

EXPERIMENTS WITHOUT COMPROMISE

In terms of artistic medium, the work of Jiří Šigut belongs in the field of photography, but in its emphasis on conceptuality, corporeality, performance, timing, etc., it should be categorized as fine art. This, at least, is how we understood his work in the 1980s and 1990s, when it entered the world of contemporary art. Today's situation is somewhat more complicated. As the former distinction between fine art and photography has naturally come to be questioned, Šigut's work has gone through several stages of development involving several different artistic media whose use does not (at least not without fundamental reservations) unambiguously meet the definitions of one category or the other; in fact, such divisions have lost all meaning.

With just a few exceptions, in the mid-1980s Czechoslovak photography created within the context of conceptual art was not seen as a medium whose products had anything to say about the relevant issues of the era. It was considered a self-contained medium incapable of reflecting the full depth and breadth of present reality — as if it was frozen in time and had not evolved to share the interests of the other visual arts. These are apparently some of the reasons why Šigut's work was from the beginning understood as belonging within the context of fine art, with a focus on the concomitant issues.

IT ALL STARTS IN OPAVA

The beginnings of Jiří Šigut's independent work reach back to the middle of the 1980s, back to a time when everything was simple and almost everything free and independent was forbidden.

I first learned about Šigut's strange photographs from Jiří Siostrzonek, a mutual friend from Opava who created structural prints and subtle, introverted poetry. His earnest interest, his immersion in the world of authentic meanings, and his ability to mediate artistic paradigms were highly important for Šigut's early work. At the time, Siostrzonek described to me how this acquaintance of his would walk around Opava with a camera hung at chest height, capturing the city with an open shutter. Šigut was briefly living in Opava at the time, so it was impossible not to run into him, especially since he lived just a few steps from my later home. This young artist did not try to publicize his activities, and only his close friends knew about them. For the most part, this community of kindred spirits saw his art as wonderfully nonsensical, interestingly eccentric, and poetically Dadaist. On some level, any divergence from the grey timelessness of Normalization was understood as a clear form of defense, as an honest expression of disagreement with the state of society, as a defense against it and as an expression of authentic personal feelings. Just the fact that something deviated from the norm was worth something in and of itself; the question of why, and what such artistic attitudes, actions, and gestures actually meant, was less important. For this reason, Šigut's early work was received positively by those around him, but also without any more distinctive critical reflection, which was quite understandable in the given situation.

At least in his own words, Jiří Šigut felt a kinship with me, since I had introduced him to several key figures on the Czech conceptual art scene. We traveled together to visit exhibitions, openings, and other artists, and we discussed our latest difficulties and our own work. In Opava, we went together on numerous occasions to visit the passionate draughtsman Dušan Chládek, who even today continues to create his constantly changing series of black ink drawings depicting fields and landscapes reduced to loosely repeating geometric symbols and rhythmic structures.

THE ARTISTIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

When he arrived on the conceptual art scene in the mid-1980s, Jiří Šigut followed in the footsteps of the founding generation of Czech conceptual art, in particular the circle of artists around Jiří Valoch. First and foremost, these included Dalibor Chatrný, who analytically explored numerous artistic questions that were hanging in the air at the time. With his fresh way of looking at things and his ability to be thorough and simple while still creating visually impressive works, Chatrný was an example, in both art and life, for many of his younger colleagues. Šigut met and came to know Chatrný a few years later as part of the Softheaded Group. Around this time, Jan Steklík — who created art actions in

nature, lyrical pieces of conceptual art, and works possessing a poetic — was working on his extensive cycle of *Patterns for the Landscape*, delicate drawings combining a rational and objective understanding of the landscape with a very specific lyrical accent. With some exaggeration, we can say that Steklík created an original Czech parallel to the art of Fluxus. In the mid-1970s, Brno's Group M (Dušan Klimeš, Jiří Hynek Kocman, Jitka Kocmanová, Jiří Valoch) created several non-utilitarian interventions in nature with the distinctive use of text or just a word or phrase related to the phenomenon of nature. Another important figure on Brno's conceptual art scene was Marian Palla, whose work can be seen as an original Central European echo of Zen and Taoist aesthetics. In his work, Palla ritualized simple events related to the human figure and human existence and actions. For instance, he would move stones across a surface every day and mark their position, or he would roll up a ball of string or engage in the simple visual documentation of ordinary situations: the barking of a dog, rain, falling leaves, or the act of breathing, confirmed by drawing lines representing inhalations and exhalations. Of this group of artists, Jiří Hynek Kocman was an important figure in Czech conceptual art. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he came up with the idea of re-making books and re-making papers, in which he absolutized the concept of interpretation and recycling and introduced new elements into the realm of conceptual art, in particular a feel for the material, the process of page-turning, and book tectonics. In 1985 in Brno, when I introduced Kocman and Palla to Šigut's first photographs created without conscious intent using an open shutter, the works aroused their critical attention.

