

# Ján Mančuška. *Me, the Double, and the Other*

Curator : Vít Havránek

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Q. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

A. "Cinema . . . is the art of allowing ghosts to come back."<sup>1</sup>

To the left, in the main space of VOX, the visitor sees Ján Mančuška's video *Double* (2009). In a semi-documentary arrangement, one man stands before the video projection of another man. Both figures perform the same monologue, but the viewer only hears one voice (that of the second man, on the screen). It recounts a mysterious tale about the mirrored duplication of a space; about a house, the doors to that house, and the doors to an apartment in Bratislava, into which fits a key intended for a similar-looking house and apartment in another city (Prague).

The entirely mirrored duplication of known reality in another, strange city depicted in the installation *Double* has the ghostlike nature of which Derrida speaks in the introductory quotation. The duplicated image is convincing enough to dupe the human senses completely, even as reason tells us it is impossible. Fully believing in the true existence of a duplicated reality is possible only in dreams. If someone were to dream such a story—and each person would perhaps dream it a little differently—then no dreamer would doubt its truthfulness.

The narrative of *Double*, however, ends with another duplication: the main narrator finds himself confronting his double. But the double is not his mirror image, and does not even look like him. The story thus ends in fear. Where else but in a dream or in a film could one meet one's phantom—one's double? The double winds up on the threshold of a split-personality state, where the ghost is as real as the reality, a condition some psychiatrists link with schizophrenia.

The story of the works of Ján Mančuška may begin where the story of the *Double* ends. The action of *Double* has been described here as though it took place outside time. However, it was filmed in 2009, when the artist (who was born to Slovak parents in Bratislava and who has lived most of his life in Prague, in the Czech lands) was 37 years old. The cities that are spoken of in *Double* were of crucial importance to the author—they reminded him of the "ambivalence" of his nationality. In the Czech lands he claimed allegiance to his Slovak origins (among other things, writing his name the Slovak way with the accent over the á: Ján) so that he could distance himself from them in Slovakia. After 1992, when the Czech-Slovak federation was divided into two independent states, the narrative of one's Slovak origins in Czech lands acquired a new ideological dimension.<sup>2</sup> An individual can, thanks to origins in a different country, escape being shut into the static identity of the country in which he lives. In Mančuška's case, as in many others, it was certainly not just a simple affirmation of the national origin of the country from which he came, but of an uncertain in-between life; a life lived between two firm shores of identity.

Let us return to the hero of the moment, who is gazing into the eyes of his double. Post-Communist schizophrenia, like capitalist schizophrenia, is a theme that has been addressed by Ilya Kabakov, Boris Buden, Felix Guattari and other artists and writers. Schizophrenics describe states during which they can hear "two or more voices in opposition." The moment that shaped Mančuška's generation came with the political changes of 1989, known variously as the Velvet Revolution or the Fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>3</sup> That double title is more than symptomatic.

Members of that generation, born in the 1970s in the Socialist bloc, considered authoritative Socialism to be somewhat unsatisfying but natural, because they had experienced neither the “Socialism with a human face” of the 1960s, nor Western capitalism. Consequently authoritarian Socialism was replaced by a version of neo-liberal capitalism imported from the West. Intoxication with capitalist pleasures did not last long. A question that had been pushed out returned: What had happened to the will of the active crowd of citizens that had overthrown the authoritarian regime? And what had happened to love? Was the love between two people under Socialism—the opposite of capitalist love—thus a false love? (The same could also be asked with respect to other moral and social values.) And if not, where does the dividing line run between the old and the new order? It runs across the subject, and it causes schizophrenia, because it speaks with two voices at the same time.

One must also recall, in relation to this, Mančuška's works *Big Mirror* (*Velké zrcadlo*, 2008) and *The Other* (2007). *Big Mirror* consists of a large mirror, unaltered in any way, fixed to the wall of the gallery. The mirror does not duplicate reality, but creates on its surface an image that appears to the human eye to be a duplication of reality.<sup>4</sup> *The Other* is a photographic record of a performance during which a clothed woman darkens parts of a male friend's naked body that he cannot see. *The Other* and *Big Mirror* are works in which mirroring is found in opposition. The dark parts on the model's body show those parts that the individual cannot see, but at the same time they create the identity of his “I”, which others see. Here we may recall Melanie Klein: to Lacan's interpretation of the “mirror stage,” she adds that it is not so much a mirror that we require to recognize ourselves but, above all, “the other.” It is only in contact with an other that we recognize the completely specific possibility of our own body; it is only someone else who can clarify for us whether the double to whom we opened the door with our own key is our own image, or a complete stranger.

— Vít Havránek, curator

1. Exchange between Pascale Ogier and Jacques Derrida in the film *Ghost Dance* (West Germany / UK, 1983, dir. Ken McMullen).
2. When Mančuška was born, the two independent states currently known as the Czech Republic and Slovakia were one federal state, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. It was divided in 1992.
3. The lack of terminological clarity—Is this a revolution or a fall?; i.e., an emancipatory act by massed citizens, or a passive threat to a construction which can no longer withstand the rules of the market economy?—is in itself already a sign of two diametrically different versions.
4. Lacan, in his major early essay about the mirror, attributes the paranoid nature of knowledge to the ontological structure of the human world itself. The paranoid essence of knowledge emerges best when observing a small child who recognizes him- or herself in the mirror.

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Front:  
Ján Mančuška, *Double*, still, 2009, video installation with soundtrack, 3 min. 29 sec.

Back:  
Ján Mančuška, *The Other (I Asked my Wife to Blacken All the Parts of My Body Which I Cannot See)*, detail, 2007, installation with 15 b/w 35mm film strips, light box. Exhibition view, VOX. Credit: Michel Brunelle. Courtesy of Ján Mančuška Estate, Andrew Kreps Gallery (New York) and Meyer Riegger (Karlsruhe/Berlin).

Ján Mančuška, *Reverse Play*, still, 2007, HD video with soundtrack, 9 min. 47 sec.

Ján Mančuška, *Lost Memory (Postcatastrophic Story)*, 2010, video, sound, 29 min. 21 sec. Exhibition view, VOX. Credit: Michel Brunelle.