

Drawing Conceptual Lessons from 1968

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The short-lived Prague Spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia was a demonstration of the impossibility of reform from within the Socialist system, and a lesson to the Czechoslovak population on the lack of constructive possibilities within that order. In the work of the Czech Milan Knížák and the Slovak Július Koller, I explore how the artists internalised that lesson of failed revolution. Both artists launched new phases in their work in 1968–1969, prompting my inquiry into how and why they changed practices and imagery in this critical period. I approach their work as an example of how to communicate within a political and social culture undergoing ‘normalisation’. Within this context, I argue, the artists began employing techniques that the contemporary artworld would come to know as Conceptualist.

Throughout the 1960s, culminating in the Prague Spring, many had believed that the Socialist system could be reformed from within; that it had the flexibility to be shaped to suit the needs of the population. Artists and writers tended to be among the most hopeful of all. Rather than seeing Socialism as irretrievably flawed, the belief among them was that Socialism could be tailored and improved to fit the circumstances of Czechoslovakia; that it could be, as Alexander Dubček famously proposed, ‘Socialism with a human face’. After August of that year and the arrival of Warsaw Pact forces in tanks, this hope was extinguished. The process of normalisation began, and was firmly entrenched in Czechoslovak life and culture by the early 1970s. Within this period, Knížák and Koller developed anti-happenings that focused on the individual, began using mathematical formulae and cryptographic signs such as the question mark as their primary visual material, and espoused an anti-art stance. Their work became a means (in the words of Koller): not of creating ‘a new art... but a new life, a new creativity, a new cosmo-humanistic culture’¹ in contradistinction to the ‘normal’ life being imposed from above. Although using strategies that focused on an ‘anti-’ approach to modern artistic norms, the artists were not merely revolting against Art. Instead, their activities became a way to create new life, new art and new possibilities in a cultural and

1. As quoted by Aurel Hrabušický, in section on Július Koller for the 1996 Sao Paulo Biennial website, accessed at <http://www1.uol.com.br/bienal/23bienal/paises/ipsk.htm>. The quote dates from 1969. The most complete source on Koller is the recent exhibition catalogue *Július Koller: Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, Kölnischer Kunstverein und Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2003.

social system that paid lip-service to the idea of revolution and change, yet stifled creativity whenever possible.

I identify Knížák's and Koller's various statements and acts as conceptual, not to categorise or label the artists, nor am I trying to force them into the framework of the isms of art history. Instead, by relating their artistic practices to Conceptualism, I can reveal the issues of information and communication that I think lie at the core of their work. Both artists have spoken directly about this period, and prepared a number of statements and texts that I will treat as documentation and as conceptual texts used to transmit information. What drove the development of Conceptualism in contemporary art was the interest in information and the systems by which it is communicated and exchanged, rather than the material specificity of an aesthetic object. In this case, the needs of the Czechoslovak artists dovetailed with the trends of contemporary art, inasmuch as the drive for information exchange and communication led them to produce work that can be described, in hindsight, as Conceptual. Within the Socialist context of Czechoslovakia, exchange and communication were a threat to the ruling Party, thus the very act of creating work that attempted new pathways of information sharing was dangerously anti-normalisation. To create new art and a new life was counter to the system, 'anti' the better life promised by Communism; it was even counter-revolutionary.

In the summer of 1968, the artists were at different stages of activity. Knížák was in the US, collaborating with American Fluxus artists, having spent 1963 to 1968 creating a body of performances and actions with the group Aktual in Prague. For Koller, 1968 came at an earlier stage in his work, and the events of that year would become the direct impetus for the growth of his work into the early 1970s. Several of Koller's key conceptual projects including his use of the question mark, the actions that he classifies as UFOs (Universal Futurological Operations), the UFO-naut portraits, and the table-tennis installations, all began after 1968.

