AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INSTALLATION

» BILL JEFFRIES

Catching sight of a wealthy man driving past in a rich carriage drawn by beautiful horses…as if coming out of a deep trance, he would sometimes comment: "Why he used to be a simple office clerk…[1]

1 A description of Chichikov in Gogol's *Dead Souls*, New York, New American Library, translated by A.R. McAndrew, 1961 (1842), 256-257; "he used to be a simple office clerk" mirroring Kafka's reception, and his life after death.

» HABSBURGIAN BEST PRACTICES: THE DREAM OF RISK MANAGEMENT

This book is published on the occasion of the exhibition The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony, held at the Simon Fraser University Gallery from April 25 to June 27, 2009. The idea for the exhibition at SFU arose when I mentioned to Jerry Zaslove that I wanted to do a Kafka show, and he replied that he had been gathering material toward such a show for some years. What I wanted to do was not at all clear, but would surely have examined bureaucracy, with some emphasis on universities as quasi-Kafkan institutions. Zaslove's project focused on "In the Penal Colony" specifically, and that is what we did; the idea for this specific show was his, as were almost all the materials in it.[2] As it turned out we examined both bureaucracy and penal colonies, along with a wide range of other associated material, including exclusionary/containment phenomena such as concentration camps. Prior to seeing the exhibition, many people wanted to know "What is the show?", to which I could only reply that they should come see it, and that we would try address the question with the publication of this book. In an effort to round out the explanatory apparatus, we decided to invite short texts by authors who did see the show in person; their short essays follow Jerry Zaslove's description of the exhibition and its meaning.

The show's form, which largely avoided the archival-document approach to Kafka, has many sources, but for me it took its cue from a late 1980s' Berlin exhibition titled *Pack Ice and Pressed Glass*, a mysterious, dense, Wagner-filled installation examining the mood, obsessions and ephemeral content of the period from post-Biedermeier Europe (c. 1850) to pre-Weimar Germany.[3] Our Kafka installation utilized archival material, but in aid of a construction that created 'an installation', and by so naming it, the reference to theatricality is already made. In an effort to set the stage, the 'mood' for the piece was created via yellow lighting filters that turned the gallery into a mock-tropical island as an homage to all the island-based penal colonies of the late 19th century. In insurance, the use of what is now termed 'best practices' is part of the larger issue of 'risk management'. The activities Kafka describes on the penal

2 We extend special thanks to Vancouver-based theatre designer Dave Roberts for his ideas and assistance in planning the design of the exhibition.

3 The book of that exhibition, *Packeis und Pressglas*, Anabas-Verlag, Geissen, Germany, 1987, was published on the occasion of the exhibition at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin in 1988, as part of a series of shows created by the Deutschen-Werkbund-Archiv. Published prior to the show, the book, sadly, has no installation photographs; that shortcoming was one impetus behind the extensive use of installation images in this book.

colony island may be seen in many different lights, 'best practices' and 'risk management' being only two of them. Kafka was involved in the attempt to improve the world for workers through his job at the recently-invented workers compensation insurance scheme in Bohemia, which was itself an early example of institutional 'best practices' aimed at helping, rather than conquering people. Now, as then, the goal of perfecting things remains both a goal and a dream.

In theory, our installation had many of the same options and challenges as the films made after Kafka's life and stories: we could either follow Kafka as closely as possible, or explore one or more of a plethora of 'creative' possibilities. Because we worked from an idea that Jerry Zaslove had developed over many years, the 'exploration', though certainly present, was kept in line by sticking to the facts surrounding the story. The exhibition exploited the latent stage-set, or movie-set potential in the penal colony setting laid out by Kafka, allowing a *mise en scène* that simultaneously focused on the story, while scenes from *In The Penal Colony* were acted by players in the gallery space—viewers would find themselves, for instance, standing over the beds, more or less as it is in the story.[4] There were no live 'players' in our installation, but the viewers of the exhibition were, in effect, milling about, in character, on a Kafkan stage set.

The implausibility of the penal colony tale might cause one to wonder if many of Kafka's texts derived from his dreams, about which he repeatedly wrote to his friend Max Brod. While impossible to know with any certainty, the curious logic of dreams seemingly has much in common with Kafka's conception of what literature might do in his era; musings about Sisyphean entrapments, being an animal, or the impossibility of real progress are both dream material and Kafka material.

