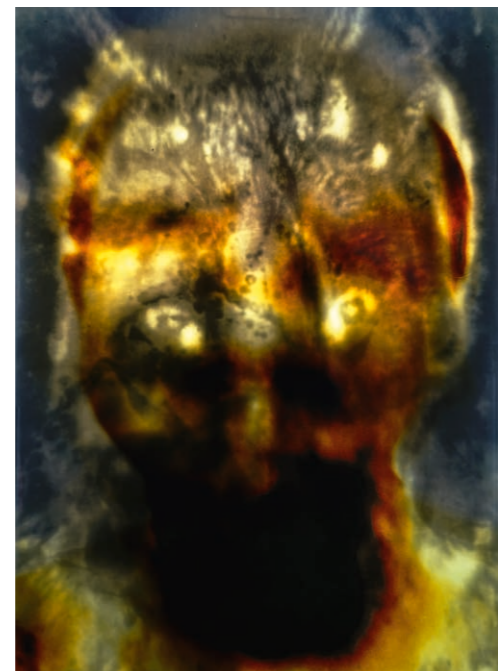


Why, Who, 2023, mixed media, 2x (55x80 cm)



Animals in us, 2023, mixed media, 11x (20x30 cm)



Animals in us, 2010–2024, mixed media, light, 170x300 cm



Big Bang, 2010–2024, oil and acrylic on canvas, 180x270 cm

Daniel Pešta SOMETHING IS WRONG

17 April – 24 November 2024

Opening hours:
Tuesday – Sunday
April – September, 11am – 7pm
October – November, 10am – 6pm



Tana Art Space
Fondamenta de la Tana, 2109A - 30122, Venezia
(close to Arsenale)

A project organized by
MuMo
Museum Montanelli

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Something is wrong

The Czech visual artist Daniel Pešta (b. 1959) absorbs his surroundings, both in his immediate vicinity and globally, with extraordinary sensitivity, transmuting them into works of art with a unique artistic language. Without trying to take a fashionable stance, his work is topically political. Through a wide range of expressive means, he reflects the history and contemporary situation of the entire species Homo Sapiens as well as the individual. His thematic axis is the extent to which man is determined by his biological, social and cultural origins, resulting in a sense of powerlessness and injustice. His current project *Something is wrong* also addresses the question of determination. In a series of paintings, assemblages, spatial objects and installations created in the last few years (marked by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine), he analyses the „evil gene“ encoded in the deep essence of some individuals who fundamentally affect the fate of others.

How is it possible that, after all the horrific experiences humanity has endured, evil is allowed to explode again and again with escalating ferocity? Who? Why? asks Pešta, together with the American psychologist Philip Zimbardo, who has made a systematic study of „evil“, in particular the critical “moment of malice” when a so-called decent person becomes a heartless monster. Zimbardo found a parallel in the transformation of the fallen angel Lucifer into the embodiment of evil – Satan. In his famous experiments, he found that it was frighteningly easy to activate the „Lucifer complex“: it was enough to induce fear in people and then identify the source of the danger. In these emotionally tense situations, the „evil gene“ awakens, spirals out of control, becomes aggressive, seeks revenge, knows no compassion, and acts only in its own selfish interest.



Something is wrong, 2023, oil on paper, 60x50 cm

“Often, the declared danger needs to be artificially created. Perfect for this purpose are minorities who are different in skin colour, religion, sexual orientation or just way of life,” explains Pešta, explaining the background of the *Something is Wrong* project. The exhibition at Tana Art Space is situated in two contrasting spaces, one evoking a laboratory and the other a monastery cell. In the evocatively titled sets of paintings and assemblages *Bloody Language*, *Fight and Silent Witness*, or in the flagship installation *Animals in Us*, etc., this „perverted gene“ and its manifestations are examined from the perspective of both victim and perpetrator. The result is a syncretic opus that offers the viewer a depiction of evil unique in the visual arts. In Pešta’s conception, this mostly takes the form of an overdeveloped human body, which here is not an image of God, but a monstrous mass, flesh interwoven with rivulets of veins. Individual features have disappeared from the faces of his

figures. Instead only spasmodic grimaces remain, or faces have been replaced by anonymous masks. A duality resonates through the project: power vs. obedience, spirituality vs. instinct, individuality vs. herd mentality, pretence vs. truth. Against the backdrop of current events, Pešta thus addresses a problem already identified by the existentialists: the man who has lost God, and thus his belief in the transcendence of his existence, also loses any meaning in life and with it all inhibitions. He becomes an unfeeling, easily manipulated creature driven only by instinct.

It is in the transcendental dimension that Daniel Pešta seeks a way out. Spirituality, which frees man from his adherence to the material, is personified in his work *Memento* in the figure of Jesus Christ. Stripped of specific historical and religious overlays, he becomes a universal symbol of supra-personal moral values for which it makes sense to sacrifice oneself.

Daniel Pešta

The work of multimedia artist Daniel Pešta (born 1959 in Czechoslovakia) is formally multifaceted and semantically ambiguous, yet thanks to the artist’s distinct style it is nevertheless consistent. He employs a wide range of media, from realistic painting (often containing a strong expressive element) to allegorical assemblages and objects in combination with historical artefacts and photographs, to his own photography, video art and performance. His works may be narrative, but also abstract or symbolic. By using such a wide variety of artistic means, he is able to express himself most fully on his chosen subject. Daniel Pešta’s artistic career began in the 1980s, during the period of so-called ‘normalisation’ under the Czechoslovak communist regime. His personal experience



