

ARTslant

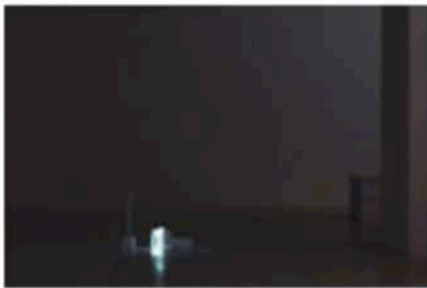
the #1 contemporary art network

chicago



'rak'rūm (noun);
the back room of an art gallery
where artists and art lovers hang

Jan Tichy



Jan Tichy, *Dimona*,
2006. , Digital video projection, 250g paper objects, stack of
approx. 4,000 A1 posters, text. Running time: 8 minutes.
© Courtesy of the artist and Richard Gray Gallery.



The Slant on Jan Tichy

Chicago, IL, March 2010-- Jan Tichy's installations and artworks are strongly formal but can also carry a social message, as hidden objects are revealed from the darkness to be abstract forms or constructions of more significance. Connections emerge from the different media that Tichy employs, presenting ongoing investigations into social conditions and politics, as well as being aesthetic investigations in themselves.

Tichy's practice has expanded to include exhibition design, designing "Moholy: An Education of the Senses," on view in Chicago at the Loyola Museum of Art, which starts our conversation below. Tichy's work itself is also on view currently in Chicago in the "Ground Level Projects," at the Spertus Institute, and in Portland at the Portland Art Museum's exhibition "Disquieted."

Abraham Ritchie: I wanted to start with the Lázló Moholy-Nagy exhibition, that you were the exhibition designer for. As I was viewing the exhibition, it struck me that there are some really interesting similarities between Moholy-Nagy's practice and yours, particularly [seen in Moholy-Nagy's] Light Prop that spins and bounces light off of the walls. Do you take interest in his practice? I know in your interview with Kathryn Hixson you did mention him briefly at the end of it, so could I hear more about him?

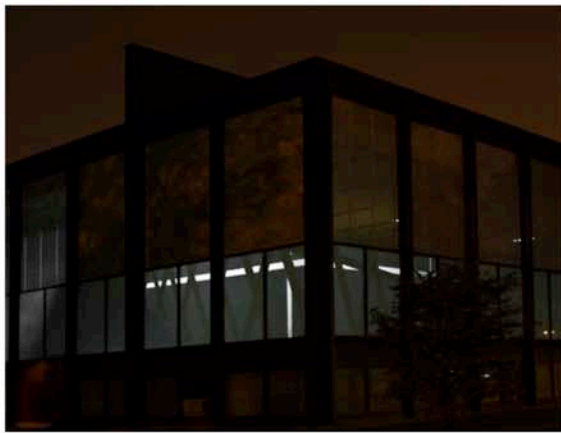
Jan Tichy: Moholy-Nagy, I first knew about him a long time ago. When I was teaching the History of Photography [class] in Israel he was part of the syllabus, but basically, you know, as a part of the photography timeline. With the photograms, he's somewhere near Man Ray.

When I came to Chicago, I rediscovered him as an artist and as an educator. I found him through his writings on sound; he was basically the first DJ, in 1921. He was writing in Berlin about using the gramophone as a tool of producing sound, rather than reproducing already made music. That's in the sense of taking the vinyl, scratch it, play it, scratch it again, listen to it. This was really interesting to me while I was thinking about the relationship between image and sound.

There are a couple of things that I would feel that [Moholy-Nagy and I] share. Most of my current practice is sculptural and installation, but I come from photography and that's where I bring the light from. I think Moholy's light is from photography as well, the photographs, photograms, films, sculptures, designs, and so on.

I rediscovered Moholy in Chicago and I started to read his educational writings and for myself as a teacher-artist I found his writing, as well as his art, very relevant to what I am doing and to how I see art education. In the Richard Gray show there was a small piece called *100RAW* [seen at right, all image credits at bottom]. It was a video of images [accompanied by] sounds of their own image files that were translated into sound. It was kind of a reaction to Moholy's writing on sound, it was almost an homage.





Last year in the summer, I was conducting a workshop with international MFA students at the IIT campus as part of the “Bauhaus Labs” projects that Mary Jane Jacobs and Justine Jentes put together here in Chicago. Again, I was using his teaching methods and looking at his ideas about light and architecture. We were doing this project in Crown Hall, the Mies van der Rohe building [installation view seen at left]. There’s an interesting connection between Moholy and Mies, these two guys who, basically, came from the same place, to the same place, at the same times, for the same reasons, but were so different. Their arrival in Chicago changed the landscape here-- the art and the architecture. They were such different personalities, and they never talked, they were basically ignoring each other. So it was interesting to bring Moholy’s ideas into this Mies temple.

