

THE PRAGUE

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CHASING ČERNÝ

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PROVOCATEUR TALKS
HIS FAVORITE WORK,
NEW EXHIBITION, AND
REBELLIOUS REPUTATION.

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CHASING ČERNÝ

PRAGUE'S ICONIC PROVOCATEUR TALKS HIS FAVORITE WORK, NEW EXHIBITION, AND REBELLIOUS REPUTATION.

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

David Černý, the iconic Czech artist and provocateur, is used to running late, says the manager at his Prague art center and studio known as MeetFactory. More often than not, his reputation precedes him.

At age 23, a young Černý was arrested after painting a Soviet tank war memorial in Prague bright pink. He's since shocked the art world with his bizarre, politically-charged installations, from a bronze sculpture of two men peeing into an enclosure shaped like the Czech Republic to an enormous middle finger he once floated down the Vltava river.

Now in his forties, the controversial artist is this month launching *Black Hole*, a solo exhibition at the Dvorak Sec Contemporary gallery in Old Town. Featuring never-before-seen art from the past three years, it's the latest in a long lineage of deviant works that have earned Černý recognition both in Prague and the international art scene.

In person, Černý is only slightly less intimidating than his work suggests. The man who finally arrives for our interview at MeetFactory bears a disheveled mop of jet-black hair to match his all-black attire, resembling more of a rock star than artist.

"I've done too many interviews in my life," he begins, rubbing his face with his hands. "They usually never ask anything new."

By contrast, Černý's life seems constantly in flux. He's been in and out of the studio all week, where he's just installed a new robotic tool for his sculpture work. Soon, he has to run to meet a transport dropping off equipment for a band playing at MeetFactory tonight.

Černý founded the Factory in 2001 as a non-for-profit theatre, concert venue, art studio and residency program. It's just another one of his seemingly endless landmarks in the city, which number 14 at the moment, to be exact.

Needless to say, Černý's reputation for breaking the status quo is as strong as ever. Just last month, he unveiled "Trifot"—a towering, googly-eyed robot outside the Czech Photo Center—though he insists the structure isn't a robot, but an embodiment of Big Brother.

"You have to be the part, and you have to obey the rules, and I never did it," Černý says, pushing a half-empty Club-Mate across a cafe table inside the Factory. "I was more or less having fun. And that's unforgivable."

Still, Černý's shocking works have made him one of the only contemporary Czech artists to catch international attention.

In the '90s, he completed residencies in New York City at the Museum of Modern Art's PS1 and the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. He's a laureate of the Jindřich Chalupecký Award, one of the Czech Republic's most prestigious awards for young visual artists. He's had solo

exhibitions in galleries from Budapest to Rome, London, and Berlin, and next year, he'll have an exhibition at Prague's National Gallery.

In the U.S., he's sometimes referred to as the "Czech Banksy," recalling the anonymous graffiti artist, though Černý would be likely to correct the misnomer. Černý's work came first.

Petr Šec, an art collector and co-founder of Dvorak Sec Contemporary gallery, has been following the artist's career since his pink tank prank in the '90s.

"Černý is a longtime star of the Czech contemporary art scene," Šec explains. "He's an internationally-renowned artist, so it was only a matter of time before we started to represent him."

Black Hole, which runs through Nov. 29, will be Černý's second solo exhibition at Dvorak Sec—his first, in 2013, showcased a series of portraits. This time, the exhibit will include stainless steel, monumental sculptures up to five meters high along with reliefs hung on the walls.

Šec thinks that what sets Černý apart isn't just his controversial style and skillful artistry, but also his ability to record history with his art.

"There is no one like Černý," continues Šec. "He has an ability and courage to come up with ideas which reflect the political and social shifts in society."

But you can't court controversy as relentlessly as Černý without earning a few enemies along the way. His sarcastic take on country stereotypes



Černý's 2012 temporary piece, "Fuck You Mr. President," a 30-foot purple hand floating down the Vltava, points a middle finger at the Prague Castle and its primary inhabitant.

