

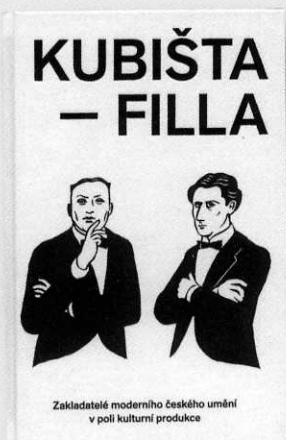
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Marie Rakušanová

## Kubišta — Filla

### Zakladatelé moderního českého umění v poli kulturní produkce

Plzeň, Západočeská galerie v Plzni — Brno, B&P Publishing 2019, pp. 295, 192 color and b/w images, list of exhibited artworks, name index, English summary, catalogue of the exhibition 7. 6. 2019 — 29. 9. 2019, Gallery of West Bohemia



'We were like two mountain climbers roped together', wrote Georges Braque about his collaboration with Picasso during the early days of cubism.<sup>1</sup> By that measure, Bohumil Kubišta and Emil Filla, who were the first Prague artists to engage with cubism, were ascending two distinct routes at a continually increasing distance. This is the picture that emerges of Kubišta and Filla in the catalog by Marie Rakušanová to the exhibition *Kubišta–Filla. Plzeňská disputace* (*Kubišta–Filla. A Pilsen Disputation*), which she recently organized at the Gallery of West Bohemia. One of the most conceptually interesting studies to be published in recent years on two figures who occupy a central position in the history of modern Czech art, the book takes a close look at how Kubišta's and Filla's life and work intersected and diverged in the formative stages of their careers. It makes a persuasive case for the benefits of placing closely related historical figures such as these back into dialogue with one another in the space of an exhibition and publication, and introduces an array of new insights and source materials that will be of great interest to scholars working on Czech art of the early twentieth century.

The book is organized into four main chapters that map the life and work of the two artists from their earliest years through 1918, when Kubišta suffered an untimely death from influenza shortly after the end of the war. A concluding fifth chapter briefly surveys the reputations that the two artists held in the new Czechoslovak republic, when Filla rose to more prominent positions in local artistic and cultural institutions, and Kubišta, although no longer alive and largely ignored by mainstream organizations, became an object of fascination and sometimes model for Prague's youngest artists in the early 1920s. Rakušanová terms the book's chapters 'constellations', and she in part approaches Kubišta and Filla through the lens of the writings of Pierre Bourdieu—specifically Bourdieu's notion of modern artistic and cultural production as the product of a complex interplay of social forces, structures, and relations. This has the welcome outcome of complicating many of the assumptions traditionally held about Kubišta's and Filla's art, such as the trope of Kubišta

as a 'lonely self' working in isolation, a theme that emerges pictorially in some of the artist's paintings but has most often been overstated.<sup>2</sup> It also positions Rakušanová's text as a social and cultural history—the type of book that until the last decade, has not had much of a presence in the literature on early Czech modernism.

The first two chapters of the book map the different social and economic backgrounds of Kubišta, Filla, and their families, and how circumstances brought them together as part of a contingent of young, progressive students at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts. Their departure from the academy precipitated the formation of the bilingual and ethnically diverse group known as the Eight (*Osmá*, or *Die Acht* in German) and the staging of its two landmark exhibitions of 1907 and 1908. As members of the group, Filla and Kubišta came as close together as they would ever become. For brief intervals in fall 1909 and summer 1910, they even lived together in an apartment Filla rented on Kozí ulice in Prague. Rakušanová is the first to draw attention to this living arrangement (pp. 108, 127), and her book demonstrates how important in general domestic settings such as these were to the artists and their contemporaries, not merely as studio space, but as sites of congregation and exchange. Filla's apartment often received visitors, including František Xaver Šalda, who at one point promised to bring with him a wealthy American patron, a woman, to view and purchase pictures, and in late 1908 *Osmá* attempted to hold an improvised showing of the group's work in the apartment of Antonín Procházka and Linka Scheithauerová. (pp. 93–94) These are among the many new findings that Rakušanová shares in her book, premised on careful research in archival and primary sources. This includes her discovery of a previously unknown and significant article by Kubišta in *Národní listy* in June 1911, in which Kubišta voiced support for the then controversial selection of the Viennese architect Friedrich Ohmann to build a villa for the Czech politician Karel Kramář. Rakušanová reads this as an instance of Kubišta 'cosmopolitan idealism' (p. 149), and it comes across as something even more specific: as yet one

more expression of the pointed resistance to local nationality politics that many Osma artists, particularly Kubišta, nurtured from early on.

