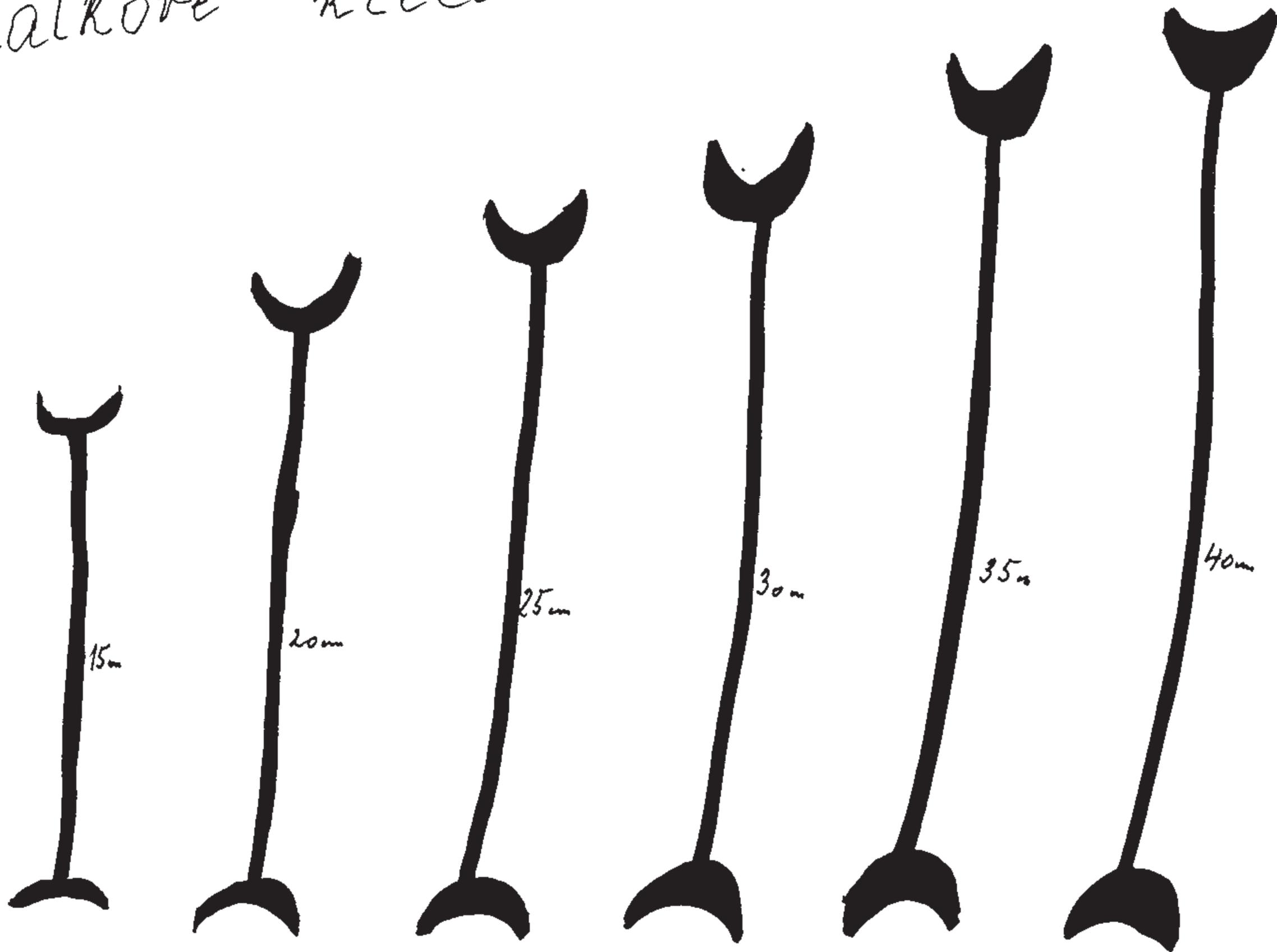


Matkové kliče



The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

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Kateřina Šedá *It Doesn't Matter*

January 6 – February 10, 2008

Opening Reception: Sunday, January 6, 4:00–7:00pm

Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 - 6:00pm

**The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago**
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My grandmother could do that.