As Alan Bennett has reminded us, it is not easy to get 'doing things with Kafka' right. Conversely, Kafka, an early adopter of the idea of 'best practices' through his day job, seemingly knew how to get it right every time, even if he didn't think so. He was mysteriously able to succeed, for reasons that remain difficult to describe, in getting his readers into his semi-dream-like world via his reportage-like narrative. For those few readers who see no metaphorical content, the tales are, perhaps, simply reports on the state of the world, almost like 'news'. An installation on a Kafka story then becomes, I feel, a reflexive report on Kafka's story, almost like an unsent dispatch or 'news' on a one-hundred year-old story.

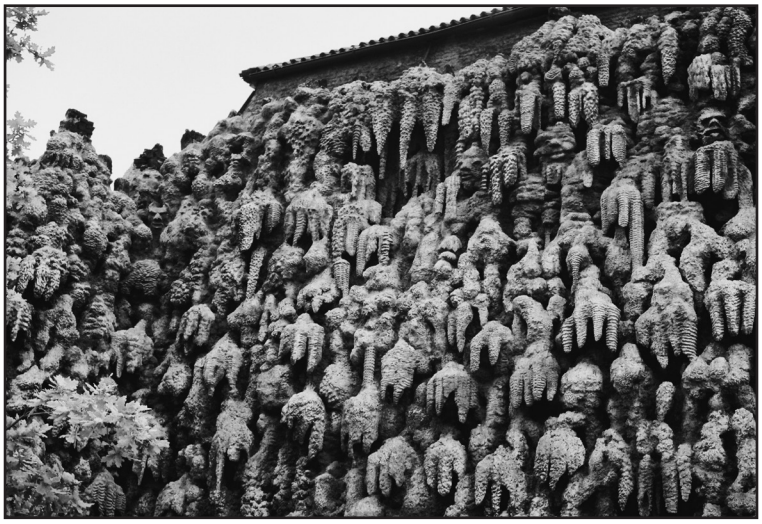
It seems important to mention dreams here simply because so many

4 A Kafka film festival was held during the show with screenings at the VanCity Theatre. Features screened included those by Welles, Haneke and Soderbergh; June 22 to 25, 2009.

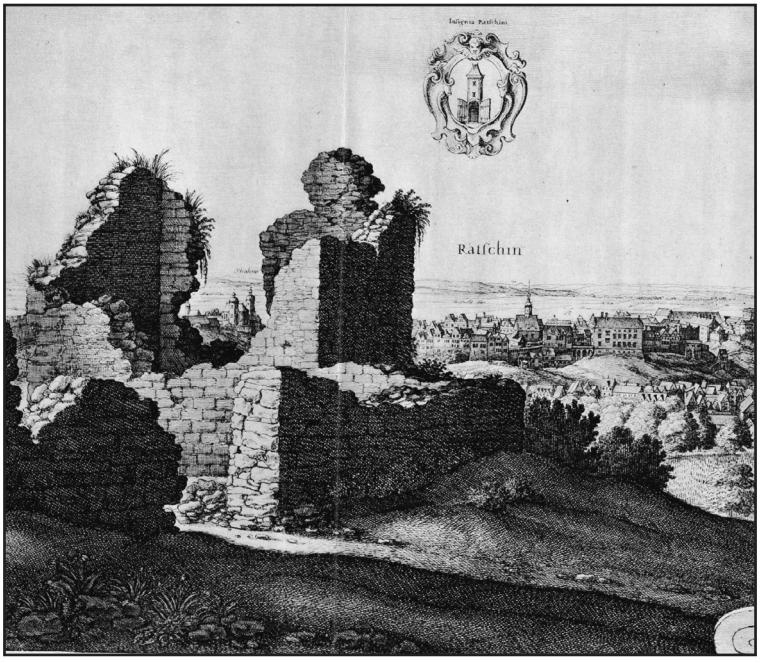
of them resemble Kafkan situations, or installations. Many people have written about the role of dreams in Kafka. It would be good to know (we never will) if Kafka could have converted any dream into a story told in his voice. If he had a dream about finding a lost object, losing a girlfriend, escaping from a bad situation, obtaining some documents, returning something that he borrowed, or an attempt to return a flawed purchase to his father's store, would we have Kafkan tales on those subjects? I know: we do have those stories. More importantly, I have to wonder if Kafka dreamt about penal colonies after reading Robert Heindl's book[5] in 1912 or 1913? My dream is that the Colony metaphor has to do with the difficulties in running any civic entity—specifically 'the state'—properly; with criminality being one of many risks to the state and penal colonies being one of many attempts at risk management.