Earning a living from the sale of their work was a very real goal for both Filla and Kubišta, and there is ample evidence given in the book that this was an especially difficult task in a city like Prague. Despite being the third largest municipality in Austria-Hungary, Prague at the start of the twentieth century lacked a diversified art market, and for artists inclined to modern, not academic painting, the only available path to exhibiting and selling work ran through a small handful of more established organizations. Osma, whose social dynamics and exhibitionary strategies Filla and Kubišta helped formulate, was in part constituted to provide an independent, less restrictive alternative to this limited set of venues, and Rakušanová notes correctly that the group ultimately proved more successful in attaining what Bourdieu terms 'symbolic', rather than 'economic' capital. For Filla, Kubišta, and their circle, self-formed social structures of community and association such as Osma held 'the function of a market for symbolic goods, in which individual members found support for surmounting representational conventions' ('funkci trhu symbolických statků, ve kterém jednotliví členové nacházeli podporu pro překračování zobrazovacích konvencí', p. 70). This same structure afforded Kubišta and Filla a platform from which to compete within the city's broader artistic arena for other symbolic gains: for public attention, and for the perceived status, positive as well as negative, accorded to those in the artistic vanguard.

Rakušanová takes a more strictly economic view of Kubišta's hopeful but fledgling discussions with his uncle Oldřich Kubišta, a schoolteacher and socialist, about starting a gallery in Prague for modern art, which never materialized. (pp. 66–67) Money, or more commonly its absence, looms throughout the book, with Filla having a somewhat easier time than Kubišta in selling his art, although his advantage did not show itself until later and appears to have been quite modest. (pp. 133–134, 178–179) In the book's third and fourth chapters, the two artists begin to drift apart in a 'distancing' ('vzdalování') that begins in late 1909 and by 1911 develops into a near complete 'separation' ('rozchod'). Filla initially appears to be the instigator of this break, as in the example that Rakušanová provides of Filla's brief role as editor of the magazine *Volné směry* in fall 1910, in which he published his own artwork and writing but deliberately excluded Kubišta, even as he relied heavily in the issues he prepared on knowledge and imagery that Kubišta shared with him, particularly of cubism. (pp. 128–130) The following year Filla helped to establish the Group of Fine Artists (Skupina výtvarných umělců), which soon became Prague's main institutional platform for cubism and Filla's own primary field of social and professional activity. Kubišta showed minimal interest in the group.

The distance between them was in fact mutually forged. As the book documents, both artists had always

nurtured somewhat different interests and inclinations, socially as well as artistically, and over time these widened into a true gap. Rakušanová asserts that by the middle of 1911, Kubišta was inching towards isolation within his own generation. (p. 150) But reading between the lines of her narrative and the substantial notes at the end of the book, there are clues that what may have looked like isolation was, more accurately, a shift towards new social and professional alliances distinct from those of Filla. Between 1910 and through spring 1913, when Kubišta enlisted in the military and left for an Austrian naval facility on the Adriatic Sea, he devoted his energy to strengthening a variety of friendships old and new: with Šalda and Josef Čapek, with younger artists like Jan Zrzavý and Jan Trampota, and with cultural journals including *Česká kultura*, *Novina*, and *Přehled*, where he published extensively. He even took a position as secretary of the preservationist Club for Old Prague (Klub za starou Prahu). As Rakušanová recounts in greater detail, Kubišta at that time also cultivated a variety of connections in Germany, a topic on which she has previously published, and which she expands on significantly hereby discussing Kubišta's relationship with Die Brücke artists Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Otto Mueller, his participation in the fourth exhibition of the Neue Secession, which opened in Berlin in November 1911, and both his and Filla's contact with Der Blaue Reiter. (pp. 172–179)

Perhaps the most substantive difference between Kubišta and Filla concerns their diverging artistic practices, techniques, and theories, particularly at the time they started to negotiate cubism—which they did separately and without the closeness that characterized the relations of Picasso and Braque in Paris. The book confirms that Kubišta, not Filla, was indeed the first artist in Prague to become aware of cubism and to adapt cubist practices to his own art. Rakušanová identifies the summer of 1910 as an especially decisive moment for Kubišta, when after returning home from two lengthy stays in Paris between the spring and late summer of 1909, and between December 1909 and June 1910, he started work on the painting *Kuřák* (*The Smoker*) (Národní galerie v Praze), which he showed the next year with the Neue Secession. Rakušanová suggests that Kubišta himself, if somewhat belatedly, recognized the painting's importance as one of the first concrete examples of a cubist work by a Czech artist, later writing in 1914 to Vlastislav Hofman, who planned to publish the picture, to request that its date be clearly identified. (p. 119) At the time that Kubišta painted the canvas, Filla had almost no first-hand familiarity with cubism.

Filla had traveled to Paris earlier during his student years, and Rakušanová offers the reminder that he did not return to France until, at the earliest, a brief trip in November 1910 with his future wife Hana Krejčí.<sup>3</sup> (p. 123) Filla's physical distance then from the Parisian scene may in part account for the halting, uncertain manner of his own earliest negotiations of cubism in his



