

VÁCLAV HAVEL 1968 – 2003

Photographs by Oldřich Škácha, Karel Cudlín and Alan Pajer, originally exhibited on the occasion of Václav Havel's 75th birthday celebration on 1 October 2011 at DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague.

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The exhibition is held under the auspices of the Czech Ambassador to Denmark, Mr. Zdeněk Lyčka.

Official State Visit

Denmark

27/5 – 29/5/1991



**Official state visit
27 May 1991, arrival in Denmark**



27 May 1991



Gjorslev
27 May 1991

Hans Peter Claus is showing the Folketing to President Vaclav Havel, 28 May 1991





Sonning Prize, 28 May 1991

VÁCLAV HAVEL

THE POWER OF THE HEROIC IMAGINATION

Václav Havel's life and career interconnected three main roles and ideas: a dissident and critical citizen defending basic human freedoms, a politician struggling to cope with questions of power and compromise and a public intellectual commenting on the topics of global responsibility and identity.

The idea of human rights and dissidence—with which Havel's life story is closely linked—provides a lesson that connects local history with a global present. Here, the Charter 77 initiative played a particularly important role and became an inspiration for similar movements throughout the world. Havel's essay "The Power of the Powerless" empowers people today just as it did when it was written in 1978. The role of the critical citizen is now important both locally and globally more than ever.

As Philip Zimbardo argued, Havel internalized and utilized the *power of the heroic imagination* "to crystallize beliefs and values into social, political action". "Such a belief system enables any of us when faced with situational forces that make us feel powerless to rise above and beyond those limitations and gain strength to act wisely and nobly."

Photographs by Oldřich Škácha, Karel Cudlín and Alan Pajer

Curated by Jaroslav Anděl, Artistic Director, DOX Centre for Contemporary Art

This exhibit originated at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague where Havel celebrated his last birthday. DOX seeks to explore some of Havel's ideas in its exhibitions and debates on democracy and social change.

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Position in the power hierarchy determines the degree of responsibility and guilt, but it gives no one unlimited responsibility and guilt, nor does it completely absolve anyone. Thus the conflict between the aims of life and the aims of the system is not a conflict between two socially defined and separate communities; and only a very generalized view (and even that only approximative) permits us to divide society into the rulers and the ruled. Here, by the way, is one of the most important differences between the post-totalitarian system and classical dictatorships, in which this line of conflict can still be drawn according to social class. In the post-totalitarian system, this line runs de facto through each person, for everyone in his own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system. What we understand by the system is not, therefore, a social order imposed by one group upon another, but rather something which permeates the entire society and is a factor in shaping it, something which may seem impossible to grasp or define (for it is in the nature of a mere principle), but which is expressed by the entire society as an important feature of its life.

Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 1978

A genuine, profound, and lasting change for the better—as I shall attempt to show—can no longer result from the victory (were such a victory possible) of any particular traditional political conception, which can ultimately be only external, that is, a structural or systemic conception. More than ever before, such a change will have to derive from human existence, from the fundamental reconstitution of the position of people in the world, their relationships to themselves and to each other, and to the universe. If a better economic and political model is to be created, then perhaps more than ever before it must derive from profound existential and moral changes in society. This is not something that can be designed and introduced like a new car. If it is to be more than just a new variation of the old degeneration, it must above all be an expression of life in the process of transforming itself. A better system will not automatically ensure a better life.

In fact, the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed.

Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 1978

There are times when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight. It seems to me that today, this “pro-visional”, “minimal”, and “negative” program—the “simple” defense of people – is in a particular sense (and not merely in the circumstances in which we live) an optimal and most positive program because it forces politics to return to its only proper starting point, proper that is, if all the old mistakes are to be avoided: individual people.

Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 1978

For example, is it possible to talk seriously about whether we want to change the system or merely reform it? In the circumstances under which we live, this is a pseudo-problem, since for the time being there is simply no way we can accomplish either goal. We are not even clear about where reform ends and change begins. We know from a number of harsh experiences that neither reform nor change is in itself a guarantee of anything. We know that ultimately it is all the same to us whether or not the system in which we live, in the light of a particular doctrine, appears changed or reformed. Our concern is whether we can live with dignity in such a system, whether it serves people rather than people serving it.

Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 1978

When I was tried and then serving my sentence, I experienced directly the importance and beneficial force of international solidarity. I shall never cease to be grateful for all its expressions. Still, I do not think that we who seek to proclaim the truth under our conditions find ourselves in an asymmetrical position, or that it should be we alone who ask for help and expect it, without being able to offer help in the direction from which it also comes. I am convinced that what is called “dissent” in the Soviet bloc is a specific modern experience, the experience of life at the very ramparts of dehumanized power. As such, that “dissent” has the opportunity and even the duty to reflect on this experience, to testify to it and to pass it on to those fortunate enough not to have to undergo it. Thus we too have a certain opportunity to help in some ways those who help us, to help them in our deeply shared interest, in the interest of mankind.

Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 1978

Thus an attitude that turns away from abstract political visions of the future toward concrete human beings and ways of defending them effectively in the here and now is quite naturally accompanied by an intensified antipathy to all forms of violence carried out in the name of a better future, and by a profound belief that a future secured by violence might actually be worse than what exists now; in other words, the future would be fatally stigmatized by the very means used to secure it. At the same time, this attitude is not to be mistaken for political conservatism or political moderation. The “dissident” movements do not shy away from the idea of violent political overthrow because the idea seems too radical, but on the contrary, because it does not seem radical enough. For them, the problem lies far too deep to be settled through mere systemic changes, either governmental or technological.

Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 1978

The fear I am speaking of is not, of course, to be taken in the ordinary psychological sense as a definite, precise emotion. Most of those we see around us are not quaking like aspen leaves: they wear the faces of confident, self-satisfied citizens. We are concerned with fear in a deeper sense, an ethical sense if you will, namely, the more or less conscious participation in the collective awareness of a permanent and ubiquitous danger; anxiety about what is being, or might be, threatened; becoming gradually used to this threat as a substantive part of the actual world; the increasing degree to which, in an ever more skillful and matter-of-fact way, we go in for various kinds of external adaptation as the only effective method of self defense.

Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 1978

So far, it is the worst in us which is being systematically activated and enlarged—egotism, hypocrisy, indifference, cowardice, fear, resignation, and the desire to escape every personal responsibility, regardless of the general consequences. Yet even today's national leadership has the opportunity to influence society by its policies in such a way as to encourage not the worse side of us, but the better. So far, you and your government have chosen the easy way out for yourselves, and the most dangerous road for society: the path of inner decay for the sake of outward appearances; of deadening life for the sake of increasing uniformity; of deepening the spiritual and moral crisis of our society, and ceaselessly degrading human dignity, for the puny sake of protecting your own power.

Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 1978

It is, however, becoming evident—and I think that is an experience of an essential and universal importance—that a single, seemingly powerless person who dares to cry out the word of truth and to stand behind it with all his person and all his life, ready to pay a high price, has, surprisingly greater power, though formally disenfranchised, than do thousands of anonymous voters.

Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 1978