

# POLANSKY

Vladimír Houdek

P O L I S

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curated by Filip Šenk

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Vladimír Houdek: The Painting and the City and the Book

In a polyphony of activity, the City is swelling, overgrowing, shackling and unleashing itself. The enchanting image of the City (indeterminate image of indeterminate city) constitutes a major part of the image of the contemporary world. However, it is not composed of projections of data – sociological, economic or geographic. The image of the perceived city places before the viewer something else that simply cannot be quantified. The paintings presented by Vladimír Houdek at this exhibition come close, because they latch onto the city's inner emotion: an image of constant activity that is elusive yet remains proximate.

In many of its current variations, the City arouses diverse forms of relations, from anachronism to life's ideal. Without exaggerating, cities may be described as distinctive elements of key structures of the contemporary perception of the world: the City is viewed as an instrument for increasing both the positive and negative aspects of life. In his book *Scale* (2017), Geoffrey West, a theoretical physicist who turned his research focus to questions regarding the nature of life, also writes about the lives of cities. He notices the evident: our time is the time of cities, after all for the first time in humanity's recorded history, the majority of the world population lives in cities (in 2006 it was about half). In place of the concept of the Anthropocene, West thus proposes the term Urbanocene for our epoch. The City is not a neutral background device, it is not simply the given nature of the framework, because it is in fact an instrument for the generation of innovation, wealth and power, as much as it is linked to crime, poverty, disease and high energy and resource consumption.

Even though Geoffrey West and his team have been able to come up with laws for the scaling and growth of cities, the perceived experience cannot be domesticated so simply. That is one of the reasons why the City remains ambiguous in terms of the way it is experienced, becoming an object of fascination: not, however, an object that we can simply place before us in its totality. The City is a place of encounters, exchanges and sharing, as much it is as a place of gaps, interruptions and concealment.

Does the City, then, have a form that can be depicted? Factual representations of cities, whether in the form of maps, photographs or data visualisations, are always somehow reductive, regardless of the scale at which we are observing the City. This opens up a field for coming to terms with the reality of the City's everydayness. In his most recent artworks, Vladimír Houdek has been creating an image of the City that is literally palpable – or thumbable – since it is embedded in the format of a book cover. The work is a continuation of the artist's previous series of paintings-books that led

him to set up his own fictional publishing house, Atilis Press, for which he has been designing book covers. The starting point for all the titles of the current series of paintings-books is the Greek word *polis*; while some of the titles such as Metropolis or Necropolis hold a familiar place in the vocabulary of the contemporary world, others like Obsepolis or Xanopolis designate forms that have not yet arisen, even though the books-paintings may bear marks of having been read. We do not know the contents of the books, and never will. The paintings of the cities on the covers are quivering moments that show us fragments of possible worlds. The paintings are similar to each other in that they always represent a city, but while they sometimes approach a state of happiness, at others it is one of catastrophe.

The interblending of real and fictional worlds creates the series' decisive quality. Here, the actual lived experience of the dynamics of the City encounters the will to give it persistent form without imposing invariability upon it. It is thus worth noticing that for Vladimír Houdek's this task is accompanied by variable compositional schemes and an unusually colourful palette. The majority of the previous series, including the first set of paintings-books for Attila Press, consisted of works with a clearly defined centre generally balanced out by an accent in the form of extension beyond the margins. With the current series, we observe flurries of movements, lines and colours that do not extend beyond the dimensions of the base in actual fact, but rather with the aid of projection into ideal space (of the mind): we thus behold fragments of the complex activities of urban culture. While in previous works the overlapping edges of layers of paint could be seen as physical instruments for disrupting the neatness of format, now the extensions beyond the painting's insufficient surface are an expression of the uncontrollable activity they depict. Even so, it is still an activity that is in some way already domesticated, having been made part of a book. A city arranged to be handheld.

There are no references to concrete cities or settlements in these paintings. They are not an attempt to imitate the world since they create their own, self-sufficient reality as paintings. This pictorial reality is penetrated and interwoven with the experienced world through insights from geometry, art history and literature. Here, the painting-book is simultaneously an image of an indeterminate city as well as a connection to a hidden narrative. The experience of the City is impressed upon the structure of these paintings, without it being possible to identify them with Prague or any other specific city (or, put the other way around: they could be paintings of Prague, but also of any other city). Because we are not supplied with narratives about cities contained between the covers of the books, we cannot rely on words and statements to elucidate and perhaps even vindicate the vision of the City on the front cover. We are observing neither the forms of images of the City created from the external viewpoint of a scientist, nor the internal perspective of the writer. Detached and immersed at the same time, the paintings can easily do without a connection to any city in particular, and still remain dependent on a shared experience of the City.

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