

DAVID  
'L'ENFANT  
TERRIBLE'  
ČERNÝ

TEXT  
Larissa Meikle

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
Juliet Taylor



Czech sculptor David Černý has certainly succeeded in raising Eastern Europe's collective eyebrow with public artworks that have gained him notoriety as a political satirist and one of the region's most controversial artists.

His acts of civil disobedience have gained him status as a hooligan, a folk hero and an artistic shock jock. Whichever, it's hard to argue that Černý's ingenious political art will go unnoticed.

Born in Prague in 1967, Černý studied at the Academy of Applied Arts in Prague between 1988 and 1994. He also studied in Boswil, Switzerland, after receiving a grant from the Swiss Government.

It was in 1991 that Černý gained international notoriety when he painted a Soviet tank pink to serve as a war memorial in central Prague. His artistic action raised a political point; by colouring the tank (a symbol of political power) pink, he twisted the national monument into a powerless, superficial object, devoid of historical purpose and left it looking like a toy. For this he was briefly arrested.

Another of Černý's noticeable contributions to Prague is *Tower Babies*, a series of cast figures of crawling infants attached to Žižkov Television Tower, a symbol of the communist era which stands, jarring against the beauty of Prague's skyline. The artwork depicts babies that are unable to reach adulthood.

In 1994, he moved to New York as an artist in residence at the PS1 gallery then, the next year, he completed the Whitney Independent Study Program (a hugely influential critical theory boot camp that has helped to introduce many leading artists, critics and curators).

In 1996, he won another grant, this time from the Pollack-Krasner Foundation in the United States and, four years later, he received the Jindřich Chaloupecký Award for being the country's most promising visual artist under the age of 35.

Causing another uproar in 2005, Černý created *Shark*, an image of Saddam Hussein in a tank of formaldehyde. It was a direct parody of Damien Hirst's, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The work was presented at the Prague Biennale 2 that same year. In 2006 it was banned in Poland, though the reason for this censorship remains ambiguous. The same happened in Belgium, with politicians fearing it would offend Muslims.

However, arguably his most controversial project to date is *Entropa*, a sculpture commissioned by the Czech Republic to mark the occasion of its presidency of the Council of the European Union. It was originally designed as a collaborative effort of 27 artists and artist groups from all members of the European Union.

As a hoax, Černý and three of his assistants created a satirical piece that depicted pointed stereotypes of the EU member nations.

Fake artist profiles were also created by Černý and his collaborators, complete with invented descriptions of their supposed contributions.

Several countries demanded an apology, which the Czech government and Černý begrudgingly provided. The sculptor later attributed his apology to emotional exhaustion and said that he had no regrets about creating a work that exposed the cultural insecurities of an old continent. In fact, the international debate brought on by *Entropa* may prove the most enduring legacy of the Czech presidency, which was deemed a disaster after the Czech government collapsed midway through.

More recently, in October 2013, Černý installed a 10-metre-tall sculpture of a purple hand with an outsized raised middle finger pointed directly at Prague Castle, home of Czech president, Milos Zeman. The sculpture, floating on a barge in the Vltava River, is a 'scream of alarm' at the current state of Czech politics, Černý told the *New York Times*. After 23 years, he said he was horrified at the prospect of a communist regime retuning to power and of Zeman helping them to do so.

This attraction to controversy was apparent right from the beginning. As a small child, his parents were afraid to raise politics in front of him for fear that he would refuse to be quiet on matters of public interest. It is a concern that he attributes to decades of living in a country under communist rule, where the fear of spying neighbours led people to keep careful silence.

Today, he commands huge, six-figure fees for private commissions and owns his own four-seater plane, perhaps undermining his status as a cultural rebel. But we'll let you be the judge of that.

**LARISSA MEIKLE**











## I MET WITH DAVID ČERNÝ AT THE MEETFACORY, HIS STUDIO-CUM-CREATIVE HUB.

The MeetFactory, housed inside a 5000sqm industrial building, was founded by David in 2001 as a international centre for contemporary art. It's located beside some railway tracks in Smíchov, a district of Prague, the capital city of the Czech Republic.

On arrival, it reminded me of what I imagine it would have been like walking into Andy Warhol's space before he found fame. It felt like it was undiscovered – a rare, working, creative space that was raw and cool. It boasts a bar as the reception, a gallery, theatre, broadcast studio, publishing house, artist residence and even a music hall complete with stage.

