Therefore, I am: Subjectivity, The Body, and Ideological Subversion from Beyond the Iron Curtain in Milan Knížák’s *Lying Ceremony* and *Difficult Ceremony*

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“Everybody lies on a floor with a kerchief on his eyes. For a long time.” – Milan Knížák, *Ležící Obřad* [Lying Ceremony]

Students at Douglass College of Rutgers University congregated in the college’s Old Gym on the evening of December 17, 1968, waiting for the night’s proceedings to commence. They were eventually blindfolded with wide strips of black or white fabric tied at the back of their heads with pieces of string. Once their vision was securely obstructed, they lowered themselves onto the worn hardwood floor and assumed a recumbent position: some on their backs, others on their stomachs, still others on their sides.

Peter Moore, the renowned performance photographer responsible for 30 years-worth of Fluxus and Judson Dance Theater documentation, captured the night’s events on black-and-white film. In one of Moore’s snapshots, a curly-haired man kneels before a blindfolded woman, herself propped up on her elbows as she lays with her stomach on the floor (Fig. 1). The two figures clasp their hands together near the woman’s chin in apparent communion. Here, Moore’s photograph conjures visual parallels with the reverent head-bowing typical of many religious ceremonies.

This ceremonial tone was exactly the intention. The two-line directive that students followed that evening was the blueprint for Czech action artist Milan Knížák’s *Ležící Obřad*. In Moore’s photo, Knížák is the man mimicking some sort of liturgical gesture with the blindfolded woman (Fig. 2). Knížák instructed participants to continue laying on the floor, blindfolded and in silence “for a long time,” or at least until 9:00 pm, when his lecture on action art in Czechoslovakia and the United States was scheduled to start.

When Knížák arrived in the United States in 1968, he left behind a country in turmoil. In January of that year, the newly installed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Alexander Dubček, began a series of policy liberalizations in a bid to give the Soviet presence in Czechoslovakia a “human face.” These liberalizations—which inaugurated the Prague Spring—included a legal end to censorship within the country, several economic reforms, and perhaps most importantly, the right to travel freely. It was this latter reform that made it possible for Knížák to secure a year-long visa to the United States, where he planned to
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stage several happenings and collaborate with artists in New York. Just

five months following the declaration of these policy reforms, Russian

authorities arrested First Secretary Dubček, and all reforms were immedi-

ately reversed. Warsaw Pact troops soon occupied Prague in an attempt to

quell public demonstrations against these policy reversals. Though August

1968 marked a violent period of Soviet conservativism, known as “normal-

ization,” Knížák was still able to leave the country on his visa. He arrived

in New York near the end of the year. The very reforms that had granted

Knížák freedom of movement were squelched under Soviet pressure mere

months before the artist left for a country whose own mythos allegorized

rugged individualism and manifest destiny.

In response to the expansion of Czech liberties and their subsequent

censure by the Soviet Union, Knížák enacted two happenings during his resi-

dency in the United States. Their core premise was a contemplation of indi-

vidualism and the body through introspective exercises. First in *Ležící Obřad*


in 1968 and later in *Obtížný Obřad* [Difficult Ceremony] in 1969, Knížák and his participants willingly subjected themselves to varying degrees of bodily and sensorial denial (Figs. 3 and 4). As described at the outset of this paper, Knížák instructed the students in *Ležící Obřad* at Douglass College to lay on the wooden floor of the Old Gym, blindfolded and in silence, for an unspecified amount of time. One month later, Knížák facilitated his second action in the United States, *Obtížný Obřad*. Compared to *Ležící Obřad*, this ascetic endurance piece was characterized by dramatically increased sensory deprivation. I posit that both ceremonies used sensorial denial to demonstrate not only sovereignty of the body, but also its reunification with systems of knowing that were otherwise rendered disparate, contradictory, or punishable under Soviet ideology. Building on French Marxist philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser’s theory of interpellation and the public/private dichotomy that underpinned Soviet life, I argue that Knížák subverted Soviet ideologies by reconciling a subject’s body and knowledge through participatory exercises in individual autonomy and subjective experience.