5 Heindl, Robert, *Journey to the Penal Colonies*, published as *Meine Reise nach den Strafcolonien*, Berlin, 1912/1913. The book, and references to Kafka's knowledge of it, are one part of Zaslove's installation conception.

Parlour, Photographer unknown. Prague. Collection of Jerry Zaslove.



Homage # 5 to Franz Kafka, Franz Kafka's Father, Grotto Wall, Waldenstein Castle, Prague, from the series *Homage to Franz Kafka* by Jerry Zaslove



Prague Hunger Wall, Filipe van den Bosche panorama of Prague, including sections of the Hunger Wall, 1606. The Hunger Wall was constructed between 1360-1363 by Charles IV as a works project for the hungry, poor, and unemployed. The Hunger Wall functioned as a defensive rampart, as well as a boundary. Reproduction in Vaclav Cilek collection, Prague. Used with permission.

» STAGING, THEATRE AND INSTALLATIONS

Installation is an art form that has evolved from its operatic stage origins and from Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau 'rooms' (both dream-like) via a circuitous route that paused in Claes Oldenburg's storefront 'sculpture emporium' and in many art school graduation shows along the way. The Russian-American conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov, as much as anyone, deserves the credit for elevating the form to its current status and museum-world ubiquity; we rest on his shoulders, lightly. We have no way to know if the penal colony story came from a dream, but, regardless, in our exhibition it evolved into an 'installation as dream', mainly because of the strangeness of seeing so much Kafka text material on the walls bathed in yellow light. We described this exhibition as a metaphorical construction building on Kafka's penal colony story—fully realizing that every gallery/museum installation is also a construction. Kafka's genius in the story is not to see it as a dream, but to see penal colonies as a type of theatricality, as a set into which the subjugated play out their parts, their roles, and in which a range of modernist aspirations are, for all their good intentions, sent up as laughable failures. Kafka was as familiar as anyone with the notion of good intentions—it began with his parents' wishes for his future and was subsequently the core of his insurance work. The contradictions contained within packages of good intentions could not have been lost on him, nor could the actual human suffering in the story which was not at all 'theatrical' to any sensitive observer.[6]

Installation art, as it is with other media, is normally about an artist's idea, and our show was that, but one step removed; it was about Jerry Zaslove's idea of what Kafka's idea was about. (again, see JZ's essay following for elaboration on this.) The show was constructed, according to Zaslove, as an entry mechanism for *In the Penal Colony*. I'd suggest that we provided a doorway, one that would have been useful for the character in Kafka's story "Before the Law", who so much needed a door to be opened for him. Installations are translations of ideas external to what is installed. Artists translate from concepts into form; what we/Zaslove did was translate from Kafka's concepts into forms that are both directly and tangentially related to the architecture and processes of Kafka's story.

An exhibition such as this makes it easier to think of Prague itself as an installation; perhaps then and certainly now. Prague's position circa 1900 mirrored that of individuals in many countries; things were improving in some areas of life for citizens, cities and empires, in part

6 In Vancouver we have scenes of human degradation on the infamous Downtown Eastside; these scenes have been sought out by many, some of whom were visitors from Europe, as a type of theatrical performance or street theatre that was 'worth a detour'.

