

# Soul and Body Organisms

The Works of Anna Zemánková

Anna Zemánková (1908-1986) began producing her fantastic plant-like imagerie around 1960 and continued to laboriously produce these until her death. Her work has mostly been considered Art brut or Outsider Art: their origin stems from a world of ideas and formal language that differs from contemporaneous trends in established fine arts. Her mature work also clearly differs from the paintings, mostly landscapes, she had painted in her youth as an aspiring artist. This is connected to another aspect typical of so-called Outsider Art, the (renewed) beginning of artistic activity in a crisis situation: After her children were grown, at the age of 50, she remained on her own with an unloved husband and at the onset of the climacteric period when she became emotionally extremely unbalanced. The age-related physical change probably affected her particularly because the ability to create new life had always been central to her self-perception. Hence, related traumas were revived: Not only had her first-born child passed at the age of four years; after giving birth to two sons, Zemánková also lost other children due to miscarriages.

As a remedy for her dejection, her sons suggested she paint, when they discovered old paintings by their mother in the attic. She finally followed their recommendation and started painting with tempera paints on large paper folios. In order to avoid conflict between her artistic activity and her household duties (and probably not to be disturbed), she regularly devoted herself to her art from 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. This time before dawn and its accompanying music (Bach, Beethoven, Janáček, but also jazz) certainly favored the trance-like condition in which Zemánková developed her pictorial ideas and process. Thus, her works draw on the long tradition of mediumistic art, which was especially pronounced in Moravia, the region of her hometown Olomouc, where she lived until her move to Prague in 1948. Plant-like forms play an important role in these spiritualistic drawings. In addition, many of Zemánková's pictures are reminiscent of the baroque ornaments of facades and monuments in Olomouc. Nevertheless, because of its strong individuality, her painting is hardly to be considered folk art.

Some authors have referred to the development of Zemánková's work over the years as an argument against its classification as Art brut and Outsider Art. However, we know developmental moments even in classics of this kind of art, such as the Swiss Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) or the Mexican Martín Ramírez (1895-1963). Certainly, the success of the first public exhibition of Zemánková's paintings had repercussions: from then on the artist endeavored to make her works more artistic. For example, she painstakingly painted the backgrounds and worked with even patterns made up of a myriad of dots or small strokes. The plant shapes remained exotic and unusual, but oriented more towards existing flora in their

appearance. In addition, Zemánková changed her medium from tempera to pastel. Beginning in 1969, she developed new techniques, albeit often for lack of her accustomed materials. She began to embroider pictures with colored yarns, later she collaged painted strips of fabric to give her plants a greater plasticity and increase their realistic character. She also began to work on smaller formats, up to stamp size, which she presumably could sell, or give away, easier. Since 1979, Zemánková suffered from diabetes, which eventually cost her both legs. Nevertheless, until her death, she regularly worked on her pictures, which apparently gave her inner support.

It is obvious that the invented plants, whose forms are often also reminiscent of primitive fauna, such as deep-sea creatures or protozoa, not only filled an imaginary exotic garden, but also allowed the artist to symbolize other existential contents symbolically. Considering that Zemánková had her sheets of paper lying on the table while drawing, it becomes clear that the frequent origin of her plants at the bottom of the picture also made them fantastic outgrowths of her body. So it is not surprising that she gave some early works titles that reference the births of her sons. But even until late in life, she was more or less consciously probably concerned with the representation of her own bodily sensations and feelings of various kinds. However, the work of this impressive solitary appears as a parallel to that of other artists. Similarities to plant representations of the American Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986) and the Frenchwoman Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) have been pointed out. Artistic concepts and processes of the 1960s aimed at bodily perception seem to be comparable in a similar way to the work of the American Eva Hesse (1936-1970) or the Frenchwoman Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002). There can also be a relationship to the "body awareness images" of the Austrian Maria Lassnig (1919-2014) from the early 1960s, which show stubborn deformations, distortions, compressions, and outgrowths of bodies. Anna Zemánková should therefore be seen as one of the protagonists of a new body-oriented art of women in post-war Western culture, whether her works are now considered Art brut and Outsider Art or the established "cultural art" of its time.

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