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Bogdan
Borčić

**In principio
erat Dachau**

Thoughts on the exhibition

The exhibition of a cycle of prints by the academy-trained painter and printmaker Bogdan Borčić titled *In principio erat Dachau*, as a paraphrase of the opening of the Gospel According to John 'In principio erat Verbum' ('In the beginning was Dachau' and 'In the beginning was the Word' (God the Son)), staged at the Center of Jewish Cultural Heritage Synagogue Maribor, is actually a touring exhibition of a 2014 exhibition staged as the 10th installation in the Bogdan Borčić Graphic Cabinet. The exhibited prints are from a graphic art folder titled *In principio erat Dachau* consisting of 8 x 7 prints, commissioned in 2014 by the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site (KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau), which was the second commission of this kind. In fact, in 2004 Dr. Michaela Haibl of the Memorial Site paid a personal visit to Borčić to ask him to participate in an international symposium and documentary art exhibition later that same year as an artist and a person who had born witness to the atrocities at the Dachau Concentration Camp. It took a lot of persuasion, perhaps even more so at the time than later. The year 2014 marks the artist's death and also the presentation of his last Dachau-related graphic art folder at the Božidar Jakac Art Museum in Kostanjevica na Krki. For the purposes of this exhibition, the museum has loaned the Synagogue Maribor prints that are part of more than 1,000 that Borčić donated to the museum and are included in the Bogdan Borčić Graphic Cabinet. In 2005, after his first collaboration with the Dachau



Bogdan Borčić, *Arbeit macht frei*, 2014, etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8386



Bogdan Borčić, *Black door*, 2014, etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8388



Bogdan Borčić, *Double crematorium furnace*, 2014, colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8393

Concentration Camp Memorial Site, the artist received the Prešeren Lifetime Achievement Award. Later that same year, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška (KGLU) in Slovenj Gradec organised an outstanding exhibition titled *Prisoner No. 91324*, the expressive power of which left a profound impression on viewers, while also providing a rare insight into the essence of the artist's minimalism with a soul. This is how I experienced this exhibition, which resulted in an even deeper bond with the artist with whom I was in contact through the Maribor Fine Artists' Society (DLUM), of which I was a member, as well as through the Maribor Art Gallery (UGM). I also authored several texts for him, including the catalogue of his last exhibition staged at the DLUM Gallery at Židovska ulica 10 in Maribor, in the immediate vicinity of the synagogue. A coincidence? I don't think so, because his last graphic art folder *In principio erat Dachau* made me believe that Synagogue Maribor was the most suitable exhibition venue for this shocking, yet optimistic cycle of prints. Although scant pieces of information about Borčić's Dachau imprisonment between 1944 and 1945 can be found in the biographies of every single catalogue or monograph, finding some more concrete information about this proves a much more difficult task, as the artist never liked talking about the specifics of the most horrifying chapter of his life. The deep wounds inflicted on the barely seventeen-year-old in one of the most inhumane

institutions of human civilization simply did not allow him to open up again, although they left a permanent imprint not only on his day-to-day life but also his artistic creativity. The thing that I found most fascinating about Borčić was the way he confronted this terrible murderous institution, whose aim was not only to kill prisoners, but even more so to humiliate them, make fun of them (*Arbeit macht frei*) and take away their human dignity. Only Borčić himself knew how much self-control and courage it took for an innocent man to confront the earthly 'infernal abyss' when he accepted the challenge to create the last graphic cycle right before he looked death in the face, so to speak. Borčić never anticipated that the early camp-related theme of his drawings, which he started creating during his imprisonment at the Dachau Concentration Camp, i.e. in a 'realistic', pre-academic period, followed by the prints and paintings in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, could continue in the form of a continuous 'Dachau' cycle in 2004 and onwards, with a longer break in between, all the way until 2014. In his camp-related works the gradual development of the formal stylisation of human figures is noticeable, from a portrait to an impersonal sign, the creation of an orthogonal, net-like composition of barbed wire or prisoners' clothes, the development of symbolic motifs of shells (burnt corpses) and doors (hopelessness: the barracks, single cells, a crematorium, a fence), the appearance of non-chromatic, dark colours as a symbol of repression, etc. His later

works, however, once again feature collage – this time in a reinterpreted form (*A Letter to My Mother, KZ Documents*), applications and perforations, as well as Borčić's menacing prisoner number 91324 and the political prisoners' red colour, which completely dehumanised the internees to the level of impersonal objects. All this represents an artistic and thematic basis of this last exhibition, for which Borčić – at the time aged 87 – prepared painstakingly; there is, for instance, a 'prototype' pastel on paper titled *A Double Crematory* created in 2013, which has all the features of prints, ranging from an architectonic construction to glowing colours. In fact, Borčić's crematories are symbols of survival in spiritual reality, because whoever destroys the body is unable to destroy the immortal soul. The crematory and fire symbolise the Holocaust or a burnt offering, which exists in eternity as an innocent victim. Unfortunately, the present time is marked by the deaths of innocent people who have fallen victims to coronavirus, a soulless killer that makes no sense and is reminiscent of wars and natural disasters, yet this is also a time characterised by people coming together to resist the tyranny of insensitivity and selfishness.

Mario Berdič Codella
Art critic and curator

Bogdan Borčič – In principio erat Dachau

Will man ever be capable of attaining such a degree of civilization and culture that he will be able to root out violent conflict from his *modus vivendi*? Any definition of the existential end of man is, sadly, beyond measure; each year, the limits on systematic terror and suffering are raised, as if they were Olympic records, while somewhere in between, in silence and suffering, remain the muted victims and their loved ones.