Before his sojourn in the United States, Knížák founded the Czechoslovakian collective Aktual Art in 1964, later simplified to Aktual. Over the course of the mid-60s, Aktual had independently reached similar conclusions about the ethics and theory of art to Fluxus in New York. When Aktual and Fluxus established contact in 1965, Knížák was promptly dubbed Director of “Fluxus East” by George Maciunas and invited to the United States for a residency. It was through Maciunas that Knížák came to host *Ležící Obřad* at Douglass College, where faculty were active collaborators in a network of Fluxus projects between New York and New Brunswick. Maciunas, a Lithuanian-American artist and founding member of Fluxus, was committed to establishing pipelines of East-West artistic exchanges. This objective may have been his motivation in trying to absorb Aktual as an appendage of Fluxus, which was and remains more widely recognized, in part

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due to Western privilege. Though Fluxus and Aktual were kindred in their theoretical approaches to art, there were some marked differences in motive and execution. Excluding the somber tone of Knížák’s *Ležící Obřad* and *Obtížný Obřad*, Fluxus and Aktual actions and were often humorous and playful. Yet unlike Fluxus, Aktual’s impetus for organizing actions was the desire to create targeted, if momentary, disruptions of Soviet public space.¹¹

These two principles often converged in Knížák’s work with Aktual, like *Demonstrace Jednoho* [Demonstration for One] on December 16, 1964 and *Procházka Prahou* [A Walk Through Prague] on December 5, 1965. *Demonstrace Jednoho* featured Knížák dressed in colorful clothing as he read from a book while lying in the street. Nearby, the artist stationed a sign that prompted pedestrians to crow as they ambled by him. In *Procházka Prahou*, participants engaged in a series of activities that playfully reanimated mundane objects in new environments. They selected a personal object “at least eight inches large” to fasten to their clothing as they left home, then later tied it to a piece of string and dragged it behind them on their way to the cinema, only to finally offer it to a fellow movie-goer. Other successive directions included “drink one beer as quickly as possible in a 3rd class restaurant,” and, most importantly, as connoted by its punctuation, “KEEP COMPLETELY SILENT!!!”¹² In these happenings, quotidian objects like Knížák’s book and the participants’ eight-inch items were divorced from their domestic contexts and recontextualized in public spaces. An unsuspecting public was invited to participate in both actions and thus to disrupt the orderly authoritarianism that surrounded them, whether by accepting a participant’s gifted object or by cawing on command. As if to contrast dreaming states with waking states, Aktual hoped that surprise ruptures in the fabric of the state-sanctioned reality would alert those moving through public space to its artifice. Essentially, Aktual playfully interrupted the quotidian life of Soviet Prague, which was otherwise entrenched in stifling bureaucracy, restrictive legislation, and police militarization.

Knížák kept a travel diary during his time in the United States entitled *Cestopisy* [Travelogues]. His account is preoccupied with the overwhelming sensory bombardment of Western consumerist splendor that he discovered upon his arrival. Knížák gives primacy to his haptic, optic, and auditory experiences over a theoretical or cultural analysis.¹³ Knížák’s descriptions of bejeweled clothes, libidinous affairs, commercial shopping centers, and anti-war demonstrations can be read as a sensuous rebuttal to the stringent corporeal regulation that his fellow Soviet comrades were experiencing back home.¹⁴ Within the borders of the Soviet Union, Knížák’s body was subject to its totalitarian governance. Though being abroad did not completely free Knížák of such subjugation, his American residency allowed him to experience a greater degree of physical and public autonomy than in Czechoslovakia, except when simulated by the humor and surprise
of Aktual happenings on the streets of Prague. Of course, the independences afforded to Knížák during his stay in the United States and the affirmation of these independences through bodily autonomy did not extend to all Americans. At the time of his arrival, the Civil Rights Act was still new legislation that, while initiating some legal protections for Americans of color, would not introduce protections based on sex for over a decade (and still does not entirely guarantee protections for the LGBTQIA+ community). Knížák’s travel accounts indicate a phenomenological awareness of the shift in body politics that occurred with his temporary move to New York. The artist admitted reluctantly in *Cestopisy* that this shift had negatively affected his commitment to the cause of Soviet subversion, while the violent process of normalization in Prague continued to claim both the bodies and lives of his peers.