Jiří Valoch, a former employee at Brno's House of Arts, is known primarily for having curated numerous exhibits throughout the country. He is mainly interested in artists who take a conceptual, rational, constructivist, or minimalist approach to art. In his writings — mostly catalogue texts or introductory speeches for exhibitions, but later also several artist's monographs — he defines, categorizes, and places into context the work of a relatively broad group of artists who in one way or another touch on the questions raised by these approaches. Over the years, Valoch has also introduced the entire diverse progressive Slovak art scene to the Czech Republic. At the same time, working somewhat out of the public view, Valoch has continued since the 1960s to develop his own artistic practice. Over the decades, his style — which possesses a distinctively visual or almost op-art effect — has developed a unique conceptual poetics with the use of text-based installations that he has only been able to fully explore during the past twenty years. In 1986, when Jiří Šigut's first solo exhibition, already installed at the Opava Regional Culture Center's Na schodech Gallery, was banned for being "artistically deficient," it was Jiří Valoch whom I turned to for an expert assessment of Šigut's work. He responded quickly and willingly, for he was intrigued by Šigut's creations. When we appealed the exhibition's cancellation (at the opening, visitors were to be treated to the sound of several vacuum cleaners running simultaneously) to the Culture Center's director, we used Valoch's assessment containing the official stamp of the House of Arts. Several months later, we even received a written apology! It was a satisfaction of sorts. In the small pamphlet published along with the exhibition, I first formulated several basic characteristics of Šigut's work.

One Brno-based artist to work with constructive and conceptual approaches is Pavel Rudolf, who visualizes the inherent spatial and semantic relationships in found photographs, writing, or musical scores using simple graphic interventions made according to predefined rules to demonstrate their hidden regularities. In the first half of the 1980s, Pavel Holouš — another artist closely associated with the circle around Valoch — was creating delicate topographic drawings in which he explored the spatial relationships between various important places on a map and used elevation marks to interpret plant morphology.

After Brno, another important center of conceptual art is the Silesian industrial town of Třinec, home to Karel Adamus and the recently deceased Jan Wojnar. Conceptual thinking also plays an important part in their work, which can be classified as visual poetry. Both artists developed multiple thematic series in which photography and the photographic process played a role as well. Wojnar in particular explored the possibilities and limitations of this medium. Other artists associated with Třinec are the visual poet Petr Ševčík and the conceptual artist Milan Lasota; unfortunately, both passed away more than twenty years ago. Lasota explored the concept of traces and records, and much of his art involved the creation of his *Dactylic Dictionary*, an original transcription of the alphabet for deaf people using color hand prints. Also closely associated with the Třinec circle was Dáša Lasotová, who created lyrical works of conceptual art emphasizing feminine standpoints and meanings. The Lasotas eventually settled in Vřesina near Ostrava.

Šigut's interaction with these artists was of central importance to his career. He met with them during personal visits in Třinec, Opava, or Vřesina, at the openings of other artists' exhibitions, or later also during joint exhibitions.

Olomouc is home to Vladimír Havlík, who has created numerous actions and projects set in nature, and Ladislav Daněk, whose drawings are a private universe consisting of a rational and meticulous system of criss-crossing lines on graph paper. Other important artists whose work has significantly influenced that of Jiří Šigut are without question Miloš Šejn from Jičín and Milan Maur from Pilsen. At the time, both artists worked on original projects based on a deep reflection of nature and time spent in it.

In 1989, Jiří Šigut joined the Softheaded Group (*Měkkohlaví*), a project organized by Marian Palla as a kind of unofficial counterpart to Prague's Hardheaded Group (*Tvrdohlaví*), which had come to symbolize spectacular art with numerous literary, existential, and social references. The members of the Softheaded Group were forbidden from making art, they burnt their paintings and invented rituals, they nominated themselves to various honorary positions with no real purpose, and they were not allowed to paint elephant trunks. The group presented a different take on art, one focused on exploring subtle movements for which they offered no guarantees. It was at the group's various meetings that Šigut's personal relationships developed, in particular with Miloš Šejn, Milan Maur, Václav Malina, Dalibor Chatrný, Jiří Valoch, Desider Tóth, and Milan Magni.

