

THREE SLOVAK MODELS FOR CONTEMPORARY ART ACTIONS

Thomas Strauss

Though I do not know precisely for how long, the European avant-garde has moved in circles since perhaps as early as the mid-forties. In itself this circular movement does not necessarily imply repetition; rather it can be understood as a spiral, a retracing of an orbit on progressively higher planes. The “performance” of our days is without doubt a logical continuation of the “happenings” or “events” of the fifties and sixties, including even some direct lessons and citations drawn from the classic avant-garde inspired by the Dada movement and, above all, by the pioneer of this type of creative activity, M. Duchamp.¹

Verbal explanations, mere references in the form of theoretical statements concerning the differences between present-day “performances” and art activities of ten, twenty, or even sixty years ago, will no longer suffice. The contemporary artist’s understandable desire for originality may well be little more than self-deception. It is necessary to collect, evaluate, and classify the available factual materials in a critical way, that is to say not merely on the basis of their authors’ proclaimed programs. A valid theoretical definition can be anticipated at the end of such a process. For my part, I shall not attempt to arrive at such a definition. I am all the more dissuaded from such an effort by the fact that the evolution which would normally provide the factual material has all too frequently been subject during the last five decades to inorganic interruptions, at least in our part of the world.

Be that as it may, our starting point could perhaps be the self-contained art action typical for this part of Europe during the later nineteen-sixties.² The artist designs an action scenario, sometimes a very detailed one, taking into account the expected activities or reactions of his audience. Here the artist participates in the action, depending on his skills and abilities, not only as author but, to use the language of the film-maker, as script-writer, director, producer, and principal actor or animator of the whole performance. The other participants are more or less “extras” assigned to perform specific parts, sometimes without being aware of the aesthetic or other values or even the meaning and thrust of the whole performance.

Model A: Art as a self-contained, total performance. This concept of completely preorganized, sometimes almost monumentally conceived actions, having a specific, not necessarily essentially artistic significance of their own, was first developed in Slovakia during the second half of the

sixties by Alex Mlynárčik (1934), a Bratislava painter associated with the Parisian Nouveau Realists around Pierre Restany. His perfectly planned actions involved tens, hundreds, occasionally even thousands of participants. A characteristic feature of his work, reflecting a special kind of artistic talent, is his ability to draw together large groups of people and make them cooperate creatively. People from all walks of life—a retired railway worker, an athlete, a police constable, a waiter, an architect, a composer, and even fellow artists. All of them do what they know how to do best, what they have mastered in real life, and they do it to the best of their abilities and with great enthusiasm. The artist has succeeded in convincing them of the uniqueness and the significance of their everyday, routine tasks. They had not hitherto realized that what they had been doing day in and day out was something of exceptional importance, perhaps even a “work of art.” Thus, for example, from 30 July to 1 August 1971, Mlynárčik organized an “Edgar Degas Memorial Derby.” The actual races were preceded by an auction in Bratislava on 29 June, during which works of César, Miralde, Seltz, Dufren, Rotella, Niki de Saint Phalle, Košice, and other foreign and domestic avant-gardists were put on sale. The auction was not intended merely as a means to cover, at least in part, the costs of poster printing, the catalogue, and the races themselves. The attendance of livried waiters, hostesses, a court-appointed notary, and other officials in sombre black suits elevated this otherwise functional occurrence to an exceptional, ceremonial event. For the young people present, the ceremony succeeded in re-creating the social atmosphere of Paris at the time of the first Impressionists.

The monumental scale, typical of all of Mlynárčik’s actions, must however not be allowed to obscure the question of their real meaning. In view of the expensive, large-scale preparations and the unavoidable difficulties arising in the course of staging even the most minutely pre-planned action,³ we may well ask ourselves whether simple, direct camera reportage would not provide a more effective view of the meaning of the world around us. The answer is by no means unequivocal. Reality is not focused, not filtered, not clear in its expression, and therefore usually not altogether legible. But that is not all. Horse races, large art auctions, grandiose carnival processions in the ambience of the beautiful, unspoiled nature of mountain meadows (as in the “Days of Games—If All the Trains in the World,” 12 June 1971 in Kamenice in the Orava district) are far from being typical, everyday experiences in Slovakia. This is where the artist is needed to fill very real gaps in our everyday calendar.