So yeah, David seemed a little hungover, shaggy, distracted – arrogant even – at first. But once we started talking tits, he opened up like a book and we could have been chatting all day.

He is one of the coolest people I have ever met, and I say this because he is in every sense what I believe to be the true artist. He creates his work without giving a fuck what anyone thinks and never taking life too seriously. So much talent, so unique, so expressive with a loud, bold political voice – and if it does mean pissing people off and receiving the odd death threat? So be it.

**JULIET TAYLOR**

### Tell me about the MeetFactory:

I wanted to establish this because Prague is not internationally recognized in the arts. You just can't become a famous artist unless you are living in New York, Paris or London – it's as simple as that.

Last year we had 40,000 visitors, mostly from the Czech Republic. But with an international studio program, MeetFactory is becoming more known around the world.

My dream was to be a rock musician but it didn't happen... I guess I am unfulfilled. Instead of that, I decided it would be better to have my own rock club, so I made it here at the MeetFactory.

### If you could have any two people, living or dead to join you in the MeetFactory – who would they be?

Maybe Hitler, for revenge – to torture him for all the stuff he did to the whole world. Also Rockefeller, Zuckerberg...

### You are a major contributor to the arts scene in Prague. Is the city supportive of your sculptures?

The city doesn't care! None of my sculptures around Prague belong to the city, they are owned by me but sit on privately owned land. There are only two sculptures that I have sold – one is the embryo [a human embryo hanging from a drainpipe on the Divadlo Na zábradlí to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the theatre] and the other is the peeing guys [two bronze statues peeing into an 'oddly shaped enclosure', which looks alarmingly like the Czech Republic].

### Do you regret anything about your career so far?

I really regret that I won the competition for the Second World War memorial but, because I said something bad about the Bolsheviks, I lost it. Even though I won it and the jury picked my design, I lost it because of what I said and they gave it to the guy in second place.

### What was it that you said?

I was asked in one interview what I thought about the fact that some of those who died in World War Two were communists, so I repeated a General Castro quote, 'A good communist is a dead communist'. It was published as a headline, and that was it...





### The Pink Tank<sup>1</sup> gained you international notoriety – why did you do this?

I did it for a girl. I desperately wanted her. She lived in Bratislava [the capital of Slovakia] and I wanted her to come and visit me – I needed to do something to get her attention. By painting the tank pink, I got on television. She saw me and came to visit. She had amazing tits. It was a dream – unbelievable.

### Do you regret the hoax and outcome of Entropa?<sup>2</sup>

The best outcome would have been that I could sell it for an enormous amount of money and buy my own private island and a six-seater jet. Then this changed and I thought, ‘I probably won’t buy an island, but the jet would be nice’. But then, after a while, it looked like not even the jet would be possible, so, I ended up with my Cessna 182 [a four-seater light aircraft]...

### You had to give the money back?

I lost two million crowns [around \$110,000 AUD] – but it was my decision to give it back. I had the perfect contract and there was no way that they could sue me even if I had kept the money.

I simply decided it was not worth having those idiots fighting with me. They were threatening to sue me, but when I gave it [the money] back, it disarmed them. A lot of people seriously hate me because of that – it was a massive scandal. Instead of shifting the failure on me, they all had to sort it out between themselves.

### Did the Czech people support you through this?

The counter reaction was that 60-70% [of the public] were for it.

### And there were death threats from other countries over Entropa?

Of course – all the time. From different countries...

### Where would your dream location to exhibit a sculpture be?

I would love to have nice pieces all over the world.

I submit many of my ideas for competitions around the world. Ninety per cent of my work is rejected. You have to be accepted by the official city hall and it’s hard to be accepted. The money that the city hall uses is the money from the tax payers of that country.

1. Černý’s 1991 work, a war memorial in central Prague consisting of a Soviet tank painted pink.
2. The project commissioned by the Czech Republic to mark the occasion of its presidency of the Council of the European Union. It caused outrage in some quarters due to its depiction of cultural stereotypes and Černý’s claim that it was the product of 27 contributing artists – a claim that, he admitted later, was a hoax and only two other artists had helped in its creation.

To give that to someone else in another country? They will rarely accept you. The only other chance is to have a private sponsor or be a super megastar. If you're a good friend of the mayor with a private sponsor you may, eventually, be accepted.

I get second place so many times, but the rule is that they tend to pick from their own country.

