Aspects of “do it yourself” book publishing in socialist

Czechoslovakia in the early 50s

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Unlike the way DIY is commonly understood in the West, where the movement was a reaction to the establishment and a method for alternative culture to criticise the system, former Czechoslovakia made such responses possible only in closed groups of writers, artists or musicians standing completely outside any official structures. Since the rise of totalitarianism in the late forties, their activities were essentially outlawed and punished by harsh repressions or at the very least extensive bullying campaigns from the police and loss of employment. In response to the repressions of the socialist dictatorship and limitations in publishing, Czechoslovakia developed an alternative method of literary and other forms of production and communication, often using very varied forms, as early as in the early fifties. From prisoner samizdat to the production of independent subcultures, collectives or simply groups of friends (the early underground, the surrealists, the “thirty-sixers” but also for example Jehovah’s Witnesses) as well as individuals (V. Fuka, J. Hanč, J. Váchal), these presamizdat activists engaged in DIY book publishing often to satisfy their own internal need. Their work is characterised by a high degree of meticulousness and ingenuity, often drawing from their experience and knowledge gained while working in private publishing houses which were systematically destroyed or nationalised in the early fifties. Their work often existed in only one originally crafted copy which the “undesirable” authors circulated among their friends. There were also many forms of collage diaries, books of poetry made using manual printing techniques, calligraphic and ornamental volumes or precisely made photographs of modern art. All these forms help us understand the period in which they were made, often perceived in culture as being exclusively the time of socialist realism. These independent activities and DIY books, collections and manuscripts, however, push back the boundaries of the common perception of the DIY culture by almost twenty years.