"Entropa" sparked a diplomatic spat that reached across the globe in 2009. And Černý is a known rival of former National Gallery Director Milan Knížák, from whom he refused to accept a museum award in 2000.

"Černý is a controversial personality," Šec adds. "If you are not ready for that, he might be able to hurt you, [but] he is a great artist."

Working with Černý is a similar story.

Michal Brenner, who has been the music program manager at MeetFactory since 2010, says it's the "best job" he's ever had. And even though he occasionally quarrels with Černý over aesthetics, Brenner says the artist truly respects those with whom he works.

"[Černý] is crazy, which is a good thing," Brenner says outside the Factory's concert hall. "But I think he has a respect for what I do, and he doesn't interfere."

Černý has mentioned that much of his work stems from anger, built up from his childhood under communism and the deep reaction he had—even as a kid—against it.

"You realize that in the moment when the teacher is pushing you to know something and say something which is not true," Černý says. "As a child, you know that there is something wrong when your parents are telling you, what you hear at home, you should not repeat at school."

Never one to follow rules, Černý remembers muttering an insult about Vladimir Lenin in kindergarten. Immediately, the school called Černý's parents: "If he were to be heard by somebody else," a teacher warned, "he might get into trouble."

It was the first time a young Černý faced backlash for his beliefs, but it certainly wouldn't

be the last. In elementary school, he was scolded for wearing American flags on his shoes; in high school, he spent his share of nights in prison for attending anti-Communist demonstrations.

"It was quickly explained that I should not say certain things," Černý adds.

But Černý maintains that he doesn't really care what others think of his work. In fact, he feels somewhat separate from the Prague art scene, proper.

"I'm part of the 'Prague art scene' just because I live here. Otherwise, the Prague art scene hates me," Černý says, laughing. "I don't even think that if you hit on the Prague scene and say my name, that they will say they know me."

Part of this detachment stems from Černý's refusal to, as he puts it, "play the part" of an artist by attending gallery openings or giving interviews. Growing up as the son of two artists—his mother a restorer; his father a graphic designer—Černý says he was "dragged" to these events, and developed a distaste for them early on.

Now, the artist insists that if anything, his art has only become darker over time: "I am more depressive, and negative, and nihilistic than I was before," he says, though his words come with a sly smile.

Still, Černý's name is also attached to a number of apolitical works that are known more for their pure aesthetic beauty than anything else. Take his 42-layer rotating sculpture of Franz Kafka's head, a marvel which sits in the middle of the busy Quadrio shopping center near Národní třída.

And despite his rebellious reputation, Černý can be warm and irresistibly charming. When relaxed, he has a hearty, raspy laugh that fills the room, and a buzzing energy that prompts him to

spontaneously swing on ceiling rails or jump up stairs.

He'd never bring up the black Porsche 911 convertible that sits in his driveway, but his eyes light up when anyone inquires who it belongs to. And when his phone rings midway through our interview, I recognize the opening riffs of Led Zeppelin's "Good Times Bad Times" in his tone.

It's a softer side of the artist that emerges especially when talking about his school years at the University of Applied Arts in Prague, like when he managed to snag a key to the school and would sneak in after hours of partying on the streets. "The party was basically ongoing, endless," Černý recalls with a laugh. "I don't understand why my kidneys actually survived."

But when asked about the future, Černý, for once, is silent. "That's a question I'm giving myself," he admits after a few moments.

"If you're 20, 22 [years old], you don't see the horizon. The horizon is some-fucking-where, it's far away, it's endless," he continues. "But in certain moments you see that there has to be some end."

Černý would like to have children, or as he puts it, "to replicate." And if he grows tired of making art, his back-up plan is to become a pilot—in fact, he's already through the flight training required. But as the artist admits, he doesn't exactly have a plan.

It's a work in progress.

'Black Hole' runs Oct 27 through Nov 29 at Dvorak Sec Contemporary Gallery, Dlouhá 923/5, 110 00 Praha 1. Gallery hours are Monday through Saturday, 13:00 to 19:00. Closed Sunday.