Being in a body under Soviet surveillance, both before and after normalization, was a bisected performance. Public spaces mandated certain behaviors, which were regulated both by punitive bodies like police forces and one’s own neighbors. Private spaces offered some respite from these daily performances. Whichever realm the body moved through, its license for autonomous expression was dictated by the politics of the surrounding space. In public, the body was an agent of the state. In private, the body’s ideological obligations were loosened, but only so long as subversion remained behind closed doors. Such regulation extended beyond what the body could do to what the body could consume. Western media and goods were officially banned under the hammer and sickle, but unofficially enjoyed in private by those who levied enough social or economic privilege to afford them. For those who lacked such influence, domestic goods produced by and entangled with the Soviet ideological ecosystem were the extent of the available market. An anecdotal source in the compendium *Primary Documents* relates the story of an esteemed university professor who fervently slandered the Impressionists in public, yet secretly shared his own cherished collection of their paintings with his innermost circle. These social dualisms produced double-speak and double-think among Soviet citizens, where one conviction was declared in offices, restaurants, and town squares, and another was quietly imparted in sitting rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. Depending on the social sphere through which the body moved, a different and often contradictory knowledge was activated. Public space was inhabited by state-sanctioned bodies that carried state-sanctioned knowledge. Meanwhile, domestic space was imbued with personal importance by virtue of its privacy. It was a place that buffered experimentation, expression, and dissent against the watchful eye of the state.

Even so, Knížák and the rest of Aktual did not consider the domestic haven an adequate solution for the problem of public repression. Aktual’s actions were public by doctrine and designed to encourage participants or
spectators to “‘live otherwise’ against the grain of routine.” As Knížák later stated, “I didn’t want to make social revolution, I wanted to make revolution in everyday life.” Knížák’s slight non sequitur expresses his intention to inject routine-disrupting experiences into the public sphere, which was otherwise rendered compliant by Soviet mandate. Rupture came to characterize Knížák’s practice not only as a method for his “everyday revolutions,” but also as a way to collapse the boundaries between public and private realms. These actions often had a domestic dialect; that is, they retrieved intimacy, contemplation, and the avant-garde from private homes and introduced them to public plazas, among pedestrians and commuters. Aktual actions pinched the layers of disparate, contradictory public and private realities together through subversive humor and spontaneity, enjoining them for a brief, seemingly impromptu moment of symmetry.

In the United States, Knížák adopted a starkly different approach to reconciling body and knowledge. The artist initiated *Ležící Obřad* shortly after arriving in New York. It comprised one part of an evening seminar at Douglass College in New Jersey. The Douglass students who participated in the night’s open events were given a single written directive: “Everyone is laying on the floor with a kerchief over his eyes. For a long time.” In the first half of this prompt, Knížák deprived the participants of their primary faculty, sight, leaving them dependent on touch, smell, taste, and hearing. Denying sight to a sighted person requires a renegotiation of bodily familiarity; without the advantages of sight, activating the body’s remaining senses becomes a labored, conscious operation. In the second half of his prompt, Knížák left the duration of the ceremony indeterminate beyond “a long time.” Blind to the actions of their peers and to the passage of time, participants had to decide for themselves how long to continue participating. Each person understood “a long time” to mean something different. Within the opaque parameters of *Ležící Obřad*, time became an internalized, corporeal flux intimately felt by the subtle cycles of biology and cognition instead of an externalized, prescriptive system of measurement. In tandem, the blindfolds and vague duration prioritized the body and the knowledge generated by being in that body. As an anonymous participant reported afterwards, “bound eyes enabl[ed] us to perceive our inner world and gain an awareness of our inner space and feelings.” Another participant stated that “so many thoughts went through my head as to what I was doing and feeling that I became unaware of everything else about me.” Without vision’s overwhelming sensorial input, participants could experience the body as a “site of knowledge.”