At a young, impressionable age, Bogdan Borčič himself was a victim of the systematic terror of World War II, as he was detained at the Dachau concentration camp. Surely we are all aware of how intensely the experiences of a young soul, still learning what life is about, imprint themselves; few - yet far too many - know of the deep, painfully branded mark that the experience of a concentration camp leaves. Artists tell us their stories in different ways. Bogdan Borčič is among those artists who have devoted themselves to man's intimate existential depths, to a place where there has never been room for ideological pamphlets or political radicalism. Over the course of his opus, his world of artistic expression has slowly slid into a minimalism of silence. Into an intimate world that knew how to issue a loud cry for attention, when needed, using elements of silence. Many theorists have labelled him a foremost figure of Modern art in Slovenia, and have pointed out how, in his opus, he uses his wealth of technical skill, as well as his exceptionally broad theoretical grounding, to his



Bogdan Borčič, *No. 91324*, 2014,
colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8387



Bogdan Borčič, *Brausenbad*, 2014,
colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8390



Bogdan Borčič, *Cell wall in the bunker*, 2014,
colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8392

advantage. This was clear and obvious in the numerous citations of and references to the great masters that Borčič liked to use in his art; and yet, the fundamental motif, which is present in every single one of Bogdan Borčič's works, is his experience of the concentration camp. It was the experience of a soul fenced off by force, of a soul that was archetypically oriented towards the blue expanse of the Mediterranean.

Several years after the war, Borčič addressed the subject of Dachau through an approach that was somewhat narrative, but also explicitly marked by his own recognisable poetics; the result was a number of drawings, graphic prints and paintings on the subject. When Zoran Mušič created his shocking series entitled *Nismo poslednji/We are not the Last*, Borčič was known to have said, on several occasions, that he was finished with the subject. In a manner ontologically reminiscent of Theodor Adorno, who openly questioned whether poetry was still possible after Auschwitz, Borčič stated that with his series on Dachau, Mušič had said all there was to be said. Borčič's experience of Dachau, and consequently his open-ended inquiries of an existential-humanistic nature, would remain present in his works throughout, but would manifest themselves through the symbolism of visual elements. Be it in the strict geometric, schematic order of fishermen's nets, or in numbered shells placed in a web-like structure that closed off the entire visual space, and that over the years would

be transformed into points, and ultimately into the small perforations in the monochrome planes of the series of works entitled *Znaki/Signs*. Yet when the nets gradually burned out, it is not the timeless space of whiteness that remained, but large, usually black, monochrome surfaces that had the effect of a mighty wall. This is also what Borčič needed in order to execute a radical stroke after many years, an incision in a printing plate, through which he let pass an immaculate shade of white, a symbolic ray of light, a final penetration into a space not confined, into freedom.

Following a break from graphic works that lasted several years, had Bogdan Borčič in 2014 received a commission from the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. He created the *In principio erat Dachau* graphic art folder, a series of eight graphics in seven prints. With his last remaining strength, but also with an eruptive human energy, he produced numerous preparatory sketches; he prepared the printing plates and meticulously oversaw the printing, as verified by his signature; the other graphic prints, dated immediately before his death, were left to others. These eight prints bear countless references to Borčič's entire creative opus, and with the series, he has quite simply astonished us. He has astonished us by showing us that even after Mušič, it is possible to tell such a powerful, intimate story, and he has astonished us with the fact that this story is still relevant today, well into the twenty-first century. Yet it is no

longer a question of chronological context, but of pure being. This is Bogdan Borčič's final showdown, and it therefore comes as no surprise that in it, he returned to the concentration camp. Only this time, it was not a fenced-off view through, but rather a direct confrontation. Although there are no people in Borčič's depictions, which only contain the artist's characteristic series of objects and atmospheres, the works present an eye-to-eye view, a look into the eyes of the civilization man has built. That is something that only the greatest of artists can achieve.

Goran Milovanović

Director of the Božidar Jakac Art Museum
(modified text of a leaflet of the 10th Installation in the Bogdan Borčič Graphic Cabinet)

Bogdan Borčič

(1926, Ljubljana–2014, Slovenj Gradec), painter and printmaker. In 1943/44 he studied at the painting school of Matej Sternen and drawings school of France Gorše in Ljubljana. In 1944 he was imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Ljubljana where he later worked as a Professor, and in Paris. In 2005, he received Prešeren award for his life opus. He is one of the most important artists of contemporary Slovene painting and one of the main representatives of Ljubljana School of Graphic Art. His work clearly shows the development of Modernist painting, starting with realistic representations and evolving through the phases of gradual disintegration of the object towards complete minimalistic – and, finally, associative – abstraction, with thoroughly present spirit of existentialism.

Since 2001 the Božidar Jakac Art Museum holds in the Bogdan Borčič Graphic Cabinet a collection of more than 1400 works by the artist, among which are predominantly graphic prints. Inside the graphic cabinet visitors can also find a collection of exhibition catalogues and a presentation of the basic printing tools. Each year a new exhibition of artist's work is set in the cabinet, according to chronological series.

Bogdan Borčič In principio erat Dachau

An Exhibition of Prints and Drawings

**CENTER JUDOVSKKE KULTURNE
DEDIŠČINE SINAGOGA MARIBOR**
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