Perhaps most important, Conceptualists indicated that the most exciting “art” might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art. The process of discovering the boundaries didn’t stop with Conceptual art: These energies are still out there, waiting for artists to plug into them, potential fuel for the expansion of what “art” can mean. The escape was temporary. Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell, but parole is always a possibility.

Lucy Lippard
from the essay “Escape Attempts”
in *Reconsidering The Object of Art*, 1995

As a movement proper, dating from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, Conceptual art arguably bit off more than it could chew. Its rigorous examination of the objects, activities and institutions that define art failed to transform the very subject of its critique. Like previous episodes in the avant-garde’s illustrious history, Conceptual art ultimately found itself absorbed within the ranks of both museum and market place. Rather than dismantling or transcending the historically cumulative traditions belonging to art, Conceptual art was instead a radical bout of consciousness that rattled art’s cage by calling attention to its bars. Baldly exposing the institutions and conditions governing the production, distribution and reception of art, however, only served to reiterate with resounding clarity a question plaguing modern art at its very core, namely what is art’s social function. This question, which asserted itself at every phase of the avant-garde, does not plague modern art, it actually defines it, and Conceptual art’s legacy is the manner it lays this question bare as such. More important than Conceptual art’s own temporary freedom from the strictures of art, is the ever present potential for liberation it would extend to future generations.

Kateřina Šedá’s art is an unabashedly social practice. Insofar as Šedá (b. 1979) has a medium, it is the residents of her native Czech environ of Brno-Líšeň. Since 2001, Šedá has developed a series of projects that investigate art’s relationship to its audience at a fundamental level. Marked by an adroit playfulness, Šedá’s projects usually assume the form of a game in which players become producers and consumers of a collective experience. Whether it is *Exhibition Behind the Windows*, 2001, in which 150 Lišeň residents used their windows to share with passersby their appreciation of a chosen knick knack; *The First Rally of Sunday Painters*, 2002, in which Lišeň’s plein-air painters raised their craft to the level of spectator sport; *There is Nothing There*, 2003, in which Šedá celebrated the normalcy of village life by synchronizing Ponetovice residents’ Saturday regimen of shopping, yard work and meals; or *For Every Dog a Different Village*, 2007, in which Šedá, designed a shirt distributed in a manner to break down the isolation between residents of a Lišeň high-rise housing complex, Šedá’s games not only make heretofore invisible relations visible, they construct a self reflexive public, one speaking of itself to itself. A hallmark of Šedá’s projects, this equilibrium can only be achieved with the dissolution of the traditional hierarchy between artist and audience and between art and life.

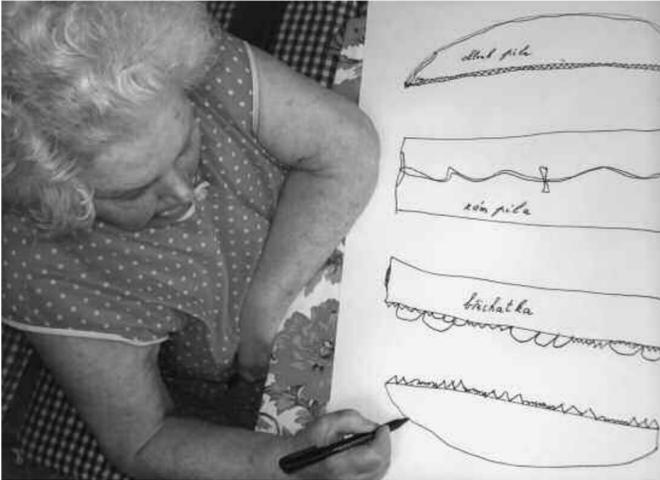
For Šedá art is fundamentally social, functioning as a form of speech in which the speaking and listening parties are equal partners. More than social, however, Šedá’s work is sociological. She not only makes manifest a social fabric whose weave is defined by the relationship between a speaker and a listener whose roles are interchangeable, she does so under the rubric of an investigation, gathering data often in survey form. In *The Gray Commission*, 2005, her thesis project for graduation from The Academy of Fine Art in Prague, Šedá took up the perennial question of the division between art, as discussed within the