In early 1969, Knížák revisited an earlier Aktual happening, this time entitled *Obtížný Obřad*. *Obtížný Obřad* invited participants, mostly other artist friends in New York, to sit with Knížák in a room for 24 hours without eating, drinking, sleeping, moving, using the toilet, or communicating
with each other in any manner. At the end of the 24 hours, the participants dispersed without speaking. American artist and Fluxus co-founder Dick Higgins, who had visited Knížák in Prague the year prior, hosted the action in his fittingly sparse apartment at 134 Greene Street on the edge of SoHo. Where *Ležící Obřad* was meditative, *Obtížný Obřad* was ascetic. The participants at Douglass College denied themselves their sense of sight, but the participants in Knížák’s second ceremony actively denied themselves all means of comfort or sustenance. Peter Moore documented this action as he did the action at Douglass, and the photographic result is characterized by a sense of alienation (Fig. 4). Three slouching figures sit equidistant from one another on sparse, unadorned benches. The leftmost figure is wrapped in a blanket. None of the three interact with one another, instead electing to fix their gazes upon distant points in space. Though assembled as a group, each participant appears wholly disconnected from his peers, a direct consequence of the artist’s severe dictum.

*Obtížný Obřad* was first mounted as one movement in Aktual’s month-long *Manifestace Pospolitosti* [Keeping Together Manifestation] in 1967 in Prague before its restaging in the United States. The title of *Obtížný Obřad* frames the action as an endurance test that necessitated both mental and physical fortitude. Such extremes of denial bordered on masochism, a type of performance art that increased in frequency during the mid- to late-twentieth century, when Knížák was developing his own practice. Kathy O’Dell writes that the alienation of experiencing pain was a useful tool for performance artists of the ’70s seeking to deconstruct alienation itself. While the ceremonies used the alienation of pain and self-sequestration to critique the Soviet state, both O’Dell and Lara Weibgen write at length on the spectatorial nature of masochistic performance art. Conversely, *Ležící Obřad* and *Obtížný Obřad*, if anything, were anti-spectatorial; for one, there were no spectators apart from Moore, no audience separated from participants by the decorum of performance to witness the happening. In *Ležící Obřad*, participants simply could not become spectators because of the intervention of blindfolds. Knížák’s various masochisms were a declaration of corporeal sovereignty without the performative trappings inherent to the act of declaring; the participants in *Obtížný Obřad* were willing to starve their own bodies before the state could.

Reclaiming the body through radical, if harmful, exercises in agency was crucial to resisting the bisection of reality under Soviet rule. As knowledge of public and private realities was vested in the body when it crossed the border between diametrically opposed social arenas, Czech citizens were enacting French Marxist philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser’s theories of interpellation, and further, the misrecognition inherent to that process. Interpellation is “the constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects.” For
interpellation to occur, ideology “hails,” or calls, its potential subject through some sort of cultural, social, or material means. Althusser’s example of interpellation is the scenario of a police officer calling after a potential subject to stop. If the potential subject obeys and turns to recognize themselves as the subject of the police officer’s order, they submit to both the authority of the officer and the authority of the state, each representing the pervading ideology.\textsuperscript{37} Though this interaction is typically understood as one figure exerting their authority over another, it can also be read as an acquiescence or agreement. By obeying, the subject legitimizes the police officer’s claims to power, effectively granting them the authority that they were, until the point of submission, play-acting.\textsuperscript{38} In accordance with Althusser’s postulate, for interpellation to occur, the subject must misrecognize themselves as having always been under the influence of the ideology that hails them. The subject loses their own power, and by extension grants ideology dominion over their states of being and knowing, in turn legitimizing the authority of the hailer.\textsuperscript{39} This shift in position hinges on a subject’s misrecognition of their own forgotten agency.