In the mid-1960s Koller began painting words on canvas,² and in 1965 he created his first anti-happening, a small text card announcing 'ANTI-HAPPENING Systém Subjektívnej Objektivity Československo'. For Koller, the anti-happening was conceived as an experience that brought about a transformation of the participant, his/her consciousness and his/her environment. It certainly was not about making an artistic action or object. The anti-happening took place in the course of a person's everyday experience, not as a separate 'art' experience. The inspiration for Koller's work of this type was his desire to 'engage rather than arrange', and to develop what he called a 'cosmo-humanistic culture', which was distinct from the controlled cultural situation of art. Koller's actions (his anti-happenings) were marked by their subtlety and immersion in the rhythms of daily life. Cutting question marks into lawns at tennis courts, or painting them on small flags, Koller slipped question marks into life without fanfare, and without drawing attention to them as works of art. The question mark was a symbol for the lack or the absence of something, or perhaps a marker of wonderment at what appears before our eyes in the world. In either case, the question mark serves the function of drawing attention away from itself to the surrounding situation, where we seek to find answers. Koller has said:

2. Conversation Between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist, in *Július Koller*, op cit, pp 143–8 and pp 143–4. He stopped oil painting altogether by 1967.

‘The question mark is also a symbol of doubt. I doubt everything... Questions and asking questions are aimed against illusions, against lies and ignorance; they help us to see and know things and implications realistically.’³ This symbol of displacement allows Koller to focus attention on the life situation, rather than on a work of art. Koller would come to define what he *does* rather than what he *produces* as ‘a means of expression and a communicative cultural medium’.⁴

For Koller the question mark was directly inspired by the cultural situation that was instituted after the failure of the Prague Spring. The question mark became an individual as well as a social symbol:

... in 1969, I reacted to the cultural social, socio-political situation in Czechoslovakia... This led me to choose as my symbol the question mark, which actually asks generally not only about man’s relationship with the cosmos, which I then used under the name UFO-naut, but also about the individual’s relationship to the collective, or the social situation.⁵

The question mark continued to reappear in Koller’s work throughout the 1970s, from his series of self-portraits called ‘UFO-nauts’, to his arrangement of a number of schoolchildren in the shape of a question mark in a Slovak field in 1978. This action was Koller’s way of marking the ten-year anniversary of the Prague Spring.⁶

The other major works begun in this era were the ping-pong tables he first set up in an art gallery, and then, as cultural constraints increased throughout the early 1970s, in recreational spaces. Playing table tennis was an opportunity to practise back-and-forth interaction and communication, it meant to engage rather than arrange, and was a metaphor for the alternative cosmo-humanistic cultural order that Koller was attempting to develop. For Koller recent political events were an immediate inspiration for developing this particular mode of communication:

I chose such a game – for example tennis as early as 1968 – as a symbol of democratic communication, where it’s still possible to preserve, according to certain rules of fair play, a sort of possibility of communication, of comparison, and also rivalry, and at the same time some exchange of opinions: in this sport’s case an exchange of blows using a ball which flies from one side to the other and is actually a sort of individualising of this attempt at communication, which at the time was visibly weakening and beginning to experience the first obstacles and was ceasing to function in the normal way. Up to 1968 we still had the impression that this form of communication – or ‘democratic socialism’, as it was called at the time – could work better than it had done so far.⁷

Koller’s desire for communication would extend beyond the individual; as unfettered connection became harder in Czechoslovakia, Koller looked to others, such as extra-terrestrials, as possible partners. One of the UFO projects was the *Pravda Compound* of 1971, which consisted of a small shack out in a field where Koller could sit and wait for contact in anticipation of human beings connecting with our cosmo-humanistic colleagues. This was truly a means to slip the bonds of the art situation, as well as the normalising processes of the cultural situation. Koller’s attempts to negotiate intercommunication within the given environment remained central to his work in the decades that followed.