However the artist does not wish merely to be the initiator and organizer of shows and festivals for the entertainment of bored crowds, although this too can be one of the many possible functions of a “performance.” The floodlights should illumine not only the scenic effect of the movement of large masses, although, as we have said, this may be a legitimate function of art.⁴ They must also throw a merciless beam on the inner self of everyone

of us, helping us to discover the true sense, not only of externalized, stylized, aesthetic gestures, but also of those innermost hidden ones which are not consciously registered by our minds. Alex Mlynárčik was striving for this psychoanalysis of gestures primarily during the initial stages of his activities. He developed an interest in and started to collect anonymous graffiti on fences, walls, and other public places. At the time of the Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in Czechoslovakia, he obtained permission from the municipal authorities to install a set of mirrors in the public lavatories under Hurban Square in Bratislava for three days in October 1966. The most intimate physical functions thus reflected were dedicated "to pay homage to St. Anthony, H. Bosch, G. Chevalier, Godot, M. Pistoletto, S. Filko, and CO/NH₂." The vernissage was, as behooves such an event, a solemn occasion. A number of foreign and domestic critics who had a sense of humor assisted in the ceremony. Among those taking part were such luminaries as J. Chalupecký, P. Restany, M. Mičko, U. Appolonio, A. Hoffmeister, and R.J. Moulin and others. The press, which had otherwise become quite tolerant of avant-garde art, accused the action's organizers of pornography, perversity, disruption of public order, and sundry other immoralities. To avoid these and other inconveniences, Alex Mlynárčik chose to escape into the immanent world of aesthetics. He spent the spring of 1968 in Paris, where together with Pierre Restany he formulated his "Manifestations Permanentes III," proclaiming "une autre Bastille bourgeoise à abattre, après la Sorbonne, le Musée d'art moderne." This one excursion into the realm of leftist politics remained however an isolated phenomenon.

In the prevailing conditions, even an immanent aesthete's determination to isolate himself from the society around him by no means guarantees that the very same society will not attempt to interfere with him. It is characteristic of the present situation that neither Mlynárčik nor any other modern action artist has found acceptance in any official gallery or art museum; indeed their usual fate is expulsion from the official artists' organization. The resulting paradox: Aesthetics torn from its aesthetic context, an involuntary underground!

Model B: Art as an open performance. Differing from Mlynárčik's rigidly preplanned actions, his collaborator J. Zelibská (1934) leaves more room for each participant's imagination and activity. Her "Engagement of Spring" (13 June 1970) on the slopes of the Little Carpathians not far from Bratislava underscored the beauty of the ancient, historical, vineyard-covered, fertile landscape. The terrain chosen, as well as the fortuitously perfect weather conditions of a late-spring day, helped to create an unusually attractive illusion of momentary harmony. The music of the flute players, the myrtle, and a white ribbon floating down from an airplane high in the skies, and the distribution of these items by beautiful maidens recalled the rites of spring in ancient Slavic mythology. The associations evoked by the

time and place of the action—not only historical, mythological, and natural allusions, but also erotic and other fantasies—could be foreseen by the author only in the most general terms. The richness of the participants' flights of imagination invariably exceeds the author's original intentions.

We have already suggested that the artist could—using an analogy from film-making—not only be the script-writer, director, or principal actor, but above all, and perhaps exclusively, a photographer-cameraman. Thus a shy or withdrawn artist or one who lacks the acting ability or the organizational talents of animators like Mlynářčík could use a camera to “capture” the action. Vlado Popovič (1939) coined the term “action for four eyes” to describe this type of “pseudo-performance” or “blind action.” As far as its effect is concerned, such an action is often more clearly legible than live action, which is bound to contain some element of improvisation. The ping-pong smashes in a photo-action produced in 1971 by another Bratislava painter, J. Koller (1939), are openly aimed in the direction of the viewer. In 1970 Koller, consistent with the principle that “the sense of life and living art is no longer a variation of the object, but above all the mutation of man,” presented a one-man exhibition at the Bratislava Youth Gallery. The sole exhibit: a ping-pong table. Visitors were invited to play, either against the artist or against each other. An immediate transformation from pseudo-performance (photo documentation) to direct action, from art to life, and vice-versa! Thus conceived, art is no longer a filtrate of life, but a complementary or parallel activity. A specific intersphere between the traditional antipodes of art and life is defined.