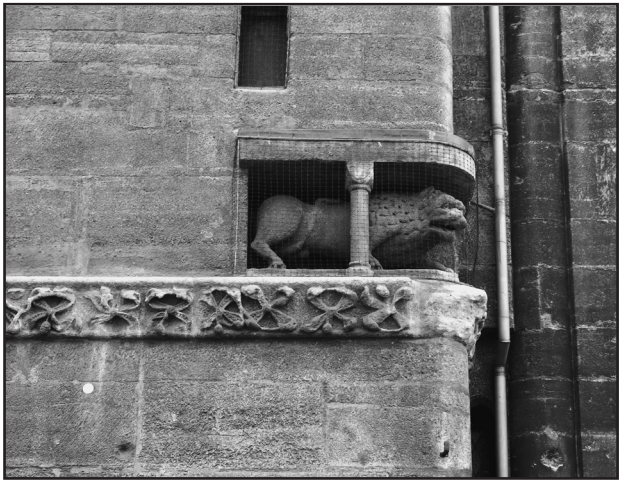
as a result of attempts to implement enlightenment/modernist policies. If Modernism is a sibling of the Enlightenment, Kafka's penal colony is a hyperbolic, but logical extension of where it all might lead. In Europe, the period from 1850 to 1910 constituted sixty years of a Modernizing process that was inescapable. Prague did not escape; but even the Haussmannization of the Jewish Ghetto in Prague, lamentable though it may have been, resulted in streetscapes that would be the pride of any city today. Prague was not smart enough to know how to build ugly buildings; it had architectural negative capability. The aspect of sociological Modernism that is often illustrated by the changes one experiences in one's surroundings from week to week, were part of Kafka's reality, but, as with Modernism's respect for the good work of the ancients, Prague was also a city that retained much of its past physical form, with swaths of the city being either old or ancient. Every form of Modernism has either existed in that duality of the new within the old or incorporated it—Prague was a bit like *The Waste Land*—it incorporated new into old in a mélange. A glass office tower in an old city creates two solitudes—a duality of two separate, irreconcilable differences, existing in a state of conflict, each challenging the other. *In The Penal Colony* (and much of the rest of Kafka) is a glass tower in the old city of literature.[7] Kafka's multi-cultural Prague may, for all we know, have been an exemplar of the well-run city-state, comparatively speaking, the 'state' of its plumbing notwithstanding.

The coming war was in the air at the time the penal colony story was written and the running of almost all European states became a war management project; war, the ultimate form of human stupidity, became the dominant reality and by its unfolding it was proof, if proof were needed, that it is very difficult to run a state in any kind of proper or ideal way, even at the best of times. 1914 was not the best of times, war was a rumour and then a reality. In war, success is always failure for someone. Kafka's repeated use of the word 'torment' in his letters presaged the torment of the war itself.

Through his work Kafka must have known that things, in order to become modern, had to run like machines—this was already conventional wisdom in manufacturing (hence Kafka's job), architecture, farming, the provision of electricity, and in politics, thanks to Machiavelli. Kafka's penal machinery doesn't just have flaws; it is flawed in every possible way, from its purpose, its conception, its functioning and its treatment of 'citizens'. Like the state, it is having a difficult time living up to its 'ideals'. Kafka

7 In an earlier version of this text in which I described the contents of the room in more detail, I mentioned that there was blow-up of 16th-century Prague panorama, showing the city as it was: even then, dense, complex, an urban maze-like island that signified "it is from this density that Kafka emerged."

scholarship may frown upon metaphorical readings of his stories, and comparisons with Kafka's compromised relation to other entities (family, girlfriends) could easily allow a reading in which the torture machine stands in for those entities. It is the functioning and mis-functioning of the state that has the broadest impact, however, far overshadowing the discomfort and mental torment that a difficult relationship or a bout of writer's block might have. If we are doomed to live within imperfectly functioning states then commentary may be the only viable mode of revenge, at least as Kafka saw it, and comedy the highest form of commentary, because if we believe Kafka, there is almost no situation that does not have its comical side.



Sv. Štepán [Saint Stephan] Vaclav Cilek Photographs

» LAUGHTER

"In a Viennese café a man orders coffee without cream. We're out of cream, the waiter says; would it to be all right to have a coffee without milk?"[8]

Max Brod tells us that when Kafka read his stories aloud to his friends they would fall over laughing and that Kafka would then himself laugh so hard that he couldn't continue. I have a theory that the humour in Kafka is perhaps not so accessible to solitary readers—the humour is not so obvious when there are just two of us—just a Kafka story and ourselves. A solitary reader of Kafka laughing would seem odd; they'd be not unlike a hands-free phone user talking while walking down the street—men in white coats might be following. The multi-valency of the stories, their ability to be about many things simultaneously, makes their primary subject difficult to pin down, although each individual reader may well feel that they do themselves 'get' the primary reading. The interpretation of every Kafka tale is contested territory, but anyone who has read even a few of the tales has a theory, one that they may assume has the authority of being 'right'. The degree to which humour is a key element in Kafka is part of the contest. Once readers are told that interpretations of a story's meaning might cast it in a humourous light, then we can see that there is another, somewhat hilarious context into which Kafka's works may be reconsidered. If my interpretation of Kafka has him exploring the fraught relations between the individual and the state in much of his work, as did his working life as a lawyer at the Workman's Accident Insurance Bureau, where he was triangulated by people, government and business, then there is the question of whether states, like the machine in *In The Penal Colony*, are designed and structured to 'run themselves'. If running a state is not an easy thing to do, especially because they suffer by comparisons with their templates, perhaps laughter becomes the only appropriate response to governmental follies.