For Jiří Šigut, these contacts with kindred artists confirmed that he had chosen the right path, and also reflected his need to communicate the intentions behind his work, but they had no direct influence on his artistic direction. Since starting his artistic career, Jiří Šigut has followed his own path regardless of the opinions of those around him.

OSTRAVA!

One might say that Jiří Šigut spent his time in Ostrava at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s isolated from the city's artistic life. He did not interact much with fellow artists such as Jiří Surůvka, Daniel Balabán, Petr Lysáček, Marek Pražák, Pavel Šmíd, and Hana Puchová — artists who by their natural disposition, artistic interests, and academic education stood more or less in opposition to conceptual tendencies and the generation that had initially promoted these tendencies. For these reasons, Šigut did not meet the representatives of Ostrava's art scene until in the middle of the 1990s, and his first solo exhibition in Ostrava — organized by curator Milan Weber at the Sokolská 26 Exhibition Hall — was in 1998 at age 38. Šigut's art only rarely touched on the specific atmosphere of and issues faced by this former mining town, although he himself had spent several years working at the Klement Gottwald Steelworks — first as a manual laborer and later as a technologist and designer. The existential questions so clearly visible in this black city with its sulfuric air, its wastelands, and a turbulent history that enveloped the landscape like thick smoke while ruthlessly gambling away human lives were not his area of interest. Jiří Šigut did not fit the image of the Ostrava artist reflecting on oppressive dramas, uprooted lives, emptiness, abandonment, or dashed hopes, let alone the idea of building a better tomorrow, which nobody here had believed in for the past two decades or more anyway. Hyperbole, blasphemy, the explicit negation or artistic transformation of people's awareness of their depressing fate and destroyed lives, absurd situations, nihilistic moods, or all manner of true-life stories without a happy end — none of this was ever a part of Šigut's artistic thinking. From the beginning, his work possessed a clearly conceptual foundation that, in its intense searching and exploration, can be called progressive or experimental. He formed a strongly personal, almost intimate relationship to nature and natural phenomena, although he paradoxically documented them with an eye towards a maximally objective and detached point of view.

TURNING PHOTOGRAPHY UPSIDE DOWN

Since the beginning, Jiří Šigut's artistic career has been associated with the medium of photography without ever being clearly characterized, defined, or even limited by the possibilities offered by this medium. In contrast, he has spent the past more than three decades seeking the limits of the photographic medium so that he could move beyond them, stretch them, redefine them, and place them within the broader context of the visual arts. His art has only rarely been exhibited within the context of regular photographic work. Only recently, with the arrival

of younger and more open curators, has it been included among photography, although much of his work is completely antithetical to the aims of traditional photography. If we here use the adjective "traditional," let it be said that it is not used to express any feelings of artistic superiority, but merely to differentiate between two ways of approaching this medium. The traditional photographer uses established methods, while Šigut understands photography in a manner unburdened by its history, applying new and previously unused methods. Such passion for seeking out and discovering is a defining characteristic of all experimenters, seekers, and innovators.

The traditional photographer uses his camera to create a satisfactory imprint of a selected portion of visible reality by working with the effect of light on the film's light-sensitive emulsion and subsequently transferring this image onto photographic paper. The adequacy of this imprint is determined above all by the photographer's creative endeavor, for it is he who decides which aspects of space and lighting to emphasize, which to suppress, which to let resonate, which section of reality to record, from what angle, for how long, and so on. First and foremost, therefore, is the photographer's vision for how to capture the situation and what it should look like. This vision is then measured up against the final result. If it does not correspond to the initial intention or any subsequent vision, it is usually rejected. Jiří Šigut approaches his work without any visual or aesthetic intention. He does not form any idea in advance that might define or determine his work. His approach is characterized by absolute unintentionality, completely open to all possibilities offered by visual reality and the dimension of time. One might say that every outcome is the right one — i.e., everything that happens and leaves a trace corresponds, on the general level, to what Šigut wants to record. For the traditional photographer, the aspect of time is a fundamental technical issue that influences the resulting form of the photographed reality. He or she is usually interested in a moment, a brief chronological segment of reality. Šigut, by comparison, is interested in situations that are happening, that are ongoing and changing. There is a clear emphasis on capturing the greater complexity of reality, while also testing whether the medium of photography is sufficient for such an artistic approach.