academy, versus how it is understood (or not) by viewers outside the academy. Toward that end she assembled a panel of 8 family members she dubbed “The Gray Commission”—Gray being the English translation of the name Šedá. A dozen of Šedá’s classmates presented and discussed their work before this broad cross section of individuals whose ages ran the gamut from 26 to 70 and whose occupations were as diverse as medical student and retired crane operator. After each presentation, the Commission wrote down their assessment of the work. A charming mix of encouraging praise, tender mercies and humorous disdain, the Commission’s comments were authored as “art.” While the “art” proper was that of Šedá’s classmates, Šedá’s contribution was a frame foregrounding the question of art’s social function as one incumbent on to whom and for whom art is meant to speak. According to Šedá, this in large measure would depend on who makes art, a point explicitly taken up in *It Doesn’t Matter*, 2005, a series of over 600 drawings by her late grandmother Jana Šedá (1930–2007).

Šedá insists that her art have a purpose. In the case of *It Doesn’t Matter*, the goal was to facilitate the reintegration of her grandmother back into the family’s social life. After her husband’s death, Jana came to live with her son (Šedá’s father) and their family. Jana declared herself in retirement, which meant withdrawing from the world and spending large portions of the day in bed simply watching television. As a way to engage her grandmother, Šedá encouraged her to reminisce. Of the things Jana recalled with any relish were the hundreds of items sold at the “Home Supplies” shop in Brno where she managed the inventory from 1950 to 1983. Realizing it was a chance to reintroduce a sense of purpose in her life, Šedá asked that she make drawings of the various goods she stocked, putting her back to work so to speak. Remembering the sizes and prices of hundreds of tools and fixtures, Jana produced a body of drawings amounting to the recreation of the store itself.

Repeated often enough to become a joke amongst family, “It Doesn’t Matter” was Jana’s reply to almost any question requiring a decision of her. Given how and at what point in Jana’s life it was instigated, *It Doesn’t Matter* has the implicit tone of a life remembered. In one respect, the title suggests the reduction of life to something trivial or rote. While most would wax nostalgic over such keepsake events as weddings, funerals and births, Jana would peruse her memory’s inventory for its supply of putty knives, saw blades and spanners. A sad thought perhaps, but one largely dispelled through a work ethic rendering the title purely ironic relative to the volume of drawings Jana would produce within two years of her death. Clearly something did matter, even if it was simply a point of pride in conjuring a domain over which she once exercised mastery. Moreover, the drawings are carefree, appearing as though they were as much fun to make as they are to view. The subject of each individual drawing matters far less than the economy of line and shape, which, as it is applied consistently from one drawing to the next, builds into a formidable formalist repertoire. Table saw or pliers, both are rendered in an elementary geometry placing them on equal graphic footing. Between an assured line and a flare for rudimentary shape—not to mention having commercial merchandise as their subject matter—Jana’s drawings at times recall Warhol’s design illustrations of the 1950s. In their variety, each of Jana’s drawing, although rendered in an extremely simple fashion, is derived from a specific mental image, the communication of which is reduced to its most diagrammatically direct. In this, they are no doubt illustrations of home supplies which, for all their use value, are anything but sentimental.