Kill me, 2022, water colour, 60x50 cm

of life in a totalitarian state was a major influence on his often politically engaged work. The power-obsessed machinations of the political bosses, the destructive force of the manipulated masses, the injustices perpetrated on individuals and entire groups, but equally the hopeful ‘power of the powerless’ – a term used by Václav Havel, dissident and later first president of free Czechoslovakia after the fall of the Soviet empire – naturally formed his key subject-matter. Besides a number of important international exhibitions (see selection of exhibitions), Pešta has regularly participated in exhibitions and projects at the Venice Biennale. His first show there, *I was born in your bed*, was in 2013, at the convent of St Cosmas and St Damian on the island of Guidecca. In a multi-media installation comprising two large-scale video artworks, a series of painted portraits of Roma children entitled *I’m Gypsy, and you?*, and several stand-

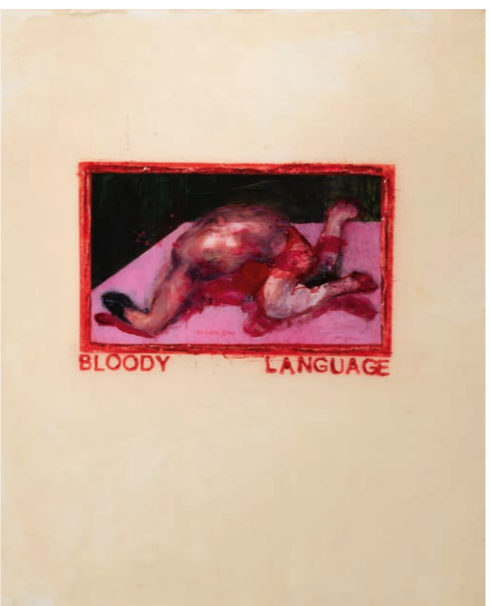
alone assemblages, he depicted the current situation of the Roma minority in Czechia, showing how they are stigmatised and segregated by the majority population – factors that turn the fate of the Czech Roma into a curse. In 2015, as part of the international exhibition *Personal Structures* at the Palazzo Bembo, Pešta presented his multiple cycle *Nocturnal Head Records*. In mesmerizing assemblages, he addressed collective guilt, memory and the unconscious, and how they are reflected in the individual imagination. In later iterations of *Personal Structures* (2017, 2019) he questioned with increasing insistence to what extent we are determined by our genetic makeup, race, ethnicity and gender, as well as by social climate, social bubble or family history.

Determination is thus a central theme in Pešta’s work, one he keeps returning to and exploring from different perspectives. It is determination that causes feelings of powerlessness, the inability to step out of



Bloody language (cyklus), 2021, mixed media, 60x50 cm

a prescribed role, to defy destiny or attempt the impossible... In contrast, he sees hope in spirituality and supra-personal values. Sometimes this transcendental dimension is identified in his work with the figure of Jesus Christ, albeit as a universal symbol of love and truth stripped of historical and cultural overlay, as something worth sacrificing oneself for. In 2022 he linked these two poles – moral marasmus and spiritual transcendence – in his *Ecce Homo* project, shown at the Palazzo Bembo and the Palazzo Mora. There, in visually bold installations conceived in his characteristically dramatic manner, he reflected on the global ecological and social crisis. In 2018, an overview of Pešta’s work was presented in the solo exhibition *DeTermination* at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague – the foremost institution focussing on contemporary art in the Czech Republic. Set in a 5000-metre space designed by Ivana Brádková, the show covered every aspect of his oeuvre.



Bloody language (cyklus), 2121, mixed media, 60x50 cm



Execution, 2010–2023, resin, 55 x 34 cm

Terezie Zemánková, PhD

(1975, Prague)

Terezie Zemánková graduated in cultural theory from Charles University in Prague. She also completed her doctoral studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 2009 she wrote her dissertation on the theme “art brut”. As an independent curator she has been dealing over a long period with artistic manifestations that fall outside the mainstream by creating comparative curatorial concepts. In tandem with Ivana Brádková (1965-2021) she prepared a series of exhibitions compiled using art brut collections from around the world (collection abcd - Paris, Prinzhorn Sammlung - Heidelberg, Adolf Wölfli Stiftung - Bern...) in the Prague City Gallery as well as the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague. For this most important Czech institution specialising in contemporary visual art she conceived Daniel Pešta’s monographic



Sorry, 2023, water colour, 60x50 cm

exhibition under the title *Determination* in 2018. She also contributed to the publication of his three-volume monograph entitled *Determination / En block / Big Bang* in book form. As editor she has prepared dozens of authorial and thematic exhibitions of contemporary art along with their related publications. She has been cooperating with the DrAK Foundation on a long-term basis, primarily as the author of exhibitions for Museum Montanelli. She has also participated in a variety of projects for this non-profit organisation in other places within the Czech Republic and abroad. Current social and political topics are themes appearing prominently throughout her work, especially the inclusion of disadvantaged minorities, their de-stigmatisation, as well as the erasing of boundaries between artistic categories.



Fight, 2023, water colour, 60x50 cm



Meminisse, 2019, ivory, resin, 63x34 cm

Museum Montanelli

is one of only few private-owned Czech non-profit organizations focusing on contemporary visual art. Fuelling creativity and imagination, MuMo embraces a continuous dialogue between the established and the experimental, the past and the future. Its mission is to promote public interest in contemporary art and encourage its deeper understanding by diverse audiences. MuMo’s successful track record of multifaceted exhibitions organized in Prague, elsewhere in the Czech Republic and abroad is the best proof of its open-mindedness and out-of-the-box approach. In addition, as keeper of the DrAK Foundation collection,

Museum Montanelli has been successfully integrating these works into diverse exhibition projects. The Museum offers a rich programme, ranging from exhibitions by Czech and foreign artists, often involving “art as experience”, contemporary dance or performances, to commented tours or talks with artists and curators, to original individual projects.

Daniel Pešta, Something is wrong
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design, Daniel Pešta
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