Each of Šigut's photographic records can generally be understood as a specific transcription onto photographic paper of all concrete "visible" optical phenomena occurring within the camera's range at a particular place. The parameters of this process are location and time. Time is the period over which the record will be made. It may vary, but it is always longer than is typical for a conventional photographer. The exposure time may be the length of time it takes the camera to fall to the ground from a fifth-floor balcony, or it may be the length of a stroll, a piece of music, or a movie. Elsewhere, Šigut determines the length of the exposure in terms of "several days," "overnight," or also the time "between" two specific moments. The location is the place where the record is made. This place may change as Šigut moves around on foot, by bus, or by train, or it can be static as when recording a film screening, listening to music, or many other examples.

With his camera hanging around his chest, Šigut recorded the ongoing reality of his everyday activities. In this way, he recorded several walks near his home in Opava (*Walk*, 19 June 1985; *New Year's Day Walk*, 1 January 1986), taking the train to work (*Transport Opava – Poruba /Train No. 3441/,* 17 August 1985), or riding the elevator in his mother's building (*Transport from 0 to 5 /Vertical/,* 18 August 1985; *Transport from -1 to 5 /Vertical/,* 4 March 1989). He recorded the period of time defined by the passing of a certain number of vehicles (*3 Automobiles Passing*, 7 September 1987; *Between the Passing of 2 Buses*, 24 February 1991) or the taking of antibiotics (*The Time Between Two Doses of V-Penicillin When I Was Sick in October* 1987, 1 October 1987), or he recorded the specific time and form of rain or a drop in temperature (*12 Minutes of Rain*, 25 June 1986; *9 °C*, 18 Minutes of Rain, 15 December 1989; *2 °C*, 14 Minutes of Rain, 22 December 1990). His portrait of the Softheaded Group (*The Softheaded Group*, 22 April 1989) was created by taking a series of pictures of the present members of the group (Dalibor Chatrný, Martin Klimeš, Otis Laubert, Václav Malina, Milan Maur, Marian Palla, Ivona Raimanová, Jiří Valoch) on the same negative. The result was a multiple portrait in which the subjects' outlines remain unclear and their faces unidentifiable. But the important thing is that all the photographed subjects are a part of this group portrait, that each of them is represented in his or her own inimitable way. Elsewhere, Šigut left the camera in one place to record a simultaneous record of two semantically divergent situations — for instance, when he recorded various screenings of the films of Jan Švankmajer (*The Pendulum*, *the Pit*, and *Hope*; *The Fall of the House of Usher*; *The Castle of Otranto* — all around 1986) on a single frame of film. By pure chance, in the resulting photographs we can sometimes make out the film's blurry title and creased movie screen with various shadows and smudges. The semi-secret screening was held under improvised conditions,

and instead of a standard movie screen the films were projected onto several sheets sewn together. It was a rare en-counter of Švankmajer's surrealist aesthetics with the unintentionality of Šigut's experimental approach. Šigut later recorded another screening of the same director's films, though this time at an official screening at Opava's Elektra Cinema in the early 1990s (*6 Films by Jan Švankmajer*, around 1989/1990). Similarly, Šigut recorded the act of leafing through a play by Samuel Beckett (*Samuel Beckett — Play, 28 March 1986*) or listening to albums of music by John Cage (*John Cage — Sonata XIII for Prepared Piano; Music for Marcel Duchamp*, both 6 October 1987). In these works, Šigut was not so much interested in the transposition from one medium to another, but first and foremost in creating a (photographic) record of the act of listening to music, watching a film, or reading a book — i.e., situations that have always been significantly personal in nature. Recording the act of listening to the music of John Cage is almost certainly a conscious embrace of the legacy of one of the 20th century's most important figures in the field of experimental art. Šigut feels an affinity for Cage precisely because of Cage's focus on intermediacy, chance, unintentionality and the natural course of events, his discovery of new possibilities, and his searching along the seeming margins of what is essential. Šigut's photographs from listening to the music of Cage or other musicians and composers (including Krzysztof Penderecki, Robert Fripp, or David Thomas) were made by opening the camera shutter for the duration of the chosen song or composition as it played on a record player in Šigut's room. The camera was placed without much deliberate consideration, essentially at a random place in his home. Once again, the precise look of what we see in the photograph is not important. Instead, what is important is that the act of listening to music is recorded on a single picture frame, with the exposure time determined by the length of the musical composition. The music was played in a particular place under particular visual conditions. The circumstances under which the music was played are recorded on the photograph in a way made possible by the medium. As with Šigut's previously described works, the photograph records onto one single frame of film a situation lasting for a longer period of time, but here it is also a transcription from one medium onto another. These photographic records — i.e., characterized by long camera exposure times — fall within the period of 1985–1991. They were made and presented exclusively in a square format, except for the three records of Jan Švankmajer's films, which Šigut (taking into account the form of the movie screen) enlarged as vintage prints in an elongated format. Šigut always made just one enlargement of each image. Šigut does work with some of the basic principles of photography, but he uses them differently than is usual, turning them upside down in order to reveal their hidden possibilities and contexts, or he absolutizes them and stretches some of their characteristic features to the very limits in order to explore and conquer unfamiliar terrain and thus expand the potential of artistic-aesthetic experience.