Levity is the great solution to despair and irony is levity's great friend. Kundera's idea that the "craft of the novel is that of irony"[9] leads him to Kafka's relation to a Jewish proverb: Man thinks, God laughs.[10] Kafka's un-Wildean mirth is more like black humour, whether God-like or not, and its often-cited source is in his relation to, and admiration for, Yid-

8 Herzog, Werner, *Conquest of the Useless*, (his Fitzcarraldo diary) translated by Krishna Winston, New York, 2009 (2004 as *Der Eroberung des Nutzlosen*), 210

9 Sternstein, Malynne, "Laughter, Gesture, and Flesh: Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony'", in *Modernism/Modernity* 8.2 (2001), 315-323

10 Kundera, Milan, "Jerusalem Address," in *The Art of the Novel*, translated by Linda Asher, New York. Grove Press, 1988), 158, cited in Sternstein.

Frydlant Castle, Scraffito Wall, photograph by Vaclav Cilek. Castle Frýdlant v Čechách is located in Frydlach(Friedland in German) in North Bohemia and was owned by Count Christian Clam-Gallas at the time of Kafka's visits to the town to examine the Textile Factory Siegmund, which was located not far from the castle. Some Kafka scholars believe that this is the source of the location for Kafka's novel The Castle, because of the name of the owner of the castle (Clam-Gallas). "Klamm", is the mysterious figure in the novel whose name and spirit hover over the town.

dish theatre. This link has been explored in many of the recent books on his work but the binary-isms in Yiddish theatre should lead us to think about Kafka in Levi-Straussian, structuralist terms. It was Levi-Strauss who uncovered the previously mysterious connection between the layering and placement of things in the world, their orientation. It was Yiddish theater, however, that mined the 'layering of society' as much as any prior art form, exploring what I now think of as the 'Kafkan sandwich' (i.e. layers) that we can now see as normal because of Kafka's descriptions of how we are squeezed between 'this and that'.

In the installation, various layers of Prague society were represented by photographs and paintings of citizens from a wide range of Prague society circa 1910–1920. Each picture depicted the individual's microcosm of the Prague version of the human condition. For me, each portrait, ranging as they do from confident empowerment to sadness bordering on despair, perfectly achieved what portraiture can do when at its best: completely

personal and about the individual and simultaneously universal. It was one of the strokes of curatorial genius that Zaslove realized how important it was to find a way to involve the people, the citizens, who were the broader context, if not audience, for Kafka's literature. The ability of any artist or author to deal with metaphysical issues is always linked to their willingness to take the risks associated with representing the human condition. Yiddish theatre, with its music, song and dance, shares elements with both opera and 'the musical', but differs in that it is grounded in metaphysical dilemmas. It is those dilemmas that Kafka shifted into his stories, but their source in theatre seemingly allowed him to see much more humour in his tales than his readers did, initially anyway. Kafka interpretation can refer to his humour, but it cannot 'become humourous' without undermining its own intentions—hence this installation avoided it. The photographs of Prague's citizens show us the challenge Kafka faced—there is little doubt that each person pictured knew how to laugh, but it is hard to imagine them laughing.

The thinly veiled levity might have been more readily accessed if Kafka's fellow citizens could have read *Catch-22* before reading the man himself, a sequential impossibility, but it might have paved the way to an opening up of the reading of Kafka. The comic aspects that emerge out of Kafka's versions of modernity—his treatment of modernistic attempts to construct a perfect mechanism that can be described in the best possible, excessively logical terms, whether the state, the judicial system, the prison system, the family, the workplace —they all have their 'challenges'. If the family is a microcosm of the state, poor Kafka had at hand an acid-etched example of how difficult it is to run a 'state' of six people so that they would have a chance to derive any pleasure from life. Indeed, for many, it would be easier to run a state with six unrelated people, something on the scale of a penal colony, for instance. The various attempts to transfer scientific principles to the social sciences, which have ranged from personal psychology to international relations, have all run into the forms of resistance and difficulty of application that Kafka continued to probe throughout his life. This installation, and Jerry Zaslove's text that follows, as well as the shorter essays following it, are our part in the probing of one of Kafka's probes, as is the installation itself.