work, and for his relative lateness, compared to Kubišta, in recognizing the movement's importance. Rakušanová raises the possibility that Filla may have developed some of his initial awareness of cubism through seeing Kubišta's paintings, and suggests that Filla's allegorical late 1910 canvas *Podzim* (*Autumn*) (Private collection), the first of Filla's pictures to bear any relationship to cubism, may have been painted as a response to Kubišta's *Kuřák*—although whether Filla's canvas should be read as homage or resistance to the latter is not made entirely clear. (p. 120) It seems more likely that Filla took inspiration for his canvas from André Derain's classicizing painting of bathers from 1908 (Národní galerie v Praze), shown at the exhibition *Les Indépendants* in Prague in early 1910. Filla may have also filtered some of the features in *Podzim* through his first, distant glimpses of the work of Braque and Picasso, which Kubišta facilitated. Kubišta planned the concept for the early 1910 exhibition while in Paris the previous year and proposed the selection of artists to include (pp. 112–14), not only Derain but also Braque, and three works by Braque, at least one of them an early cubist landscape, were displayed in the show.<sup>4</sup> This was the first time that any artists or members of the public in Prague, apart from Kubišta, could view a cubist work in person. Filla at the time showed no special interest in Braque's exhibited works, although decades later he would claim that he did (p. 117), and the next occasion he had to see cubist pictures was in reproduction. Among the materials that Kubišta brought back with him in June 1910 from his second trip to Paris were photographs of Braque's and Picasso's works that he shared with Filla, who published them in *Volné směry*. (pp. 127–129)

Rakušanová convincingly explains that photographs were an important vehicle for coming to terms with artistic developments abroad, and she adopts a phrase from the late painter Jan Kotík, '*Cézanne in gray*' ('*Cézanne šedý*'), to describe Filla's and Kubišta's earlier initial rapprochement with the art of Paul Cézanne. (pp. 96–104) Filla's earliest knowledge of Picasso's and Braque's work could thus also be described similarly: cubism apprehended in black and white, refracted through the lens of the camera.<sup>5</sup> Another explanation to consider when analyzing Kubišta's and Filla's different paths to cubism is that the new Parisian art form simply might not have resonated with Filla as much as it did for Kubišta. By the time of Kubišta's first trip to Paris in 1909, he was in some respects already predisposed to become interested in cubism because of his own particular understanding of Cézanne, whose works he started studying intensively in early 1908. Kubišta's painting *Promenáda v Riegrových sadech* (*Promenade in the Rieger Gardens*, Národní galerie v Praze) from the first half of 1908, which is not included in the book, and about which I have previously written, features juxtapositions of close-valued hues and a faceted treatment of figures that are not only adaptations from Cézanne's work, but carry within them the seeds

of Kubišta's more emphatically cubist paintings of 1910–1913.<sup>6</sup>

This is a lively and intellectually engaging book, and it is copiously illustrated, even if the reproductions are somewhat small in scale. It is a prelude to the author's significantly larger book project on Kubišta, which she has prepared with a team of Czech and international scholars for publication in both Czech and English, and which is soon to be published: *Bohumil Kubišta a Evropa. Nový pohled na umělcovo dílo* (*Bohumil Kubišta and Europe. A New Perspective on the Artist's Work*). One hopes that at least some of the material from the present book has found its way into the forthcoming volume, for there are many sections here that would be interesting to scholars of modernism generally, not only those who work in the field of Czech art. There is no question that Filla, too, deserves a major monographic study in another language. With the recent passing of Vojtěch Lahoda, to whom Rakušanová dedicates her book, that prospect now seems further away in the future than ever before. But the time will eventually come when both artists are better understood beyond the borders of Prague, and perhaps regain some of the attention they once held abroad in the years when they exhibited with the Neue Secession and Herwarth Walden's gallery *Der Sturm*, and when Parisian artists like Derain sought out their company. (p. 117) In the early 1910s, the relationship between modern artists in Prague and the rest of Europe was indeed already one of bilateral interest.

## POZNÁMKY

1 See Dora Vallier, 'Braque: La Peinture et nous. Propos de l'artiste recueillis', *Cahiers d'Art* XXXIV, no. 1, October 1954, p. 14.

2 The idea has been a mainstay of literature and exhibitions on Kubišta's work since at least as far back as the late 1950s, and resurfaced most recently in the international exhibition *Rozložená doba* (Years of Disarray), which at its showing at the Olomouc Museum of Art in 2018–19, included Kubišta's work in a section of the installation devoted to the 'lonely self' ('osamělý já').

3 Documentation of the trip is limited, and as a reference Rakušanová cites Vojtěch Lahoda, who was the first to mention it in his monograph, see Vojtěch Lahoda, *Emil Filla*, Praha 2007, p. 664. According to Lahoda, the source for this information is a letter that Hana Krejčí wrote from Paris that month to her father František Krejčí.

4 In my own earlier discussion of Kubišta's role planning the *Les Indépendants* exhibition, see Nicholas Sawicki, *Na cestě k modernosti: Umělecké sdružení Osmá a jeho okruh v letech 1900–1910*, Praha 2014, pp. 143–47, I document that at least one of the paintings exhibited by Braque was an early cubist landscape, probably from *L'Estaque*.

5 For further reading on the importance of photographic reproductions of cubist works to Filla in particular, see Tomáš Winter (ed.), *Emil Filla. Archiv umělce*, Kutná Hora 2010.

6 Sawicki (note 4), pp. 115–26. — Mahulena Nešlehová earlier discussed the painting in her monograph *Bohumil Kubišta*, Praha 1993, pp. 39–40.