A RADICAL STEP

Much of the work created by Šigut over the subsequent twenty years differs from regular photography in that he consciously eliminates the camera as a tool for recording an image of reality onto a negative and subsequently printing it onto photographic paper. For these works, Šigut lets the light act directly on the emulsion of the photographic paper, which thus becomes an immediate and *authentic* carrier of information. This open attitude towards the final visual image, combined with an emphasis on the gradual process of fixing on paper all the optical changes that take place across various segments of time, mirrors the intent of his earlier works. Here, too, he does not try to rewrite, construct, or interpret reality in any creative manner, but instead delves deeper towards the essence of reality, capturing it in a non-hierarchical *self-layering* of the light left by the events that play out in a given place at a given time. For one long period in Šigut's career, this place is nature. This radical decision to consciously give up the camera and focus on nature, on its never-ceasing movements and the processes that exist within it, introduced new possibilities into his work — a greater immediacy, new correlations of meaning, the color qualities hidden in black-and-white paper, and a visual richness.

The first of these records of reality made using only light-sensitive paper date to around the turn of 1989 and 1990. Ever since then, this approach to working with classic black-and-white photographic paper has been a typical characteristic of Šigut's work.

In terms of technique, Šigut's works made without the use of a camera can be divided into two groups. One group is made using developer, the other is not. The decision whether to use developer, which reduces the emulsion's colorless silver halide into black particles of metal in

order to visualize the process of its exposure to light, is determined by the intensity and length of exposure. A sufficient amount of light or a sufficiently intense light source can create a visible image even without the use of developer. If the source of light is weak or the exposure of short duration, then the latent image emerges only with the use of developer.

Šigut used developer, for instance, to reveal the movement of female fireflies of the species *phausis splendidula* across the photographic paper (*Movements of Fireflies*, 9 July 1991). The insects' luminescence in and of itself is too faint, and would be barely visible without the use of developer. Similarly, developer was needed to make visible the image on the inadvertently exposed photographic papers that a friend donated in the form of partially unpackaged rolls (*The Gift*, summer 1989). As in the earlier examples, for both these works the final outcome was determined by unpredictable circumstances — in the first case by the instinct-driven movement of insects during mating season, and in the second case by random chance resulting from the photographic paper's unwitting exposure to light.

For Šigut's "sleep records" (*Sleep*, 15–16 May 1992; *An Attempt at Sleep*; 21–22 July 1992), the moonlight over the field outside of town should have been enough to leave a visible trace on the light sensitive paper, but the use of developer made the imprint of his naked body and his changing position more clearly visible. In some places, the weight of the sleeping body and the uneven terrain combined to pierce or tear the paper, and so the final work reveals not only traces of light but also emphasizes its performative nature. Other works clearly identifiable as action art are the ones made using fire (*Fire*, 11 July 1991; *Fire*, 4 September 1999), in which the part of the paper on which Šigut lit a fire is singed or blackened and the rest of the paper shows the traces of the stones used in the fire pit. These latter works are the result of an activity whose meaning is fully experienced by the author and presented with a clear emphasis on distinctivizing his own activities, ritualizing various situations and events, or searching for and working with archetypal meanings.

Other examples of works laden with meaning are his two actions (1962/7 and 1964/5) from the night of 23 August 2001, in which he reflects on the tragic events from 1962 and 1964 at Ostrava's Michal Coal Mine, previously known as the Petr Cingr Mine. For these images, he used mining attire from inside the actual mine buildings to create imprints recalling the victims of a cave-in and a methane explosion.

