

## SEEKING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ABLE TO *DISCERN* IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL WORLDS

*A contemplation on the cornerstones of the current work of Jiří Šigut*

Towards the end of his book *The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism: The Critique of Reason since Adorno*, the philosopher Albrecht Wellmer embarks on a contemplation of the notion of “seeking”. He relates this to a new re-definition of post-modernism, imagining it as an “attempt to record the traces of change”, an effort to prevent post-modernism from becoming a mere fad, a form of regression or a new type of ideology. In other words, “seeking” is a defence **against the sense of artificiality** inherent to and projected by post-modernism. The Seeker is someone whose relentless creative endeavour and activity breaks through into areas where we can catch a glimpse of the unknown, pointing towards paths in a direction which had previously seemed closed, exhausted, or done to death by previous generations. From the perspective of the mid-1980s, Wellmer wrote about the necessity for “reason to transcend itself” in art, and about the dialectic (i.e. coherent in its contradictions) relationship between vital art (“energetics” = e.g. activism, performance art) and semiotic art (“semiotics” = art articulated in a material medium through signs and their structures). Vital art without the semiotic element is one-dimensional, as with the mere realization of a material artifact devoid of “energetic” potential. Both are therefore important, and both combine to form a unity. In order for contemporary art to be authentic and yet in touch with the present day, it must move beyond this restrictive one-dimensionality. This is not necessarily a question of the output — i.e., the resultant artifact, but should rather be a **question of a shift in thinking**, for as it is becoming obvious with the rise of new technologies and their overspill, which in turn reduces our thought processes and activity, human thought is a far more complex process than it has hitherto seemed — since forms of thinking may include ways of attaining experience that have been artificially excluded from thought and integrated instead within other areas of human activity.

Jiří Šigut may well serve as an example of this kind of “seeker”. It is not by accident that as early as 1993, the critic Jiří Valoch wrote in relation to Šigut’s work about the “sphere of art and time”, and the “sphere of art and nature”, which open new horizons for journeys of discovery that go beyond the well-trodden paths of art in the narrowest sense — as reduced to the field of aesthetic phenomena.

The work of Jiří Šigut goes well beyond mere aesthetic experience, and in some ways comes closer to the **theory of knowledge — epistemology**. The artist’s initiation to this field occurs through photography — albeit not via photography conceived as a genre-based imitation of an impression based on illusion, but rather through photography as a de-personalized **processual performance**, one which enables the artist to capture the multiform reality in the very act of experiencing it. It is something akin to a temporary “live transmission” of experience. It is in this direction that Šigut expands his well-known experiments with touch (fleeting) and contact (of longer duration) with landscape. What he discovers here are above all the relationships between experience (a walk in nature, or in the city) and its record (in photographic form), two mainstays of the same experience which together form an arc vaulting towards the consciousness of a sense of belonging that transcends the purely personal — an interconnectedness of place, time and the active subject — that is to say, the seeker (as an archaeologist of time) and the terrain (as a sort of temporal database).

It is curious that in the course of seeking, the “seeker” adopts a ritualized form of behaviour. It is as though if one wants to understand and communicate with landscape, to get under the surface of phenomena, one subconsciously starts to engage with ritual — circling around the place of fascination, investigating it cyclically, circumscribing it - yet by doing so, the place simultaneously exerts a kind of possession. There occurs a temporary contact — or communion — between the figure and the frame, the paradigm of the microcosm with the macrocosm. In this sense, Šigut’s own description is most telling — referring to “total”, or “integral photography”: by disengaging subjective perception from the thrall of optical illusion, he arrives at a **form outside the confines of the visible**. Šigut calls it the “inner quality” of photography. But what does this “quality” refer to as a defined value? “To naked reality,” says the artist — and one should add here that this also forms part of the episteme — namely, the broad cognitive process.

What was obvious already in his older series which strove to possess the landscape, or to achieve genetic contiguity (the cycles *Moji nejbližší / My Dearest Ones*, 2002; *Spermagramy / Spermograms*, 2004, etc.), is obscured in his more current work, employing digital tools and a newly-adopted techno-aesthetic. This aesthetic is mechanically based on the program Aparát ("acting technology"), the linguistic product of pre-programmed communication. It is based on a consensus of understanding; instead of looking for new ways of communication, it elaborates and totalizes means of communication that have already been tested by time and which are socially inoffensive. These do not contain contradictions, as there is simply no room for them, and thus they do not contain the possibility of revolt — being one-dimensional by nature. Digital tools thus reduce human experience to a model situation, a stereotype of behaviour, of seeing and perception. After all, that is their primary function. In his most recent work, Šigut follows the **logic of the reductive language of the digitalized image**, creating a paradoxical situation — **he reduces the reductive abilities of the digital medium**, taking it to the extreme (1 pixel) in order to find a solid base for his exploration within the chosen medium.

**Reduction within the technological product** — the tool of digitalization — is pre-set for standard operations, for operational user functions — maximizing, minimizing, increasing definition, formatting, colour manipulating the original. Šigut on the other hand enters the medium **free from pretensions**. What he asks of the medium is something different. What is it? He is interested in the treatment of memory. Archiving, databasing, the compression of images within memory — not the perfect treatment of illusion, but rather the possibility to store images in memory in the form a kind of compressed database. Šigut systematically assimilates to the digital equipment. He thinks in terms of the breakdown of image into numbers, ones and zeroes, in order to approach anew a **"form existing beyond the confines of the visible"**. His approach is closer to working from the score of a program, rather than the aesthetics of the resultant image.

The present day unravels in a sort of playground between the original human gene equipped for multiform diversity, and technology which levels everything, equalizing, reproducing and distributing it. This predicament gives rise to the question of how to resist the reduction of thinking, perception and memory, but also of how to turn the tables on the predicament itself and to derive benefit from it in terms of new possibilities for the next step in liberating human potential. Instead of functioning within the framework of the "apparatus culture" (as critiqued by Walter Benjamin, Theodor Walter Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Albrecht Wellmer, and Vilém Flusser), one must discover and articulate that which the apparatus alienates from man, the ways in which it dehumanizes, and to turn this process back on itself for the benefit of humankind and its potential — and not just for the individual, but for the benefit of all. To renew the values that are perishing within the contactless culture of the apparatus — the values of direct contact and understanding outside of the stereotypes of conventional language. Šigut thus follows up his fleeting touches and lingering contact with landscape — his contact with stored time — as with a database — within the actual form of the landscape.

The artist's famous claim of an "unimaginable silence" is a statement which by default refers to experienced reality — and yet there is a seminal difference. The **"unimaginable silence" of nature is by definition different from the "unimaginable silence" offered by an image or the projection of any kind of technology, including digital technology. Yet the language of communication labels designates this as the same thing, identical**. And it is here that I wish to locate the above-cited moment of the essential differentiation (relation) which must be relentlessly renewed and reinforced, so that the Heideggerian sense of "space without differentiation" does not become the directive program of a type of applied culture based on the apparatus, where the deletion of the "old program" at the same time deletes the ability to overcome it by ritual in order to return to the consciousness of the ancestors. If Jiří Šigut considers the "image without differentiation", he **paradoxically** considers it precisely because through the act of its creation, this very differentiation is revealed and visualized. In other words, despite all the formal mimicry this has nothing in common with any other type of either concrete or conceptual art. What we encounter here, in his body of work, is an original artist acutely rising to issues that defy language — because the very **language we use to articulate it and which in turn uses us**, can never comprehend all of the nuances of the urgent situation that we would like to share. That is to say, the mixed emotions evoked by the **echo of the expansive artificial world**.