[...]

AR: You mentioned contrast, the [way you bring “the light], and the way that you control it. That really was noticeable at the Richard Gray exhibition and the pieces elsewhere. Technologically you could use color in these pieces since you are using a LCD projector, so it’s not like you are limited by the technology, you are choosing to use black and white, or light and dark. I wanted to delve into that. What’s the greater significance of using black and white and working within that kind of light? Is it an aspect of controlling the light, does it lend itself to control easily? It also seems to link back to ideas of photography, which is your background.

JT: We can start with photography. Technically in both of the photography processes whether taking the picture or developing the picture, it’s basically starting from nothing, from darkness. Then the light starts to draw the image and you are controlling how much light can enter. The same goes for a studio shoot. If you have a studio, you start with darkness, next you turn the lights on.

In the sense of light, these are very natural processes, day and night. That is the background I am coming from, I was working with photography and video and at a certain time I realized that I could use video projection as a time-based light.

The first installation that I used this technique was *Dimona*, which is from a series of politically charged pieces [that use light and] paper cut models [seen at right]. There was one at the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago], 1391, which is the Israeli Guantanamo prison and is now on display at the Portland Art Museum. With *Dimona* there’s a paper cut model I have built-

AR: And this is the model of a nuclear reactor?



JT: Yes, it’s a nuclear power plant in Israel that is used for the production of nuclear weapons. It’s a secret site and a thing that is deeply taboo in Israeli society.

The projection, which was part of a floor-to-ceiling installation, was a strip of light scanning the object and revealing the object from the darkness and introducing [an element of] time. That was the beginning of using light produced by a video projector on a time-based level. Then more formal issues were introduced and more narrative elements, but the work has stayed in the black and white realm. It’s not that I didn’t check other options, or that I don’t use color, since I work in color in photography and video pieces.

I used objects from paper, porcelain, or painted MDF and these were always materials that were white, orb-like, some may have been in between, sometimes black, but mostly white. The projections allow me to activate them as very clear light reflectors but also as a narrative and expressive element.

AR: So there is a metaphorical weight to the light itself [. . .]

We've been mentioning the exhibition "Installations" at Richard Gray [2009] where you were actually able to have an entire floor at the Hancock building to yourself, due to the vacancies in that building. You had this floor to yourself and you set up installations in several rooms all around this floor.

What was really interesting about that exhibition was the role that you moved architecture into when planning a work and using each element. I remember that the Hancock's X-braces, which give the building its strength, were used a particular way for one of your projections. How do you approach a space when you're planning an installation? Does it take some time to get to know a space? What role does the architecture have?

JT: My pieces range from a white-cube environment to site-specific pieces that deal with a specific place and architecture. Most of my works on some level use architectural language, or the ideas of architecture, or formal aspects of architecture, so the connection is always there even if we are talking about a piece that was made in a studio environment for a white-cube setting. Bringing it into a place, architecture is always an issue.

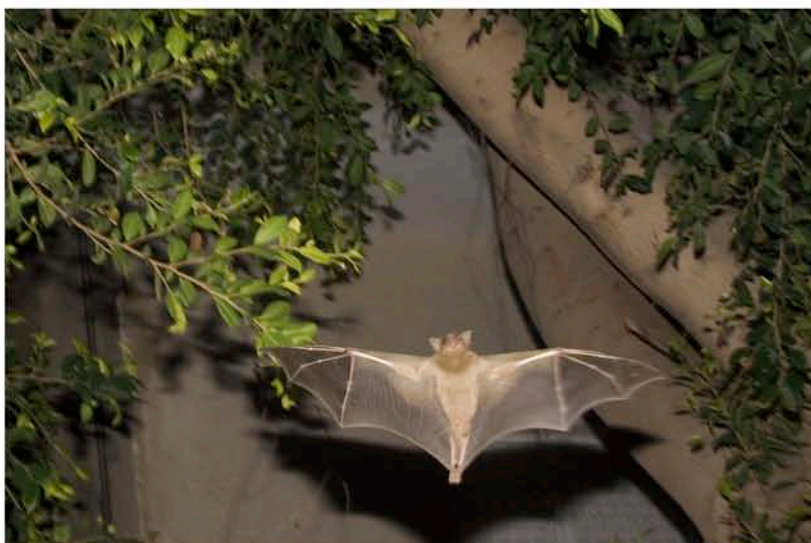
With the show at Richard Gray Gallery, there were two or three critical elements. One was luck, that there was this space, this very particular space in a very particular building and my works already have architectural contents, some of them

even formally relating to structures like the Hancock tower. So the starting point was good. The other thing was that, unlike other places or shows, I had basically all the time that I wanted to be there and to prepare it. I basically moved into the tower with my studio and was working there for three months, not just on that show but on other projects too. But that allowed me to really be there, to really feel it, to know the spaces, to know the tower, to know the spirit and really feel the architecture.