3. Ibid, p 147

4. As quoted in Hrabušický, see note 1.

5. ‘Conversation Between Július Koller and Roman Ondák’, in *Július Koller*, op cit, pp 135–41

6. Ibid, p 139

7. Ibid, p 137

Milan Knížák and his group Aktual began creating actions and correspondence art in Prague in the early 1960s as a means of establishing direct and immediate communication with their fellow citizens. This work consisted of Knížák and other Aktual members appearing in public in altered clothing, with painted bodies and faces, and performing strange and unexpected actions in the middle of public spaces, trying to engage the attention and interaction of people, and to initiate a transference of information. Knížák intended to engage and communicate with his fellow Prague citizens despite their resistance to, or at least their suspicion of, his motives. Often funny, always unpredictable, their actions were an attempt to make their fellow citizens 'live otherwise', counter to the grain of routine, and to lead what Aktual considered more fully human lives. Later, in a quote from 1974, Knížák clearly articulated his belief that the media were a means to reach the other participant/viewer, and that an artist should be involved in something other than making objects:

What is a result? Is a picture a result of a painter, a sculpture of a sculptor, a book of a writer, etc.???? I don't consider these things to be results, but only means – only a kind of bridge between the one who talks and the one who is listening. To me, the results are changes in the everyday life of every person who is affected by these things.⁸

As had Koller, Knížák would directly connect his orientation toward actions that would change the life situation of the participant, to his increasing disappointment with political and cultural reality in Czechoslovakia:

I wanted people to live richly every millimeter of their everyday life... Look, I was very influenced by the Communist ideal. We lived in it. Even if I was never a Commie, never. But I was very much influenced by the idea that life is important, that we have to make life very rich, we have to live really and deeply. We have to trust in justice. They said these things but they never did it. We were taught at school about fantastic stuff and there was a great contrast between this and the reality. I always thought about revolutions, changes in life. That is at the base of my being. I was taught that revolutions brought something new and important. I didn't want to make social revolution, I wanted to make revolution in everyday life.⁹

8. *Aktual Schmuck, Czechoslovakia*, Beau Geste Press, London, 1974, unpaginated
9. As quoted in Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', pp 299–301, in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, eds Paul Schimmel and Russell Ferguson, Thames & Hudson for MOCA, Los Angeles, London, 1998, pp 227–329

1968 was a major turning point for Knížák, but for different reasons than for most of his fellow Czechoslovaks. From early spring 1968 until early 1970, Knížák was living and working in the US, at the invitation of George Maciunas and the Fluxus group. While in the US, he travelled extensively throughout the country, produced several actions and, in particular, worked closely with Ken Friedman in southern California. Knížák returned to Czechoslovakia in 1970, knowing what he was returning to but believing that, because it was home, it was where he needed to be. By this point he had seen a variety of revolutions: the failed political one in Prague (albeit from a distance), and the 'hippie revolution' in the US, often attended by a complement of policemen with truncheons, as witnessed in Chicago in 1968. The *10 Lessons of Aktual University* (written during 1967 and 1968) includes:

Lesson 4 On Revolutions: ...All societies so far have had and still have one common characteristic – ANTIHUMANITY. Societies create enormous social institutions for the protection of man and at the same time, from the very beginning, they destroy him by absolutely annulling the basic requirements of his humanity – respect for him as an individual with a unique nature and unique opinions.¹⁰

It is a text that reflects Knížák's learned pessimism about revolutions, and his belief that all revolutions devolve into governments that do their best to repress human freedom – in both the Eastern socialist states and the Western capitalist ones.

Although Knížák had frequently had conflicts with authorities throughout the 1960s, it was an especially difficult situation for him after his return to Czechoslovakia in 1970. Knížák counts his arrests in the hundreds, even though he took himself out of the public eye and spent most of the 1970s living in relative isolation outside Prague. Nevertheless, he developed new actions based around the concept of ceremony, and attempted to maintain some contact with the outside artworld which had always been important to him. His court trial in the early 1970s, occasioned by the German collector Hans Sohm being caught taking Knížák materials across the border, concluded that the work of Knížák was 'in its totality... undesirable within the framework of Czechoslovakia's present cultural policy'.¹¹

