

CATERINA TOGNON

arte contemporanea

NOT A PICTURE BUT AN EVENT

Vladimír Kopecký

14 September | 23 November, 2024



Vladimír Kopecký, *Untitled 3*. 2024, vitreous enamel paint on blown glass sphere. Ph: G. Urbánek

In occasione di:



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ITALICS
Art and Landscape

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'The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him.'

cit. Harold Rosenberg (poet, educator, philosopher, and art critic)

Introduction

This exhibition brings together a body of work made in Kopecký's tenth decade. It is a testament to the vitality, spirit, and dedication of the artist who has been experimenting with materials, form, scale, and colour throughout his art life. It takes its cue from Harold Rosenberg's reflections on life and the practice of art itself.

The glass objects here extend Kopecký's early 1960s experiments improvising with paint and etching on glass sheets, his 1970s assembled paintings that incorporate industrial and found materials, and his more recent performative installations generated in the theatre of the glass foundry. Where, in the intense heat, in front of an audience, Kopecký conducts glass blowers to pour hot molten glass over bricks, glass and metal panels while he throws and drips acrylic paint onto the transparent liquid as it solidifies — the action intensifies as he casts personal artefacts into the flames and the accompanying music builds to a crescendo.

Smaller in scale, (more intimate in their making) Kopecký is now painting on blown glass with vitreous enamels, harking back to an ancient Roman technique. The vessels and objects are brought to him in his studio. With his materials close to hand, his actions are led by the imperfections and bubbles that result from the blowing process, and the intense colours particular to Murano glass. Instinctive, playful, spontaneous and free. Action remains his fundamental truth.

'Not a picture but an event' was first coined by Harold Rosenberg in his 1952 essay, *The American Action Painters*, to argue that art cannot be separated from the artist's life. That every splash, drip, or spray of paint, every mark made, is a choice. The new artists in New York at that time, Rosenberg insisted, used the canvas as "an arena in which to act". And their actions in creating the art were an expression and reflection of the energy of a life's history. During an interview in the early 1970s Rosenberg recalls taking up "this question of action as a basis for the transformation of the individual". In the essay *Character Change and the Drama*, written 20 years earlier, in 1932, he discusses the practice of art:

'Individuals are conceived as identities in systems whose subject matter is action and the judgement of actions. In this realm the multiple incidents in the life of an individual may be synthesized, by the choice of the individual's existence and which, controlling his behaviour and deciding his fate, become his visible definition. Here unity of the "plot" becomes unity of being and through the fixity of identity change becomes synonymous with revolution.'

H. Rosendberg ,1960. Art & Literary Criticism, *The Tradition of the New*. Originally published: New York, Horizon Press, 1960.

Vladimír Kopecký - Biography

Born in 1931, at the beginning of a tumultuous political decade in European history, Kopecký spent his infant years with his parents and twin brother in Svojanov, a prosperous market village at the foot of the Bohemia Moravia Highlands. His mother was a seamstress, his father a carpenter.

By the mid 1930s the effects of the Great Depression, that began with the 1929 U.S. stock market crash, were being felt in Europe. The economy in neighbouring Germany collapsed. Jobs were scarce, poverty grew. The crisis reached Svojanov when the textile factories limited production, and unemployment rose rapidly. Kopecký was around four years-old. The family was now living in Uhřetěves, a small town on the outskirts of Prague. Encouraged by his mother, his ambition was to be an artist.

When he was around eight years-old the volatile political and economic climate led to the rise of Hitler's far right movement and relations between Czechoslovakia and Germany were strained. The clock began ticking on the countdown to WW2. In March 1939, German troops crossed the Czech border into Prague. In a pre-emptive act Hitler proclaimed Bohemia and Moravia a Protectorate of Germany on The Ides of March.

For the duration of the war, Kopecký spent his formative years living under Nazi occupation until the Prague uprising of 1945. He was fourteen years-old when Czechoslovakia became the final European country to be liberated by Allied troops. The family moved again to Děčín, north of Prague.

In 1946 Kopecký enrolled in the nearest state vocational school in Kamenický Šenov. He was about to begin his artistic life.

In 1948, after a short period of stability, the Czech Communist Party took power in a coup d'état, supported by the narrative that the USSR had freed the country. For the next forty years Czechoslovakia was a satellite state of the USSR, until the Velvet Revolution in 1989 brought a peaceful transition of power with free democratic elections.

In 1948-49, Kopecký attends Nový Bar, the State Industrial glass school before graduating in 1956 from the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague. During this time, he had a serious accident in a foundry, from which he was lucky to survive. His talent and promise were recognised by his professor, Josef Kaplický, who recommended Kopecký undertake a Postgraduate, which he completed in 1961.

Kopecký achieved success early on. Throughout his working life he's been awarded numerous prizes and public art commissions, most recently winning the competition to design one of the stations of the future Prague Underground line D – Nádraží Krč. His work is collected by private, national, and international collections worldwide, including National Gallery Prague, Museum of Decorative Arts Prague, Corning Museum New York, V&A London, and Toyama Museum Japan.

His actions in words are as decisive as his actions in his work— he is a highly respected teacher, and iconic figure for the students he taught as Professor and head of the Glass Studio at the University of Applied Arts, Prague from 1989-1995.