Alisha Wessler
Travel Report: Prague, Czech Republic

May 4th – July 8th 2011

This past summer I traveled to Prague to attend a two-month residency at the MeetFactory International Center of Contemporary Art. Located on the west bank of the river Vltava in the former industrial neighborhood of Smíchov, the residency offers respite from the crowded city-center. David Cerny, a Czech artist known for his Žižkov television-tower baby sculptures, founded MeetFactory in 2002. Housed in a former factory building, the residency takes up the entire second floor, while a gallery, recording studio, café, music club and theatre, occupies the ground floor.

Arriving with no particular expectations, I found Prague to be an inspiring place for exploration and work. I was surprised by the spacious studio I was given, with views overlooking the railroad racks below and then beyond to the east bank of the Vltava. I quickly became accustomed to life in Prague: working in the studio, going for walks in the hillside above the residency, shopping in the local markets, exploring the city and socializing with the other artists-in-residence. Coming from varied artistic backgrounds, these artists contributed to a refreshingly diverse creative environment: Philip Topolovac (Germany), Yumiko Ono (Japan), Veronika Landa (Czech Republic), Nora Adwan (Great Britain and Northern Ireland), Scott Harber (Canada), Alexander Hacke and Danielle de Picciotto (Germany), Adam Holy (Czech Republic).
Prague is a dense and bustling city but one needs not travel far to find the idyllic countryside. Taking a bus 50 miles northeast of Prague, I found myself in a vast nature preservation area called Český ráj or “Bohemian Paradise.” I explored Malá Skála, a small village resting below the majestic cliffs of Vranov. Intended as a fortress, Vranov was built into the steep and jagged sandstone in the 15th century. Abandoned only a century later, the medieval castle and fortress declined into ruins. Deserted until 1802, the site next gave way to the ideals of Romanticism with the addition of a Neo-Gothic chapel. From Malá Skála, I was able to hike through the woods to access the Vranov Pantheon, as it is now called. Many parts of the “original” medieval fortress are still left in tact, allowing the visitor to traverse the narrow and often treacherous staircases into various dungeons and rooms. Vranov is a wonderfully bizarre place, giving the visitor room to dream about the many stages of its existence. Having hiked through the surrounding area, it was natural to imagine what it would have looked like as a rocky cliff, its original form.

On another weekend jaunt, I paid homage to the Sedlec Ossuary, an underground burial chapel I have long wanted to visit. Famous for its decorative use of human bones, the chapel is said to contain the remains of between 40,000 and 70,000 people, arranged by artist František Rint in 1870. The ossuary is, indeed, a macabre place. In the dimly lit room tourists take photographs of cascading piles of skulls, and hanging above, an ornate chandelier comprised of every bone in the human body.
Every Saturday morning I took the metro to Kolbenova, home to the Bleší trh flea market. Still within the city limits of Prague, the flea market feels like a world away, perhaps its own universe. Here one can find anything, the old and the new, broken bric-a-brac as well as the exceeding rare and valuable. I visited Bleší trh as one might visit a favorite museum, although here the collections were always shifting, never twice the same, the vendors being the only constant force week after week.

I also gathered inspiration from the galleries and museums around Prague, attending exhibition openings on a regular basis. My favorite museum to visit was the Národopisné muzeum (Ethnographic Museum), housed in the Musaion at the Letohrádek Kinských (Kinský Summer Palace). The collection includes an impressive array of lidové umění (folk art), including statues of Krkonoše, legendary Czech forest giants. I was especially drawn to the strange and rather unsettling folk costumes and masks.
Inspired by such excursions, it was easy to focus while in my studio. With the approaching deadline of the July exhibition, my work intensified. Borrowing from the imagery found on my adventures, I constructed a 7-foot mountain-cum-tower out of materials I found around the city. A tiny airship, modeled after one from a book on Czech aviation, hovered above the installation. The project was completed just in time for the group exhibition entitled “NÁVŠTEVNÍCI” (“The Visitors”). Curated by Pavel Vančát and Dušan Zahoranský, the show included work from the international artists in residence in conjunction with local Czech artists.
The two months I spent as an artist in residence in Prague helped me to connect with artists and curators whom I might not have had the opportunity to meet otherwise. We were able to support one another by asking questions and exchanging feedback, thus helping each other delve deeper into our work. Since being back in the United States, I have kept in touch with many of these individuals. In September, two of the artists (Yumiko Ono and Philip Topolovac) showed their work in *Topophilia*, the Detroit exhibition I co-curated with Kayla Romberger. This was a rich and rewarding experience, proof that my travels in the Czech Republic will continue to connect to my life here.

The experiences I had this past summer in the Czech Republic and at the residency in Prague were invaluable in my development as an artist and I want to sincerely thank the School of Art and Design for making this trip possible.