One highly personal work is *My Dearest Ones*, which was created on the night from 11 to 12 March 2002. It consists of six photograms made using the ashes of Šigut's own parents and grandparents, arranged in circles on the paper. The light source was a set of candles that gave the action an intimate atmosphere. The series was first exhibited at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, Poland, and was subsequently shown at the Fiducia Gallery in Ostrava as a unique form of art installation.

In terms of their meaning, Šigut's *Spermagrams* made between 2004 and 2010 through the chemical interaction of the artist's semen and the light-sensitive emulsion of the photographic paper (e.g., *Spermagrams*, 30 June 2004; 25 August 2007; 27 March 2008; 5 August 2010), can be seen as a counterpart to *My Dearest Ones*. These works suggestively ask several fundamental existential questions while presenting a type of conceptual art that differs significantly from art that deals with purely formal or metalinguistic questions or universal issues of communication and relationships. Šigut does not present his personal experience in a neutral manner that allows viewers to create their own meanings in their head. Instead, his works are a comprehensive presentation of existential situations and problems. He tries to pull the recipients of his message into the stories and events, to affect their emotions and to allow them to experience, even if only vicariously, what he experienced during the making of the particular work in question.

A different approach, though one that still works with the direct effect of light on a light-sensitive surface, is the use of articles of clothing such as shirts, boxer shorts, and socks soaked in a light-sensitive emulsion in the darkroom to record the artist's physical surroundings. As Šigut goes through his everyday motions, the light-sensitive material records his activities in a manner similar to the works made with an open camera shutter. This approach, however, allows him to create an unmediated and three-dimensional record in an entirely inconspicuous manner. The clothing records everything happening on all sides, in front and behind, above and below, all for the amount of time that Šigut spends moving around while the outer layer of clothing (sometimes more, sometimes less) is exposed to the light. The "recording equipment" is constantly changing position as he moves, and so an image recorded on one part may later be recorded on another part as well...

(*Trip to Hukvaldy*, 4 April 2009; *The Softheaded Group — Exhibition Opening at the House of Arts*, 30 March 2010). This photo-clothing becomes a richly layered and fluid spatial collage-record of the visual reality that surrounds the “recording equipment.” Šigut calls the resulting three-dimensional photographic record of time a *4D photogram*.

Šigut’s perhaps best known and internationally recognized works are characterized by the non-use of developer as a medium for revealing the latent images on the photosensitive emulsion of the photographic paper.

The first such works were made indoors in Šigut’s own home, exposing the paper for a whole week (*The 11th Week of 1989*), an entire season (*Spring, 1989*), or a full year (*Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring, 1989–1990*). For these works, the papers are loosely arranged on the upper shelf of his bookcase — i.e., a place where they can be exposed to the light for several months without being disturbed. At the end of the pre-determined period of time, the paper is processed in a fixer solution in order to fix the image in place.

After these indoor exposures, Šigut began to place photographic paper out in nature — among clumps of earth on a freshly plowed field (*Field — Rain*, 30 April 1990), among blades of grass (*Grass — The Last Snow*, 21 April 1991), in a forest, or in a creek (*Stone, Water, and Leaves /In a Stream/, 1 October 1990*). The results are photographic records whose distinctive visuality, characterized by a unique color range and concreteness of shapes that quickly transitions into abstraction (such as the painterly *Bulrush*, 1–18 January 2001; or *Reeds*, 3 November – 6 December 2007), is the product of the natural processes to which they were exposed. Šigut works with black-and-white paper, but the silver halide’s chemical reactions when exposed to the elements and the influence of pigments present in nature can produce distinctly colorful outcomes (*Little Waterfall*, 13–15 June 1992; *Surface of Pool*, 22 October – 5 November 2000; *Burdock Field*, 11–18 February 2001; *Bank — Ice*, 29 January – 3 February 2004).