It may take the form of a game. “The game as symbol of a conceptual realization of life, with fair-play rules for everyone,” is how Koller described it in 1971 when he drew an interim balance sheet of his creative activity. Another ex-painter, Peter Bartoš (1938), has for a number of years been breeding pigeons as a form of artistic activity *sui generis*. His particular “conceptual realization,” the Bratislava Aesthetic Pigeon, was awarded a prize at the 1976 exhibition of the breeders' association.

Model C: Performance with a transposed meaning. The same Peter Bartoš, author of a number of “zoo manifestations” and “zoo actions,” was the one who, together with J. Koller, created an action-performance model defining this new hierarchy of art and life. In the spring of 1968 the two painters held an exhibition in one of the arcades of Bratislava's Old Town. Paintings were displayed on a wall. Their figurative design, with wallpaper-like vertical dominants, attracted the attention of passers-by. To the amusement of the sneering organizers, the spectators did not notice that as they were stepping closer to the exhibits, they were trampling freshly cut flowers spread on the ground: Art as artificially cultivated, uprooted life; aesthetics as the inability to live naturally and to appreciate the beauty all around us; art as a sneer directed at aesthetics.

The organization of performances is but one facet of the activities of

many contemporary artists. Among those we have already mentioned and those we have failed to mention, it is above all J. Koller who systematically returns to the basis of painting. It is, however, a new—one could say an action—variant of painting. In a way it is a variant of the performance as well. Koller is not interested in the specific transformation of the motive, nor in expressing the authenticity of his personality, nor in any of the other postulates rooted in six centuries of post-Renaissance painting. The subject of the work, its interpretation, the artist's individual technique, and all the other traditional "qualities" become insignificant. All the modern artist is interested in is duration, the action of realization. The image itself—provided the author has selected painting as his figurative variant—the multiplication of existing, generally accessible objects, has the same meaning or lack of meaning as any repetition of everyday gestures and events from the life around us. In the perception of the radical aesthetics of the seventies, the artist is no longer the traditional Creator, but rather an uninvolved experimental researcher, or to put it even more bluntly, a skillful technician who knows exactly how to make something or how something is made.

The paraphrase of painting in place of painting: that is one of the main goals of contemporary art. The avant-garde of the past decade (pop-art, kinetics, mini-art, happenings, earth-art, arte-povera, etc.) simply ignored painting as an art form. Most recently this is no longer the case. Thus the performance, at least in the activities of some contemporary authors, reveals a number of important points of contact with the new fundamentalist movements (hyper-realism or concept-art).

Project "Paintings for the National Gallery" [From V. Popovič's diary, Bratislava, November 1968]:

. 10th we are being paid for painted canvasses. I should therefore start "manufacturing some goods." I've got an Idea—to do something like an action: "Painting pictures for the Gallery." 13th. Made inquiries re. Painting for the Gallery. It's going to work! The Purchasing Commission meets on the 22nd. Pictures have to be at the Gallery the day before. That gives me more than a week. Simply have to make it! I'll start tomorrow a.m. Have to kick out the pussy-cat, that notorious boozier will have to clear out of the studio too. I need space, clear open space! What else? I'll have to buy 20-25 meters of linen canvas, a quarter kilo of bone-meal glue, lots of whitewash, some pigments. What else? Blackening, etc., frames (?), cobbler's tacks. Themes: something from nature, butterflies, etc.—not too many. That hit record "When the Band is," should be good for at least 3 paintings—"We meet again"—musicians with an empty violin case . . .

This diary of mine is good for at least 2-3 paintings. Titles: "From the Diary,"—Must go through the diary. 15th. Shopping is a drag, have to get more pigment, green and black, tacks

Picked up an advance from the Artists' Co-op Fund. Evening: preparing

frames, cutting, stretching still have all morning tomorrow . . .
 Am I going to make it? 16th. Grounding. Why does it dry so slowly!
 17th. Painting itself. 18th. Ditto. 19th. Still painting! 20th. Drying.
 Takes ages! Framing, glazier, order rental van! 21st. Moving pic-
 tures to Gallery! 23rd. Mission accomplished! Clean up studio.

