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With Sharp Satire, Enfant Terrible Challenges Czech Identity

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PRAGUE

Milan Jaros for The New York Times

David Cerny, in front of his sculptures of naked, urinating men.

DAVID CERNY sends a rude text message to two bronze sculptures of naked, urinating men, which proceed to swivel their hips and move their protruding penises to trace his four-letter words into a pond shaped like a map of the Czech Republic.

To Mr. Cerny, bad boy of the eastern European art world, the playfully subversive computer-controlled duo — installed a few years ago in a sleepy courtyard here — are an apt commentary on the self-deprecating Czechs, who he contends have gritted their teeth through centuries of invasion and occupation, barely resisting and seldom winning at anything.

“The Czech attitude is not to be proud of being Czech,” said Mr. Cerny, a wiry, floppy-haired 41-year-old who resembles Mick Jagger. “It is a positive thing for me, but it also has a dark side, which is that we never won any war. In America, people are taught to be proud and as visible as possible. Here in this country, we are taught to be silent and invisible.”

No one could accuse Mr. Cerny, who once considered getting silicon breast implants and walking around Prague naked “to see how people would react,” of seeking silence or obscurity.

In this post-Communist age, in which former Marxists have reinvented themselves as captains of industry and dissidents have long since become presidents, Mr. Cerny is pursuing an artistic and political rebellion that is, perhaps by necessity, bolder and louder than his predecessors’.

He has painted a Soviet tank pink, depicted Prague’s heroic 10th-century King Wenceslas riding a dead, upside down horse and lampooned the incendiary, right-wing Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, by displaying a caricature of him inside a giant fiberglass anus.

“David Cerny is one of the region’s leading cultural and political satirists and one of a handful of Eastern European artists who have achieved global stature,” says Jan Vitvar, culture editor of Respekt, the Czech political weekly. “Some Czechs would prefer him to be grayer, more contemplative and behave less like a rock star, but no one can ignore him.”

Indeed, the Czech Republic, which recently gave up the six-month presidency of the European Union, is still reeling from the scandal caused by Mr. Cerny’s satire of European stereotypes in an eight-ton mosaic of the bloc’s 27 nations called “Entropa” last January.

The piece, which was installed at the European Council building in Brussels, was supposed to proudly display unique traits of each country in the union. Instead, it depicted Bulgaria as a Turkish toilet, Catholic Poland as a group of priests raising a gay flag and Germany as a network of motorways eerily resembling a swastika.

Officials in Prague, who had commissioned the work to mark the Czech presidency, had asked Mr. Cerny to oversee a work by artists from each of the union’s member states. Instead, the sculpture turned out to have been entirely constructed by Mr. Cerny and two friends in an elaborate hoax. Mr. Cerny even fabricated fake biographies and Web sites for the nonexistent artists, along with pseudo-intellectual absurdist texts. The fictional Bulgarian artist Elena Jelebova notes that she sought to create a “punk gesture, intentionally primitive and vulgar, fecally pubertal.”

Several countries demanded an apology, which the Czech government — and Mr. Cerny — grudgingly provided, prompting some critics to ask whether the prankster had caved in to the forces of political correctness.

MR. CERNY attributed his apology to emotional exhaustion. And he insisted that he had no regrets about creating a work that many critics have lauded as ingenious political art, exposing the cultural insecurities of an old continent. Indeed, the international debate spurred by “Entropa” may prove the most enduring legacy of the Czech presidency, which was deemed a disaster after the Czech government collapsed midway through.

“When the hoax was exposed, I went into a deep depression,” Mr. Cerny said. “It was hard to have that weight on my head. I regret how it all unfolded, but I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again. It was fun.”

The ruse elevated Mr. Cerny to the status of folk hero in his native country and spread his already growing reputation worldwide, including to the United States, where he has exhibited in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.

But some critics, like Milan Knizak, the director of Prague's National Gallery, counter that "Entropa" is little more than a cynical provocation by an artistic shock jock who has made a career out of thumbing his nose at the establishment.

"There is nothing special about David Cerny's art, other than that he is more visible than other artists and talented at marketing," Mr. Knizak said. "But artists like Cerny who are in headlines today will be forgotten tomorrow. His work is destined for the amusement park and won't stand the test of time."

Mr. Knizak, whom Mr. Cerny once depicted inside the same towering sculpture of a rectum where he placed his other nemesis, Mr. Klaus, may not be the most objective critic.

In a 2003 work titled "Brown-nosers," museumgoers were asked to climb a ladder and peer into a hole in the huge white rear end, where a video showed impersonators wearing rubber masks of Mr. Klaus and Mr. Knizak, feeding each other slop to the tune of "We Are the Champions." Mr. Cerny is so contemptuous of Mr. Knizak, whom he accuses of fawning on the establishment, that he once refused to enter the National Gallery to accept an award. "It was hate at first sight," he said.

Mr. Cerny first drew attention in May 1991, when, at 22, he was arrested after painting a giant Soviet tank pink, transforming a memorial to the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army in 1945 into the sculptural equivalent of a large pink toy.

Recalling his hooliganism, for which he spent a few days in prison, Mr. Cerny said the tank had been a symbol for him and his generation of the Soviet-led occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and a monument to decades of Russian oppression. "I was sick and tired of passing by this tank, two years after Communism had fallen," he said. "I was standing with a friend one day at a tram stop nearby staring at it and we both decided we should defile it."

THE son of a painter and a restorer of 15th-century art, Mr. Cerny traces his impulse to revolt to a childhood under Communism, when freedom of expression was suppressed.

When he was 4 years old, a statue of Lenin was erected in a square near his house. One day, he and his father were driving by, and his father muttered, "They would be better off building streetlights." When he repeated this at kindergarten, he said, the teacher called his parents to warn about their young subversive.

"After that, my parents were afraid to say things in front of me, and I had problems with refusing to be quiet," Mr. Cerny said.

Today, he commands six-figure private commissions and owns his own four-seater plane, somewhat undermining his status as a cultural dissident.

And yet, 20 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, he laments, his parents still warn him to be careful.

“The Czechs can’t get out of their ‘be careful’ mentality,” he said. “It is in our brains and in our bodies because of decades of watching out, of worrying that your neighbors are spying on you.”

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