What was distinctive about these ceremonies, the primary work after his return, was the shift in emphases away from the *Aktual* work that he had been producing in Prague and in the US. The ceremonies were much smaller, included only a few pre-selected participants and featured increasingly mute activities that ultimately had to do with knitting the individual participant into the environment he/she was actually in, rather than disrupting that world. The ceremonies were more meditative, ascetic, controlled and self-focused than the *Aktual* events, and were more intent on processing and synthesising the nature of encounters between people and things. For example, in *Stone Ceremony* of 1971, participants formed individual stone circles to sit in, and then climbed while humming to the top of the quarry and looked down, 'from where they watch their stone circles left alone on the bottom'.¹² Knížák had tried one or two of these 'quieter' actions in the US in 1969–1970, but had problems with cooperation, because American college students would simply get up and leave when they got bored or tired of taking part. Perhaps the habit of endurance was more finely ingrained into the Czechs by the early 1970s – certainly the ceremonies were tests of concentration, self-reflection and physical control. Participants were led to concentrate on infinity, endure time, and live intensely in small places and in small actions.¹³

Another manifestation of the shift in spirit in this post-1968 period is Knížák's interest in maths, which was supported by an advanced degree in mathematics that the artist gained in the 1970s. He produced an increasing number of conceptual texts in the form of mathematical formulae, rather than the whimsical poetry and prose that characterised Knížák's earlier writing. For example *Mathematical Sums* of 1977:

- 1) House + scream =
- 2) Homeland + paper + choking =

10. Reprint widely available in Peter Selzer and Kristine Stiles, eds, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, pp 740–1.
11. *Aktual Schmuck Czechoslovakia*, publisher's introduction
12. From Knížák's handwritten text of the ceremony in *Aktual Schmuck, Czechoslovakia*.
13. As listed and discussed in typescript documents from the artist in the Ken Friedman Archive and Collection, part of the Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Arts (ATCA) holdings at the University of Iowa libraries, Special Collections. Knížák outlines a number of actions from the 1970s, such as the *Enforced Symbioses* (participants would bind themselves to material objects), *Becoming Aware* (intense interaction with a substance such as air or a stone), *White Process* (interacting with only white substances), *Negation and Equality* (juxtaposing various things and ideas to suggest new combinations), and *The Process of Anti-Creation* (to be carried out in the mind).

- 3) (eye-pencil) . paste =
- 4) Breath . breath =
- 5) $\sqrt{\text{glass}}$ =
- 6) Soul (logx) =

These formulae propose a different order by juxtaposing and combining already familiar things in new ways. It is a shuffling and reshuffling of the existing order of things into new and potentially productive orders or combinations. It is not chaos, only disorder or a proposal of a different order counter to the already established one, here cast in terms of simple elements of the environment, and the smaller domestic world. It was also a means for Knížák to find another space in which to create:

I found the space of the mind (because I was studying mathematics), a real space, like the other spaces, and maybe even a little bit more free. It was the only free space I could use under the Communists in the 1970s.¹⁴

This kind of disorder or anti-order is not the chaos of revolution, nor the compromised grey mire of normalisation and apathy, but a different order altogether that constructs possibilities for exchange and communication, and that prepares for a future of greater humanity and freedom that cannot come from any political mandate. What both Knížák and Koller had learned from revolution was the impossibility of reform from without; instead they had come to rely upon themselves and their own connections with individuals, one on one, in the specifics of their environment, as the source for real communication and life, without the necessity of the promised Utopia of political revolution. Reality, as that which is lived in the interplay between people and the world around them, is where life takes place, not in the ideal promised by revolution.

Question: Is the concept of Utopia important for you?

Koller: Yes, but from the position of the question mark. I don't believe in an ideal Utopia. In principle the various perspectives and ways of seeing play a more important role. Yearning for a better world is an infinitely human characteristic, but with it usually comes the depressing reality of trying to implement it in practice.¹⁵

14. As quoted in Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy', p 301

15. 'Conversation Between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist', in *Július Koller*, op cit, pp 145–6