As Knížák’s participants struggled to reclaim political autonomy without the aid of external resources (food, water, companionship), they turned inward for resources. Discomfort increased over time, and so too did the participants’ awareness of their bodily limitations and survival mechanisms, be they social or nutritional. The depleting effects of holistic bodily denial on their cognitive functions made apparent the biochemical nature of the mind. Psychology is biology, and a day without food, water, and socialization manifested itself as mental stress for the participants. Persisting under such adverse circumstances required strong inner resolve. As the body monitored the mind, so did the mind monitor the body. This awareness of the body through extreme discomfort and simultaneous reliance on the mind to persevere thus invoked an understanding of the mind as a faculty of the body: not hierarchically superior in its operations but gestalt in its codependency.\textsuperscript{40} For Knížák and the participants of \textit{Obtížný Obřad}, being in a deprived body was to know deprivation in a cyclical, cerebral-corporeal helix.

The intensity of this self-deprivation was such that \textit{Ležící Obřad} and \textit{Obtížný Obřad} yielded highly subjective, individualized experiences for the participants. Extending Deleuze’s “What Can a Body Do?” to “What Can Performance Art Do?,” Adair Rounthwaite of the University of Washington addresses inherent variations of being in a participatory body: “I want to emphasize the function of participation as a material practice in which a collective, pre-individual field of affect provides the ground for the emergence of varied subjective experiences.”\textsuperscript{41} “Affect” here means the changes or fluctuations in the body’s power to act, used by the author to explore the “material dynamic” or interaction between bodies in a performance piece.
Drawing on the theoretical writings of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, Rounthwaite describes bodies in “reciprocal contact” as “reciprocally united,” creating a new collective body composed of individual bodies. While all participatory artworks generate personal knowledge or subjectivity, Knížák’s ceremonies prevented most opportunities for socialization in favor of hyper-personal, solitary meditation or asceticism. Ležíči Obřad and Obtížný Obřad harmonize with Rounthwaite’s discussion of varied participatory experiences moderated by affect, but Knížák’s ceremonies reject the imperative of collective experience forged by the material dynamic. As Claire Bishop writes in her landmark text Artificial Hells, understanding collective action in the context of politically mandated collectivism, as was the case in the Soviet Union, means problematizing traditional Western conceptions of collaborative practice. Western art historical scholarship often conflates group participation with an inherent ideological subversion, or an “oppositional response to spectacle’s atomisation of social relations.” But as Bishop observes, collectivism was the spectacle behind the Iron Curtain. Unlike the subversive promise of cooperative participation in a Western context, collective practice in a state where collectivism is institutionalized could arguably catalyze the opposite outcome. It could alternatively result in recursive interpellation, wherein subjects continuously hail one another to submit to state ideology. Bishop argues that, instead, Knížák and other artists assembled for participatory works in order to achieve a heightenened sense of individualism: that is, participants gathered to experience their unique subjectivities together.

In light of Bishop’s analysis, Rounthwaite’s “pre-individual field of affect” is disrupted by Ležíči Obřad’s blindfolds and Obtížný Obřad’s prohibition of all interaction during the happening. Instead, Knížák exploits the tendency for subjective individualism, encouraging private knowledge vested in the body to uniquely coalesce within each participant. Where Soviet interpellation negotiated the merging of body and knowledge through subject misrecognition, Knížák invited participants to apply interpellation practically and independently. In theory, the unification of body and knowledge could result in state supremacy and subject misrecognition. In practical application, as demonstrated by Ležíči Obřad and Obtížný Obřad, being and knowing in the body generated an awareness of individualistic knowledge, composite in their reconciled realities instead of misrecognized under the hailing ideology.

