10 questions to Jirí Kovanda in August 2009

Tobi Maier: Can you tell me a bit about your work as a surveyor for army construction projects, your occupation between 1971 and 1977?
Jirí Kovanda: I worked like a surveyor five years, it was on the construction of Prague metro. I have no artistic education, so officially I could not be an artist during the communist regime, I had a duty to work like everybody else. So I selected not so exhausting employments, above all I wanted to have time and energy for my artistic works. In the time I was influenced by surrealism, I made mainly collages and drawings. I like early surrealism till now.

TM: How did you start working as an artist in the mid 1970's and did your previous career and the people you met there influence that? I know that there was a kind unofficial art scene that reacted to the socialist realism painting that was supported at the time. Can you tell us a bit about the memories you have from that time?
JK: I already said I have no artistic education, I am an autodidact. My father was a hobby painter when I was a small boy and I remember I liked to look at him at work. Later there was very imporant a friend of mine who was well-educated and had a lot of good books. For example he brought me to the show of Marcel Duchamp in 1969 in Prague. It was shortly before bad changes (so called "normalization") in the Czechoslovak society. In these early times I made my works for myself and friends, still it was not a part of the real unofficial art scene in Prague.

TM: While Julius Koller tried to channel his artistic energy into the extra terrestrial communication, his life as UFO-naut and the excursions he took with friends to the mountains and the subsequent founding of the Ganek gallery, your actions seem to be more rooted in a realist stance to life. Is it correct to say that you wanted to interrupt the order of things at the time?
JK: I don`t know if interrupt the order. Maybe more something like to examine and to experience relations and borders between people in public spaces for example. Or my own position there in everyday situations. Or a position of an individual in a crowd. Among others.

TM: Your friend Pavel Tuc documented many of the actions from the 1970's. Can you tell us about other artists doing actions like you at the time?
JK: At the time I was workig together with three artists - Petr Stembera, Jan

MIcoch and Karel Miler. We organized performance events in different private spaces - cellars, store-rooms or empty appartments. It was only for a few invited friends, it wasn`t public. Works by my colleagues were more expressive, more existetialist, and they never made performances in public spaces.

TM: When you made actions like I hide or Kontakt were you aware of Vito Acconci's Following pieces from the late 1960's?
JK: Yes, of course, it was one of my favourite pieces.

TM: Also you told me that some images of early Judd works were transmitted to Czech republic, none of his important writing though. Did his work also have an influence on you and other artists?
JK: It`s not so simple, we had quite good informations, but not complete, and no direct experiences, it`s important. I personally don`t remember writings by Judd, but somebody else could read them somewhere, I don`t know. For me and my work was much more important Carl Andre.

TM: The humble sculptures created from the 1980's onwards have a kind of poetic and melancholic stance to it. I am thinking of crumpled paper (1982) or walled sausage (2002) or Le Dessin Automatique (2000) for example. How do you find the ideas and sites for these interventions in the public space?
JK: I can`t speak about it like this, I don`t know, it depends... It`s combination of intuitions and certain possibilities. My work is above all ituitive.

TM: For the exhibition at Ludlow 38 you made a new piece Untitled (2009) that is assemblage of two wooden boards roped together and inserted between two corners of the front gallery. The work is somehow reminiscent to your Instalace III, 15.brezna 1979 Praha. Can you say what motivated you to do the piece in Prag?
JK: For this piece (and similar ones) the concrete space is absolutly important. It`s about to make "visible" the space, to be in the space, to experience better our being in the space and at the same time it`s my trace in the space.

TM: A question people were interested when we were doing the show at Ludlow 38 (July 10 - August 16, 2009) was: When you were waiting for the telephone to ring in, how long did you wait till somebody called you? I guess it has to do with the New Yorker's anxiety today of being always connected by means of technology …

JK: Technology wasn`t important for me at the time. It`s again more about contacts between people and about a sorrow to be alone. The time is absolutely unimportant. Five minutes or one hour? The gesture is important, it`s always the same.

TM: While we are doing this interview you are in three shows in New York, the 2 person show with Koller at Ludlow 38 and the two solo shows at Andrew Kreps and Wallspace galleries in Chelsea. While the drawings and sculptures at Kreps work as a nice addition to the documentation of your actions at Ludlow 38 I was particularly enjoying the new work at Wallspace. How do you feel your work today in a new context differs from the actions, drawings and sculptures you made in the 1970's and 1980's?

JK: Maybe the biggest change is that my work now is made for public spaces, for galleries, for a lot of people, not only for a few friends. My contemporary work is maybe formaly more "complicated", there are, I think, more levels. It is more "visual", more "lyric". But inside is always the same thread.