An unusually expressive and convincing case, not only against classical art but also against modern art (including his very own "action plots"), was quite unintentionally made by M. Knížák (1940). Sometime during the early stages of the "event" movement (it must have been around 1965), this outstanding representative of the Prague actionists arranged a screening of recent films from the New York Fluxus group at the Bratislava Artists' Club. This was during the period of the thaw in the rigid aesthetics of the fifties, and a significant number of still uninformed artists, mainly painters of the older schools, came to the screening. In their heart of hearts they had hoped to pick up some hints painlessly, to freshen up their rather shop-worn productions with a cautious sprinkling of fashionable "avant-gardism," but conveniently and in a "gentlemanly" fashion, as is the custom in these parts. The audience remained quiet and patient while, for seemingly endless minutes, nothing but a stark-naked female posterior swung back and forth on the screen. A nasty, aggressive note broke out, however, during the second third of the show, when a series of increasingly large numerals were projected on the screen. A group of libertines, notorious for their devotion to wine, women, song, and the baser joys of life, began to shout excitedly about the absence of ideas and immorality. Others, behind a facade of bohemianism and worldliness, gave vent to their basest, normally well-concealed sentiments, to prejudice, nationalism and chauvinism, and to hatred of anything and everything beyond their grasp (including—Let's face it—modern art).

This altogether unplanned action, which completely unmasked the audience, was upstaged however by one of the local organizers, an artist who as a rule identified himself with the latest "avant-garde" trends. With an engaging simplicity, he tried to explain the significance of the films, not understanding that any attempt to enlighten and pacify that part of the audience was doomed from the outset. This ardent partisan of radical actions of every sort could not understand that the immediacy of the reaction to the performance had in fact added a new and distinct dimension to its meaning. As the pioneers of Dada pointed out shortly after the turn of the century,⁵ an essentially banal, random occurrence in everyday life can thus achieve many varied shades of significance. What occurred was an unmasking on two levels. The prejudice, intolerance, and base instincts of the traditionalists were revealed, but some of the local "action avant-garde" were also stripped of their radical veneer. They simply could not grasp—for the nth time since 1890!—what it is all about. They cannot fathom that a radical creative demonstration such as the Fluxus films is something quite different from a museum vernissage, a public lecture, a commercial spectacle, an authors'

workshop, or a solemn convocation in honor of, let us say, avant-garde art. It is not only the author's intention which enters the structuring of the action performance piece, but also its concrete realization, its execution in time and space. Semantics, aesthetics, and morphology are thus enriched by concrete cultural historical, anthropological and psycho-sociological meanings.

With regard to the author's subjective intention for a performance and its potential objective realization, we can distinguish at least three types of art action: (1) An artistic action may be conceived as an image composed to reach back into time, or if you wish, as a living tableau. Some of Mlynárčik's actions have been directly inspired by classical works of modern art. The action "Allegorie reelle: Bonjour Monsieur Courbet" (Chatillon des Arts, Paris, 1969) is of this type. Also adapted in this way were P. Breughel, Degas, R. Magritte, R. Lichtenstein, Arman, Walter de Maria, and a classic of domestic art, L. Fulla, as well as others. (2) Another artistic action, still closed in a sense, is conceived as socio-psychological impulse. In the course of the action its importance grows under the influence of its participants. (3) An open artistic action is one that points beyond and past itself; it is an intermediate stratum between art and unintentionally experienced real life. The original intention of the author no longer enables us to predict its actual impact. A critical unmasking of the aesthetic essence of art itself occurs; self-destruction, anti-art, and so on, are one variant of this model.

Thus far we have examined some expressions of action art primarily from the point of view of its formal-aesthetic structure. The difference between the recent phenomenon called "performance" and the dramatized realizations of the sixties is not to be found, however, merely in the different structures of the intention—meaning relation, but also, and above all, in the disparate intellectual and emotional climates of the two successive yet diametrically opposed decades.

We have in front of us photographs of works by an artist whose decisive development, in contrast to that of the others mentioned above, took place in the current decade. Michael Kern (1938) originally started out as a rational constructionist. Later he moved on to conceptual approaches, photo-monologues, and actions. His "Cubes" performance (1974) is a bitter, skeptical comment on the rapid and ephemeral changes in artistic fashion and on his surroundings by an author who lives in isolation far from the hub of things, in Liptovský Mikulas, in the Tatra Mountains. The painter, assuming the role of magician and juggler, throws cubes alternating with human skulls up into the air. Some fall to the ground and vanish irretrievably into the snow, soon to be followed by the dexterous artist, who held our attention for a fleeting moment only. The action ends where it began, in open space, with no trace of man's presence.