As an exercise in memory, *It Doesn’t Matter*



cannot fail but serve as a model of subjectivity. They are an expression of self, and in Jana’s case a self prone to the question, what does one’s life amount to. If home supplies is Jana’s humorously frank answer to this daunting metaphysical question then her work represents “the objectivity of a subjectivity” to borrow a quote from Francis Picabia. While Picabia’s early twentieth century portraits of individuals drawn as machines are germane to any discussion regarding representations of human subjectivity in the language of mechanical drafting, Jana’s drawings are a far cry from that ilk of technical illustration. Hers are elementary renderings of tools, and specifically tools as merchandise. But just as her drawings are not an understanding of the self as machine, nor are they an understanding of the self through the matrix of commercial products à la Pop art. As drawings of merchandise, more important is that they amount to an inventory, specifically an inventory representing Jana’s labor. In this regard, they are an understanding of the self defined through work, which under communism was more than purposeful activity but also structured the social realm.

But there are two artists in the exhibition, and just as the drawings could be taken as a self-portrait of Šedá the elder, the instigation of the project within a critical framework belongs to Šedá the younger. *It Doesn’t Matter* initially took the form of an offset artist book featuring the first 175 drawings, a project description and an interview with her grandmother. Exhibition formats have included showings of up to several dozen drawings accompanied by a videotaped interview featuring Jana at work. The exhibition at The Society will be its most comprehensive overview to date, featuring over 500 drawings. This monumental format would cast Šedá’s role as that of having provided a platform on which her grandmother blossomed both artistically and more important socially. Šedá would be the first to own up to the project as a form of art therapy, one whose success is measured by its impact on the patient rather than the merit of the art. It was a surprise to all that Jana turned out to be a drawing dynamo. While exhibition of the drawings is more than well warranted, under Šedá’s auspices, *It Doesn’t Matter* is an iteration of the question of who makes art for whom and why.

The consistency of Šedá’s projects suggests that she chose a social practice with the same ease and sense of tradition as if she had chosen to become, say, a painter. For artists of her generation, conceptual art is a mode of her art-making like any other, meaning it is not dialectically opposed to an object-based

practice as it was in the 1960s. Gone is the polemical posturing endemic to the first generation of Conceptual artists whose claims, particularly those of Conceptual art being a purer, more democratic and accessible form of art, were more ideologically driven than based in the kind of social outreach and follow through practiced by Šedá. The irony here being that Šedá, coming from a former communist country, would dispense with Conceptual art’s ideological claims and in effect save it from itself. Her work does not redeem Conceptual art in the guise of art merely as idea, but instead as ideas that she then puts into effect. If Šedá is on parole as described by Lippard then *It Doesn’t Matter* operates outside art’s cage in dubious fashion. More conspicuous than its relationship to art therapy is its relationship to “outsider” art. But given where Šedá started there was never an inside. Despite Conceptual art’s canonization, the cat was out of the bag. Then again, conceptual art only served to reiterate questions already endemic to modern art. In that respect, *It Doesn’t Matter* has as its roots not Conceptual art but an engagement with folk art belonging to the likes of none other than Alfred Barr, Jr., the Museum of Modern Art’s first director, during whose tenure the museum mounted a series of landmark folk art exhibitions. *It Doesn’t Matter* then belongs to an older ontological investigation into art, one quite opposite in form than Conceptual art. In trying to make us aware that art can be found in anyone and anything, its purpose, however, is the same. If, when looking at art in public you should overhear someone say “My grandmother could do that,” by all means tell them to crack the whip and put granny to work.

This exhibition has been made possible with generous funding from Aplewood Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs; a municipal agency; Christie’s; The Danielson Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council; a state agency; LaSalle Bank; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; the Provost’s Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; The Pritzker Traubert Family Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; and our membership.

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[that side]
Kateřina Šedá
It Doesn’t Matter, 2005
ink drawing by Jana Šedá
nut spanner, 17 ¼ x 24 ½ inches

Essay by Hanna Walker. Layout by the JNE Graphic Design, Chicago.