From the earliest moment it was clear to me that apart from the pieces I brought that were already done before, from the last two and a half years, it was clear to me that the space was asking for site-specific intervention. So there was one piece that basically took one of the architectural elements, that part of the X-brace, and worked with it as a sculptural element.

Or there are spaces like the Spertus Institute, the exhibition that just opened, where I was working in a very architecturally open environment that the piece just had to take into account. Therefore for this very particular space, it's a very site-specific installation that takes into account the specifics of the place, of the physical architecture, of the light, of the concept of the institution itself.

Many times the space or the building can [indicate things] to me, so I really enjoy working with different spaces.



AR: *There seems to be an interesting thread running through your work of this revealing of things that are in darkness and unknown that you bring into light, whether through actual physical light or through capturing an image, and I'm thinking of Bats [above] or 1391 particularly here.*

How do ideas of hidden knowledge, or the revealing of knowledge through exposing an object, come out? You seem to have a lot of analogues running through your work: bats, secret nuclear reactors, secret prisons.

JT: With my art I try to talk, to touch, to somehow be in a dialogue with my audience. Things like exposure or revelation or charged spaces, are ways to discuss other issues. These tools are again connected back to photography, exposure and things that are hidden and that point of revealing something. These dualities that you can find between the light and the darkness go much further than what's there. This is in the sense of what we were talking about earlier; the exposure can be physical with the light but also be an exposure of ideas, or things that are hidden. I guess that's one way of how to get into the hidden places of the audience, to let them reveal through the pieces things about themselves. We think about the way we see things and react to them, this can happen during viewing the work.

AR: *To wind up our conversation by way of Moholy-Nagy, he described the artist in terms of politics, "artists, writers, scientists and philosophers become the revolutionaries of a realistic utopia, awakened from the mere enjoyment of their craft to essential duties and responsibilities toward the community."*



We've talked about several works that have both overt and subtle political content. There's a lot of discourse and opinion about the artist and what their political responsibilities are or should be, especially coming out from the Bush Administration and the many, many controversies that surrounded that administration. I wanted to ask you, how you view politics in your work and your approach?

JT: It's true that every work has some political aspect, though some are really hidden for particular viewers. At the same time I hope that all the works have strong visual qualities. It seems like through [my visual] tools I can start to discuss the issues that I have found relevant for me and my audience.

I do believe that art can cause change, on various levels. Basically I do believe that. I wonder if that is because of my personal history, since I had the chance to witness three very significant political moments.

I witnessed the Velvet Revolution in 1989 in Czechoslovakia where I grew up. I grew up with a deep awareness of the system and the dictatorship. The revolution in '89 was something that I was personally involved in. At the age of sixteen and seventeen [I was] experiencing such a thing as the collapse of a regime and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, it was in a good direction, the end of dictatorship, the beginning of democracy.

Then when I moved to Israel I was there when the Oslo Accords were signed. Suddenly you could go to Palestine and Palestinian cities and there was a lot of optimism in the air. But I witnessed the other sides, when all the things went downhill. I was a student at the Jerusalem School of Photography, I was for ten years living in a city that was terrorized on a regular basis.

Two years ago, my studio was on Columbus Drive [a street neighboring Grant Park], so I experienced the election of Barack Obama. It was right there! So I do believe that things can change, I think that things are moving, so maybe my optimism comes from this personal experience.

I do believe that art can function as a tool to reach out, on many different levels, if it's with conceptual issues in a white-cube environment or if it's working with the community [directly]. I believe that artists can, or should be, involved and there are so many levels on which it can be done. I think, in that sense, the arts are a very open platform.

--Abraham Ritchie, Chicago City Editor

(Images credits, from top to bottom: **Jan Tichy**, *100 RAW*, 2009, Digital video with sound on wall-mounted LCD monitor, 8 1/4 x 12 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches. Running time: 5 minutes; **Installation view of Lighting the Crown Hall**, 2009, Collaborative project with 15 digital projections., Running time: approx. 45 minutes; **Jan Tichy**, *Dimona*, 2006, Digital video projection, 250g paper objects, stack of approx. 4,000 A1 posters, text. Running time: 8 minutes; **Jan Tichy**, *Installation No. 8 (Hancock)*, 2009; **Jan Tichy**, *Bats*, 2002-2007, Two-channel slide projection of eighty 35mm slides onto adjacent walls, Running time: 8 minutes; **Jan Tichy**, *Recess*, 2009, Single channel high-definition digital video projection, Running time: 10 minutes; All images courtesy of the artist and Richard Gray Gallery)