### What made you want to become a sculptor?

My parents are artists. When I was growing up, I decided that I didn't want to do anything with art because I was exposed to it so much. My mum did most of her work at home and I was exposed to all the things she did (paintings etc.) I hated it. Then, when I was in third or fourth grade in high school I was doing electronics. I decided then that electronics didn't interest me so much.

### Who is your most respected contemporary artist? Whose work do you love?

David Lynch, Iggy Pop.

### Do you support the art schools in Prague?

I went to the Academy of Applied Art in Prague. The sculpture, painting and the free art department was pretty bad. Art schools here are pretty fucked – I don't support them.

### Did Banksy really rip off your work ?

Yes. I met him when I was living in New York, he came up to me and told me he liked my work. After I left NY, my friend called me and said he didn't know I was doing an exhibition there – I told him I wasn't! It was Banksy and he completely ripped off my work. It was an exact rip-off.

### Which sculpture are you most proud of?

*Metalmorphosis*.<sup>3</sup>

### The majority of your work is very political, tell me about your interest in politics?

I did support Karel Schwarzenberg through the recent election. It's in a bad state here – I may need to emigrate. We still have freedom, so it's not that bad... [but] they are trying to shift everything toward Moscow. The president that was there before that pig said two days ago that we should leave the EU – it's a stupid opinion.

3. A psychological self-portrait in the form of a segmented, 25-foot, steel rotating head, in Charlotte, South Carolina. It is made from 14 tons of stainless steel and has seven layers that rotate in various patterns controlled by David from his computer in the Czech Republic.

I am doing an installation for the EU elections<sup>4</sup>  
\*Černý here adopts the voice of, I assume, the government\* 'We won't help you with that because its too dangerous.' People are scared by what I do.

After the elections there will be fear, and fear is power. If they stay in power, we will no longer be part of the EU... we will lose NATO... we will be fucked.

### **You are a pilot. Is flying your escape from what you do?**

If I'm gliding its an escape. If I'm flying, if I'm behind the propeller, it's not an escape – it is, more or less, transportation.

### **Are you ever afraid of flying?**

Flying is still not perfect. Here, in Europe, 20 or 30 years ago, we had very stable weather. If today was 21 degrees, there was no chance the next day would be 40. Now, with the result of global warming, or global colding, it's quite fucked. As a pilot, I really notice the changes. The forecast now doesn't work. Twenty years ago, it was more accurate than it is now.

The computer predictions these days... it's half as accurate as it was 30 years ago. Back then they had one picture – if they were lucky – in very bad resolution, but they were still more accurate then today.

### **If you were an animal, what would it be?**

Something that flies... or a rabbit, because it's always fucking. Fucking and flying... I've had sex in my plane. I turned it on to auto pilot and had nice sex above Warsaw. It was quite funny. The truth is, I did it to all the Catholics in Warsaw. It's an incredibly Catholic city – there's a pope on every corner. So I decided, as we were flying above Warsaw, that we should have some fun. And we did.

### **Do you believe in polygamy?**

Well, I don't believe in monogamy.

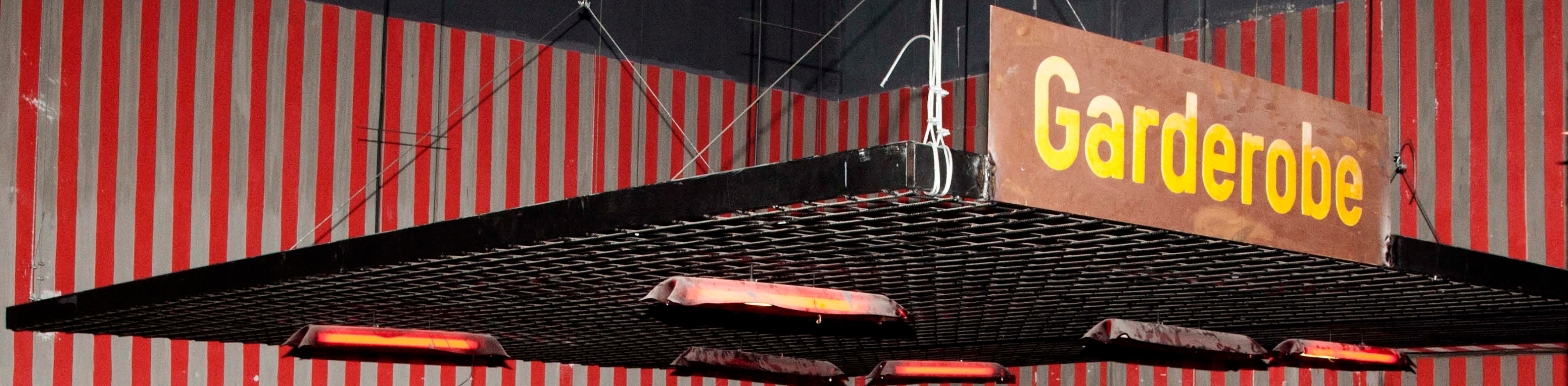
### **Where do you see yourself at 70?**