In contrast to the type of "pseudo-performance" represented by Koller's ping-pong demonstration or Popovič's "Game for Four Eyes" and other similar actions in the past, the artist no longer confronts us, his audi-

ence. Engaged in his play, he probably does not even notice us. And in this there is a new paradox. In the former case: A photo-action simulating society, and a plot challenging us in a way to respond. What is in fact a solo action, set up for the camera, has the effect of live communication, of a dialogue. That is what it really is, and we may therefore treat it as a performance, although we know—solely by having been told by the author, but not otherwise—that it is an arranged photo-plot. But now, the very opposite: Occasionally, even in real time and space, in the presence of the public, an organized action affects us as if it were a solo photo-documentary—no dialogue, no appeal to the audience, nothing but a silent monologue—self-expression, with the author actually indifferent about anyone following, understanding, or emulating him. In place of the precisely nuanced, intimately familiar environment of our civilization—games, sports, festivities, and the like—there is an abstract frame of an indifferent nature, a horizon without end, without temporal or spatial localization.

In the mid-sixties, Knížák, Mlynářčik, Zelibská, and company were reviving big folk festivals for everyone. For centuries the festival dance, whether in its archaic form or subsequently in the duality of court and folk festivities and games, invited without distinction all willing and able to join in. Bourgeois society, on the other hand, defined the dance as a man-woman pairing game, with minimal disturbance from their surroundings—the *café dansant* from the first half of this century. This, however, was still not the final stage of decay in traditional society. The ecstatic beat of rock music during the seventies laid claim only to the solitary, alienated individual, disrupting even the dividing line—and by the same token also the bonding link—between the sexes. Instead of tenderness, love, and joy, rock in its most recent incarnation “Punk” has come to express only distrust and anger. Whether we like it or not, art even in its “performance” format—and we are tempted to add, today particularly in this format!—is a sensitive seismograph of the civilization in which we live.

NOTES

¹ Peg Griffith, ed., *Notes toward a Definition of Performance: An Interview with Four Performance Artists* (Chicago: Performance Midway, 1977).

² The road from traditional “object art” to the dynamic immediacy of capturing living processes and realities was opened in a radical manner by Alex Mlynářčik and Stano Filko in their “Sociological Happening” (Happsoc I) in 1965. They declared the exhibited object to be Bratislava (presented from 2 May to 8 May 1965) composed of, inter alia: “138,976 women, 128,727 men, 49,591 dogs, 64,725 dwellings, 165,236 balconies, 35,560 washing machines, 6 cemeteries, 9 theaters—including amateur ones—1 Danube, and the like.” The authors state in their First-of-May Manifesto of 1965: “Happsoc is an action which provokes the perception of reality, taken out of the stereotype of its

existence . . . in contrast to a happening, its expression is non-stylized reality itself, utilized to introduce subjective standpoints." Whereas Mlynárčik chose the road of pure action from 1965 onward, Stano Filko gradually extended his object-collages and material environments with the introduction of moving statues (persons); note, for example, his exhibition in the Gallery on Charles Square in Prague, February 1967. For the art-historical aspect of this movement, see: T. Strauss, "Concerning the Question of the Transformation from Art-Subject to Art-Deed," *Výtvarný Život*, XI, 4 (Bratislava, 1967).

³ For example, the "Snow Festival," which had been prepared for almost a year for the 1970 World Ski Championships in the High Tatras, almost failed to materialize because of momentarily unfavorable weather conditions. The same was true for several of Mlynárčik's actions.

⁴ Two authors from Eastern Slovakia, Gabriel Kladek (1940) and Juraj Bartusz (1933), specialize in a type of ironical pseudo-performance in which they comment on art trends of the day within the broader context of the falsely stylized pathos of events all around them. For example, in a series of illusion photo-events they announce the "First Landing of Slovak Astronauts on the Moon" (1975). Space suits and other space-age gadgetry familiar from the well-known Apollo landing scene are supplemented by the shepherd's axes of Slovak brigands, the national tricolor, and other sentimental folklore paraphernalia.

⁵ A roughly similar situation (an intentional, maximally destylized impulse and an angry, aggressive audience reaction during the second third of the action, the climactic momentary destylization of the audience itself, followed by calm in the face of increasing provocation) is described by Hans Richter in his reminiscences of a historic presentation at the Cafe Voltaire in Zurich (*Das war Dada. Dichtungen und Dokumente* [Munich, 1963]). It appears that this can be regarded as a classical, experimentally verified, psychological behavior pattern.



Alex Mlynárčik
Palm Beach