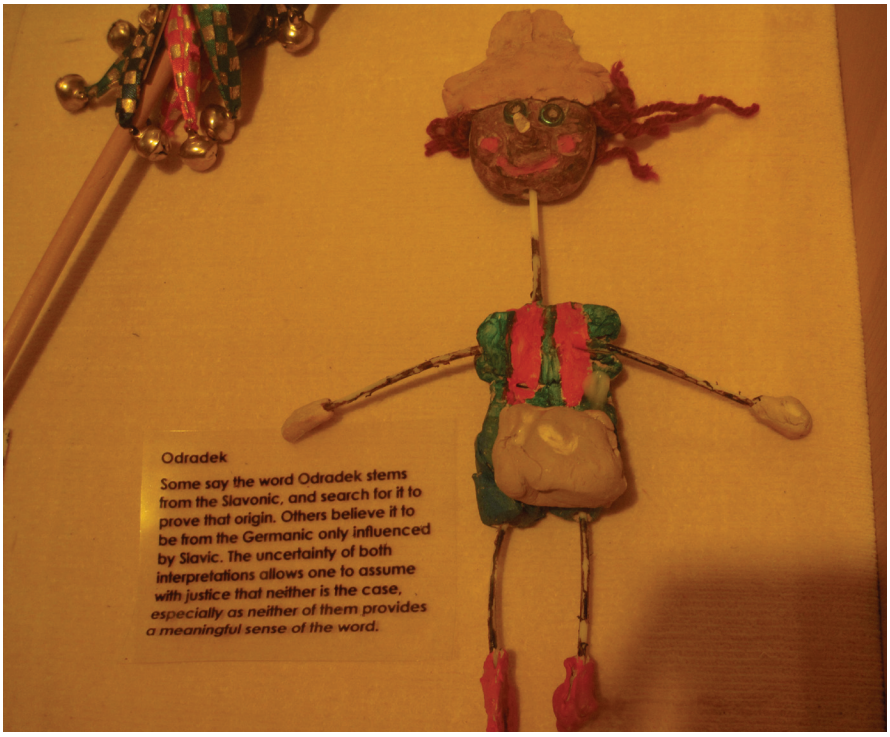
Installation view: Museum Vitrine with Svejk Puppet. Collection of Jerry Zaslove. Vitrines contain Kafka's favorite literary ephemera or objects related to his cultural ethos, for example Alfred Kubin, photograph of mining, letter from his Dr. and children's books. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

Installation views: with by Bozena Kozakova, 1913. Models supplied by the Czech School of Fine Arts, which stood adjacent to Kafka's home and his father's shop. Collection of Jerry Zaslove.

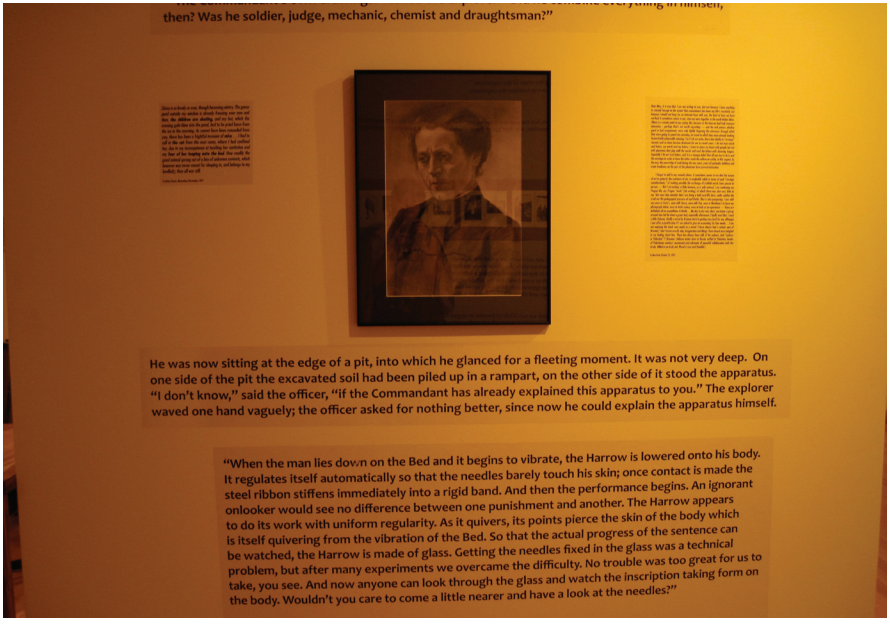
Installation view of Eva Svankmajer (Surrealist artist and animator) Hermaphrodite n.d. Pencil and crayon. Collection of Jerry Zaslove.