I see myself as ash. Ha ha... Maybe like Hugh Hefner – swimming in a pool with seven naked, big-titted women.

4. An outsized purple hand with an extended, 10-metre high middle finger pointed in the direction of Prague Castle, the seat of President Milos Zeman.

Theatre

Garderobe

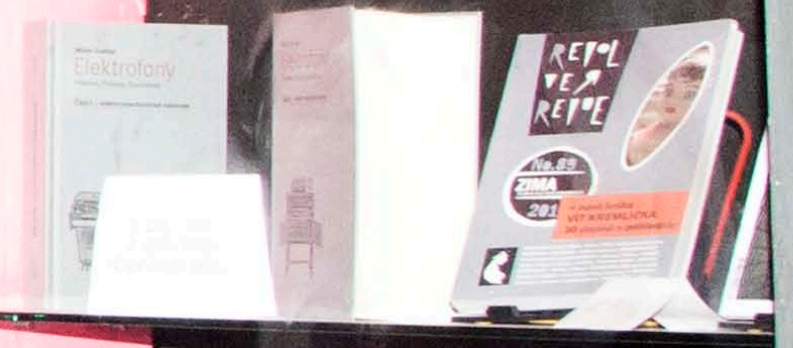


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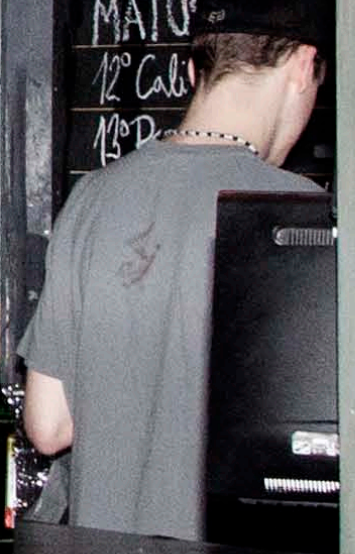
MUSIC →

Theatre ↑  
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Studios ↑  
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Restrooms in Numbers:  
2001  
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12° Cab  
13° P



RUSSIAN CIRCLES  
& CHELSEA WOLFE



12.10. MEETFACTORY

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# Slovo dalo slovo Word for Word

## Robert Šalanda a Dušan Zahoranský

12. 9. — 27. 10. 2013

Hlavním momentem, jež byl inspirací pro představení této dvou  
na společné výstavě, je jejich zájem o slova, znaky a lingvistiku  
každý svým způsobem, zpracovávají vizuálně. Výstava je tak  
posunutých významů a nevyjmenovaných slov, odvozených jak  
a slovních spojení, tak z každodenního prostředí plného nápisů  
která často nesou rozporuplná poselství.

The inspiration to present these two artists in a collaborative  
from their mutual interest in words, signs and linguistic phenom  
Zahoranský and Šalanda transfer to visual creations. The exhibi  
of shifted meanings and unpronounced words derived from the  
phrases and the everyday environment filled with verbal and  
which can often be rather ambiguous.

kurátorka / curator: Karina Pfeiffer Kottová  
architekt výstavy / exhibition architect: Jan Pfeiffer  
produkce / production: Matěj Al-Ali, Tomáš Moravec, Venuše Te



Divadlo MeetFactory uvádí

# POLITICKÝ KABARET ANEB SEBER SI TO HOVNNO

*Handwritten signature: B.A.*



Premiéra 17.5. 2012 ve 20.00  
režie: Braňo Holíčak  
scéna a kostýmy: Nikola Tempir  
hudba: Braňo Holíčak  
dramaturgie: Jan Točevský

Reprízy 29.5., 13.6. a 20.6.  
další reprízy na [www.meetfactory.cz](http://www.meetfactory.cz)  
hraji: Marie Štípková,  
Radovan Klouček, Ivan Lupták  
bici nástroje: Ondřej Dučekal

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