Knížák had a few more ceremonies and lectures planned for his tour through the United States, two of which were scheduled to take place with students in San Bernardino and Los Angeles, respectively. The Los Angeles ceremony would have been realized with the help of UCLA students, but Knížák’s proposal to allow multiple fires to burn freely in the Californian wilderness was deemed unsafe by the local fire department and never
brought to fruition. As Czech art historian Tomáš Pospiszyl noted, Knížák’s trip to the West Coast did not culminate in significant artistic production, but was instead an opportunity for the artist to rest and relax.⁴⁸

When Knížák finally returned to Czechoslovakia near the end of 1969, the process of normalization had solidified, leaving no trace of the liberal policies that had permitted his travel. Most of Knížák’s peers had returned to practicing in private studios and homes, producing what was once again art on the fringes of Soviet sanction.⁴⁹ Disillusioned by the “impossibility of reform from without,” Knížák continued to facilitate meditative, introspective ceremonies while increasingly withdrawing from Prague.⁵⁰ Eventually the artist and his family moved to the small town of Mariánské Lázné near the country’s western border, where they began an alternative commune. By the mid-70s, Knížák was living in solitude with his wife and children.⁵¹ Perhaps Ležící Obřad and Obtížný Obřad were conditioning for Knížák’s inevitable return to the disciplined and severe realities of the Soviet Union; one can only speculate. Regardless, the reconciliation of conflicting bodily states of being and knowing, facilitated by two actions of increasing deprivation in the United States, marked a shift in Knížák’s career and life. But the shift for which Knížák had hoped, the shift towards a revolution of everyday life, would not arrive for another two decades, when the Soviet Union dissolved.
Notes


5. Weibgen, “Performance as ‘Ethical Memento,’” 54.


15. While Knížák’s own body was subject to the ideological hailing of the Soviet Union, the artist himself identified differently while in the United States: “It’s almost ridiculous the things they have laws for here, as if Americans were not adults but a swarm of thoughtless and unreasonable children. (And at times they are.) In some places, you can’t stand in one spot for more than an hour, in others you can only sing, in yet others only swing, and still in others walk on your cock... for a European, all this seems ridiculous...” Bishop and Dziewańska, 1968-1989, 216. Knížák’s self-identification as a European is interesting in light of his geopolitical positioning, but also for his understanding of these political institutions. Knížák’s qualms with the United States’s religiously tied legislation, such as alcohol restrictions on Sundays, contrast with his experience of the forced secularization of the Soviet Union. There is irony in a Soviet citizen describing Americans as a “swarm” of children in need of a government-parent, but it also speaks to Knížák’s understanding of these two governing bodies as equally hyper-regulatory, though divergent in function.

16. Now, whether or not Knížák was trading one proverbial yoke for another—the Soviet police state for the trappings of capitalist consumerism—is another debate entirely. Zdenka Badovinac, Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 46.


19. Hoptman and Pospiszyl, Primary Documents, 41.

20. Hoptman and Pospiszyl, Primary Documents, 41.


24. My intention with the phrase “domestic dialect” is to connote a system of meanings and symbols particular to domestic life. In the same way that dialects both resemble their referent language and are specific to a certain region, so too is domestic space composed of meanings and symbols that refer to the greater expanse of life but are specific to its private context.


30. Weibgen, “Performance as ‘Ethical Memento,’” 56.


34. O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 53 and Weibgen, “Performance as ‘Ethical Memento,’” 56.


41. Adair Rounthwaite, “Cultural Participation by Group Material between

42. Rounthwaite, “Cultural Participation,” 94.


47. Bishop, “The Social Under Socialism.”