The start and finish of the “recording process” takes place in the dark, in part because of technical requirements and in part to encourage Šigut’s level of concentration and his ability to be aware of his surroundings, himself, and the silence of the night — a time when seemingly nothing happens. In fact, it is these imperceptible movements and changes that he is most interested in. The movement of sand and pebbles, the changing surface of the water, falling leaves, moonlight, the sounds of the forest, of his own footsteps, his own breath... Šigut’s works happen; they are formed in harmony with natural events and the laws of nature. Personal involvement is extremely important to Jiří Šigut — his presence at all his actions and his first-hand physical and spiritual experience of them. Each *action* thus becomes a physical performance with an emphasis on inner experience. These personal experiences remain hidden to the viewer, but our imagination plays a part in interpreting the final outcome. At some exhibitions, Šigut’s works are accompanied by a brief text describing his personal subjective experiences from these *actions*. Personal experience and an awareness of context and of the cultural/social aspects of human experience and behavior play an important role in any interpretation of Šigut’s records.

It is surprising to see the many different and ever newer variations and color transformations created by his records of nature. One might think that this method has its limits, but the records are constantly producing new and highly impressive images whose aesthetics play an important role in the way the work is perceived. The language of his reports from nature is not indifferent; it presents us with the *mysteries* of nature, allowing us an unmediated glimpse of the *magic* of natural processes and movements. In a way, it acts against the original concept, pushing it aside and focusing our attention on what we see. The path from open-ended intent and physical action towards the final image presents the artist with different ways of understanding and of creating compositions that, in seemingly new combinations and contexts, hint at the search for a key to the order present in nature. But an important element remains the fact that the visual result is not created for the purposes of aesthetic effect; this happens as an afterthought, unintentionally, without conscious effort. This fact is further emphasized by Šigut’s relationship to his work. Despite their visual diversity, he views all his records as being equal. He prefers none over any other; each is equally truthful and thus equally important.

Besides natural processes, since 2011 Šigut has also been recording industrial architecture from the 19th and 20th centuries that is or soon will no longer be used for its original purpose but has not yet been renovated. These buildings, so typical for the entire Ostrava region, have been

a part of Šigut's life since early childhood, and so he tries to preserve them in his own way, to document their typical industrial atmosphere before they are commercialized or lost forever.

On seven pieces of photographic paper, Šigut recorded the traces of the machines and equipment in the working environment of a building that, in its heyday, pulsed with life and energy (e.g., *Machine Hall — Michal Coal Mine, 27 June – 4 July 2011*). Elsewhere, the papers are placed among the pillars or electrical wiring of a mining tower at a mine where Šigut's grandfather on his father's side used to work (*Mining Tower — Jeremenko Coal Mine /Pit Luis/, 13– 20 November 2012*).

The concept behind this series, which Šigut has called *Industrial*, is identical to the earlier explorations of nature, except that the visual side of the final outcome is predetermined by the specific characteristics of the particular place. The organic shapes of nature are replaced by a more economical and rational vocabulary of form.

Šigut's exclusive use of photographic paper makes these works similar to the photogram technique developed by the international avant-garde (such as some works by Man Ray). Unlike the pioneers of this technique, however, Šigut's works show an emphasis on accentuating the aspect of time, visual unintentionality, and the choice of a predominantly natural setting. The classic photogram is usually exposed using an artificial light source, but Šigut uses natural daylight, moonlight, the light of a flame or a candle, or a similar source. The classic photogram is necessarily made using developer, but many of Šigut's works make no use of developer to reveal the latent image. Because of these differences, we can see Šigut's non-camera works as a specific and original expansion of the possibilities of the traditional photogram — i.e., the unmediated recording of light on photographic paper.

A RETURN?

In 2010, Jiří Šigut began working with a camera again — a digital camera, with which he hoped to explore this new medium in his own original manner. These new works explore an area that we traditionally and indelibly associate with photography — the portrait.

It all started with a relatively simple idea. Šigut deconstructs digital portraits of various people from the world of art using a simple algorithm based on the subject's age. The resulting image is transformed by changing the resolution into a geometric composition of squares (pixels). The original photograph thus passes through a computer operation that can be expressed as a mathematical equation in which the "main" variable is the age of the photograph's subject. The final portraits are usually printed out and presented as photographs or are repainted using acrylic paints on canvas. Except for several exceptions in the introduction, this book reprints only the photographic works from this series — for instance, portraits of photographic theorists and curators (*Antonín Dufek, 2010; Deborah Klochko, 2007/2010; Josef Moucha, 2011*) and from the *Family* series, for which the calculation is based on the sum of the age of all the people in the photograph.

