possible during the past nineteen years. The times might now call for artists and curators to join in refusenik-like moves of dissembling and disappearing, or to shift their practices—as

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Július Koller or Milan Knížák once did, in Prague after 1968<sup>2</sup>—to the immediate, intimate action and small-scale production. Group practice might reassert its role, and separation from the mainstream might become de rigueur once more, while serious models of art-community building and educational experimentation take on new relevance. Institutionally, 2008 also offers a challenge not only to fund-raisers but to the museum visionaries who gave us the vastly expanded real estate and signature architecture of the period just gone. How might they muster the same creative drive with fewer available resources, all the while working in a society that is itself under severe economic strain? The cultural projections of desire and satisfaction, as well as of critique, are going to change, and to capture them in institutions will take openness and sensitivity to what is around locally: The days of importing global models of cultural consumption are likely over.

Just as in 1968, today only a few naive believers still think that the ideology of state socialism can help us understand what is happening, let alone solve the very real problems that lie before us. There can be no return to the past. Instead, we need new ideas and ideologies that address the cultural and emotional needs of a society for which economics is a demonstrably dismal science. Such conceptions must emerge from experiments and attempts responding to the here and now, without any clear sense of what kind of world we are finally seeking to build. In that sense, the institutional art system, which still has one foot in the revived public sphere, is probably a good place to start. Even in the heyday of globalism’s vanities, art occupied a tolerated space that encouraged speculation about other possible futures. In probably uncertain yet hopefully imaginative and courageous acts, artists and the institutions that support them will be crucial to discovering whether art can still foster viable forms of emancipatory and progressive culture in the difficult years ahead—or whether the scene of any possible democratic renewal will look to put its cultural roots down elsewhere. □

CHARLES ESCHÉ IS DIRECTOR OF THE VAN ABBEMUSEUM, EINDHOVEN, THE NETHERLANDS, AND COEDITOR OF *AFTERALL*. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

#### NOTES

1. “How do we want to be governed?” was organized by Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack for the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona in 2004. “Who if not we should at least try to imagine the future of all this?” was organized by Maria Hlavajova that same year for seven venues across Europe.

2. There were, of course, many other artists across Central Europe at this time—in Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere—working in a similar vein. I have cited Koller and Knížák simply to recognize two particularly vital figures in Czechoslovakia at that time.