THE MEETFACTORY

Černý's "multicultural supermarket" connects the arts

Driving up Nádražní in the industrial Smíchov district, it's hard to miss MeetFactory, an industrial building flanked by two enormous fiberglass red cars, hung on either side by two equally enormous nails.

The car sculptures, of course, are the work of Prague artist David Černý, and MeetFactory is his contemporary arts center and studio. Founded in Holešovice in 2001, but forced to move to Smíchov after the destructive floods of 2002, the non-for-profit institution serves as a home away from home for writers, theatre directors, visual artists, and other international creatives.

Černý says MeetFactory is inspired by PS1, an art institution at New York City's Museum of Modern Art where he completed a one-year residency in 1994.

"I was thinking about trying to find a space for a similar institution, and this happened," Černý explained, lounging at a bar table in the Factory. "I wanted to make a multicultural supermarket."

That it is. The mammoth building is complete with a theatre, concert venue, three galleries, and 16 art studios, along with an artists-in-residence program which hosts more than 30 international artists of every medium each year. It's run by an administrative board, which is made up of Černý, musician David Koller, and Czech filmmaker Alice Nellis.

Originally erected as a warehouse for a glasswork factory in the 1920s, the building itself is a work of art. Inside, industrial-looking walls and wrought-iron fixtures are highlighted by the glow of bright red neon lights, which match the bar and café's fire-engine red wooden chairs and tables. Walking through its concrete halls, the maze-like building appears to have endless nooks and passageways—secretly hidden among them, Černý's own studio.

And MeetFactory wouldn't be complete without a mark of classic Černý sarcasm: a lifelike sculpture of a slab of raw meat greets guests at the bar downstairs.

Michal Brenner, the space's music program manager and longest-serving employee, remembers nearly a decade ago when MeetFactory was merely an idea, and the building an abandoned space.

"It was really squatted, we had to build the venue from scratch," Brenner recalls, describing the building's emptiness at the start of the project. "There really was nothing here."

Brenner left his old gig as an independent promoter to officially join MeetFactory in 2010, and he claims it's the "best job" he's ever had. Though Prague's art scene has in recent years expanded to include a number of theatre, music and art venues, he thinks MeetFactory is unique in its ability to join multiple forms of art in one space.

It's all part of Černý's original goal: to connect Prague to the international art world and foster relationships between artists and the community. MeetFactory even puts on regular "Open Studio" days, where visitors can roam the building's 16 studios and talk to the artists-in-residence.

On any given day, "Open Studio" events may cover anything from a presentation of contemporary Mexican video-art to an interactive workshop led by a resident artist. Currently, there are seven artists-in-residence at the Factory, hailing from hometowns as near and far as Austria, the United States, and France.

Keeping with its emphasis on connecting creatives, each of the Factory's components makes it a priority to expose up-and-coming artists in addition to the more well-known. Though Brenner only hires bands he actually listens to himself, he adds that the Factory

doesn't "really do big Czech bands."

"They should be a new name, because that's part of the focus of the venue—to bring artists that haven't played in the Czech Republic before," he explains.

In the past, this has included acts like the U.S.-based Animal Collective, Ratatat, and Caribou, as well as the birthday party of '80s German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten and, more locally, the launching of MIDI LIDI's third studio album and a sold-out WWW concert.

Though Brenner says the theatre sector has perhaps the least international audience, as most of the plays are performed in Czech, the space has hosted a number of global successes, like Hungarian theatre group Lakmusz Csopor. It's also a hotspot for slam poetry, literary readings, and film screening parties.

Brenner adds that while MeetFactory's original vision remains strong, he and the other members of the institution are continuously changing to keep up with trends in the art world and new generations of creative thinkers.

"We are constantly challenged to bring relevant content," he says. "I wouldn't want to grow old with our audience."

MeetFactory is many things—a place to watch theatre, visit an artist, discover a new band, or soak in an art installation. But to many of those involved with MeetFactory, the towering building wedged between a railroad and a motorway looks a lot like home.

"We have all these four things together, and we try to work together, not just lock ourselves in our respective halls," Brenner says about the Factory. "It's still a small team, so of course we all know each other and we work together."