In his paintings in this series, Šigut focused on artists working with rational approaches and the language of geometry such as Stanislav Kolíbal, Zdeněk Šýkora, Jan Kubíček, and Jiří Matějů. Another series of portraits is of contemporary composers such as John Cage, Philip Glass, Christian Wolff, and Phill Niblock. Repainting a portrait is a difficult process that can take several months — time that, according to Jiří Šigut, he spends with the portrayed subject.

Šigut works on photographic portraits and painted images concurrently. Most of the *conventional* digital portraits that he subsequently subjects to computer transformation are his own works, but he also uses images made by other photographers. If the image isn't particularly important to him, then he concentrates his creative interests primarily on the subsequent process and the overall concept.

Since 2011, Šigut has also taken the digital camera into the setting that is most characteristic of his work — nature where he creates photographs of the landscape. By coincidence the first image taken with the intention of its conscious reduction (*Field, 2011 01 15 14:32:34*) was taken at the same place as one of his first records on photographic paper (*Field — Rain, 30 April 1990*).

Šigut subsequently transforms these landscapes on a computer according to a carefully chosen principle: He reduces them to a single point, thus radically changing their original visual characteristics. Although the reduced image is stripped of unimportant details, these details (including color) contribute to the final form, though compressed into a single pixel, and so the various landscapes do differ from one another. As

with the use of photographic paper placed out in the open landscape, the final image is entirely independent of the artist's intentions, except that here it is determined by a computer. In both cases, his only role is to define the starting conditions. The computer program works with the shapes and colors contained in the original image, and this is the only information used for the process of transformation. Šigut then prints the resulting images and presents them as photographs (*Forest and Meadow /Morgenland/, 2011 04 22 16:43:08; In the Game Preserve — Hukvaldy /For Josef Sudek/, 2013 09 29 14:03:51; Haystack, 2015 07 31 14:30:08; Path in the Field, 2016 05 06 20:16:23*) or transfers them onto canvas using acrylic paints. The titles of these works give not just the place where the image was taken, but also the exact date and time. In this way, Šigut references not just the specific lighting conditions at a particular moment in time, but also shows the advances in technology that allow us to determine the exact time a photograph was taken down to the very second.

Working with both of these methods, Šigut creates geometric *images* — either photographic or painted — that at first glance are entirely abstract with no relationship at all to reality. Their simple geometric compositions recall the constructive and minimalist art of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) our familiarity with this way of thinking about space, we find ourselves drawn to these images, and I don't think I have to be ashamed to admit that they are beautiful. But only when we understand Šigut's original intention do we realize that what we see is more than what we see. The final look of these works has little in common with the intentions of geometric art. Instead of consciously demonstrating spatial relations, Šigut's images are the result of processes that he himself cannot influence.

Transferring computer-generated images onto canvas is a paradoxical game involving the relationships among various media, but in my view it may also represent a certain semantic complication, a kind of running in place. In any case, these works reflect the contemporary tendency to articulate the geometric language of art differently and to enrich it with the new meanings and connotations brought by today's digital era.

AN ILLUMINATING ENDING

If we are going to try to find a unifying theme that cuts across all of Šigut's work, then it may well be the question of how to record visual information, which he records in "real time," allowing it to overlap, layer, move to the background, or become unclear or compressed. He subjects it to analog (and more recently, digital) processes that resemble the way this information is processed by our mind. Even back in the first half of the 1980s, Šigut created numerous typewritten semantic texts written in densely overlapping lines that made it impossible to identify what was written there. In his eyes, however, they still possessed the original meaning contained in the words, even if it could no longer be decoded through linear reading. For almost the entire subsequent period in his career, Šigut's works have involved the condensation of visual information. They explore how to carry the message of the original image and in what manner we can try (together) to read them. But this was no conscious design; it was a natural path that, with the benefit of hindsight, appears uncommonly consistent and concentrated.

Both literally and figuratively, a significant part of Šigut's work touches on nature, and despite his conceptual approach, it is of a clearly romantic character. Šigut has created his own mythology around being in nature, where he seeks out and finds a lost Eden. He is attracted to nature as a source of spiritual experiences, as something divine that is in constant change and motion, something that possesses mysteries transcending the limits of human existence. On the other hand, he can also take a step back from his work and assess what it means to him, so that he can move on to other things.

Jiří Šigut's work is unique, original, and at first glance distinct from that of other artists. His creative activities have not become stuck in the repeated use of just one method, but continue to expand the possibilities of the photographic medium, and continue to explore the applicability of conceptual and rational approaches that unconsciously lead towards the creation of visually captivating images of *light*.