Installation view: Battery and Cable Connected to Officer. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

Installation view: Photographs on far wall of Prague Celebrities, Langham Photo Studio, Bozena Kozakova, Prague School of Arts. Right wall, Kafka's anti-militarist texts, and anti-war illustrations from Ernst Friedrich's War Against War, 1924 The Torment Machine with Prague Panorama, Battery, Officer and Beds of 'Machinery', 'Sleeping', 'Marriage', 'Office', 'Hospital', 'Writing,' Watched over by "Explorer". Charcoal and crayon. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.



Installation view: Odradek Doll. Creation of Tara Silva, five years old. Collection of Jerry Zaslove. Photograph, Christine Liotta.



Installation view: Double Sided Kafka, Sandwiched Glass Newspaper Clipping with 'Unknown Letter of Franz Kafka Found'. Montage construction Jerry Zaslove.

Installation view. *Death bed with palm tree.* Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

Installation view: *Comedia Masks on mannequins.* Reproductions of masks from 18th century baroque theatre in Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

Installation view of desk and chair with cotton batten in drawer as simulacra of Terezin Concentration Camp office. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

Installation view of Bozena Kozakova portrait representing the Explorer observing the beds with panorama of Prague. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

Installation views: portraits by Bozena Kozakova, 1913. Models supplied by the Czech School of Fine Arts, which stood adjacent to Kafka's home and his father's shop. Collection of Jerry Zaslove. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC..

Installation views: portraits by Bozena Kozakova, 1913. Models supplied by the Czech School of Fine Arts, which stood adjacent to Kafka's home and his father's shop. Collection of Jerry Zaslove. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC..

Installation view Comedia Masks on mannequins. Reproductions of masks from 18th century baroque theatre in Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

Installation view travel Trunk "Amerika—The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma". Trunk contains Charlie Chaplin Hand Puppet. Photograph courtesy of SFU LIDC.

THE OFFICER SHOWS THE LABYRINTHEAN BLUEPRINT FOR THE HARROW MACHINE TO THE EXPLORER WHO CAN BARELY READ THE NOTES

- Lots of flourishes around the actual script are needed
- The script runs around the body in a narrow girdle
- The rest of the body should be saved for ornamental marks
- Run up the ladder to turn the wheel if necessary
- Call to those below to beware the noise
- Watch out when coming down
- Look up at the Apparatus to check it out
- Follow the script if you can
- If it is not in working order climb back down into the pit and fix it
- Note that the Harrow writes the inscription on the back of the prisoner
- Slowly turn the prisoner over to allow for more free space for writing
- Deepen the raw wound that has been inscribed and staunch with cotton wool
- The teeth of the Harrow now tears the cotton wools from the wounds
- Pitch the wool into the pit so the Harrow can do its deeper work
- The writing work will take twelve hours
- Note that for the first six hours the condemned man lives merely as he did before
- Note: He suffers only pain
- After two hours the felt packing is removed
- Note: the man no longer has strength to scream
- Warm milk-rice from the electrically heated basin is set at the head of the bed
- The man can use his tongue to lap up as much as he wants
- Experience shows that few miss the chance to eat
- At about the sixth hour the man loses any desire to eat
- I usually kneel down to observe this phenomenon
- The man merely swallows the last bite and rolls it around his mouth before spitting it into the pit
- Be sure to duck or it will come into your face
- The man will grow quiet in the sixth hour
- Expect Enlightenment to come to even the stupidest fool
- It begins around the eyes and spreads beyond him into a moment that could tempt oneself to get under the Harrow with him
- Nothing further happens except the man begins to decipher the writing and purses his lips as if listening
- One will see it is not easy to decipher the script with one's eyes but our man deciphers it with his wounds.
- Be aware it's hard work and it takes all of six hours until completion
- Then, the Harrow pierces him through and throws him into the bottom of the pit where he pitches onto the blood and water soaked in the cotton wool.
- Then the judgment is fulfilled and we, the soldier and I, bury him like a dead animal.