

Acknowledgements

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A distinctive Central European scepticism is inescapably a part of the spiritual, cultural and intellectual phenomenon that is Central Europe as it has been formed and is being formed by certain specific historical experiences, including those which today seem to lie dormant in our collective unconscious. That scepticism has little in common with, say, English scepticism. It is generally rather stranger, a bit mysterious, a bit nostalgic, often tragic, and at times even heroic, occasionally somewhat incomprehensible in its heavy-handed way, in its caressing cruelty and its ability to turn a provincial phenomenon into a global anticipation of things to come.

Václav Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence'
(Prague, April 1985)¹

Introduction

The Cold War left East-Central Europe in a geopolitical impasse, cut off from the West and apparently frozen in the Soviet sphere of influence. Its isolation was underlined in autumn 1956, when the West gave no military assistance to the Hungarian uprising against Russian occupation.² The United States abandoned its policy of 'rolling-back' communism in Europe as unfeasible given the Soviet capability for nuclear retaliation. Despite this, pressure for change continued to grow from within the satellite countries themselves. Faced with economic and social stagnation in the early 1960s, the Czechoslovak Communist Party undertook a review of inherited institutions and practices, concluding that a radical democratization was essential.³ Central to such renewal was a more plural public life, which in turn would lead to a more open and humane form of socialism. Although parallel reviews were undertaken by the Hungarian leadership under János Kádár, the overwhelming response to 'reform communism' from the Soviet Union and its more orthodox allies was negative. Czechoslovakia remained within the Warsaw Pact and retained a mono-party system, but it was still invaded in August 1968 just the same. The Soviet notion of 'limited sovereignty' devised to justify this action, dubbed the 'Brezhnev Doctrine' by Western analysts, claimed that developments in one socialist country were the responsibility of all the others, who reserved the right to intervene with force to restore the *status quo ante*. This confirmed the view that the Soviet-type system was unreformable.

From the early 1970s on, a new form of resistance emerged in East-Central Europe. The aim of the opposition after 1968 was to democratize society rather than the state. Instead of waiting for political reform ‘from above’, independent social groups were formed to press for change ‘from below’. In Poland, Jacek Kuroń pioneered the notion of ‘self-organization’ by society. His idea was not that a more independent culture and society could one day develop into an effective political opposition; rather, that the development of autonomous groups, unofficial initiatives and eventually social movements could *in themselves* constitute an opposition. Participants would actively enjoy the benefits of self-organization and freedom of expression, across an increasing range of social activities. A non-coercive sphere for engaged citizens with a sense of common purpose could reclaim the public space monopolized by the Communist Party and promote democratic values. Citizens started to take initiatives uncontrolled by the authorities, acting independently of state-controlled instruments, elections and Parliament to revive civil society.⁴ The success of social movements such as the Polish Workers’ Defence Committee KOR from 1976, and Solidarity from 1980, lay in the fact that while they were designed so as not to explicitly challenge the Party’s control of the state, they effectively ended the Party’s monopoly of the public sphere.

The opposition’s goal was empowerment and a new conception of political subjectivization which would enable people to act and communicate openly. Radicalism in Central Europe can be linked to the wider spirit of counterculture movements in the later 1960s.⁵ David Ost has argued that it had ‘an anarchist streak [...] a general rejection of power, an ethos of openness, and a sense that the object of political struggle was not just to change the government but to change personal life as well. The personal was political, too.’⁶ Civil society, in 1970s Central Europe, was conceived of as the ‘non-governmental sphere of politics’, rather than in the orthodox Marxist sense of *bürgliche Gesellschaft* (bourgeois society), for this had been brutally eliminated under Stalin, in order that he might claim to have realized ‘the Marxist-Leninist assumption that state and society become reunited when the party of the “universal class” takes power’.⁷

As Barbara Falk has observed:

Civil society for the dissidents was neither apolitical nor beyond politics. [...] According to the dissident *oeuvre*, civil society is fundamentally antipolitical, which does not mean that it is not political *per se*,

but that it provides and generates an alternative non-institutional form of politics [...] civil society flows from the wellspring of low politics – not military or diplomatic institutions or processes, but an active and engaged citizenry.⁸

When striking workers in Gdańsk in August 1980 issued a statement to the Polish government saying: ‘Politics is your business, not ours’, they signalled a paradox. As the events of 1980–1 unfolded, and the Party decided to negotiate with and to acknowledge Solidarity as a legal organization, the opposition’s hitherto antipolitical position was threatened. Forcing Solidarity to engage in dialogue with state power about the political future was an attempt to render antipolitics obsolete as a discourse. With the imposition of martial law in December 1981, however, the tables turned once more.⁹

Perhaps the most eloquent spokesman for antipolitics was the Hungarian writer and dissident György Konrád. In his landmark work *Antipolitics*, an essay written in secret in 1982, he asked: ‘How can we strengthen the horizontal human relationships of civil society against the vertical human relationships of military society?’¹⁰ Although Konrád was of the opinion that ‘democracy and independence, here and now, are not possible for us’, and that ‘the basic framework of political and economic power cannot be reformed’, he argued that this did not mean there was no alternative to the *status quo*.¹¹ On the contrary, if ‘autonomy and solidarity are the root values of every democratic ideology’, he reasoned, then the aim of opposition should be ‘to attempt the near-impossible: even if our nation and our institutions have no autonomy, to try to work out our own’.¹²

Konrád’s call for the opposition to attempt the ‘near-impossible’ echoed Czechoslovak poet and artistic director of the band the Plastic People of the Universe Ivan Jirous’s idea of a ‘second culture’. Citing Marcel Duchamp’s prediction that ‘the artist of the future will go underground’, Jirous explained:

The goal of our underground is to create a second culture, a culture completely independent from all official communication media and the conventional hierarchy of value judgements put out by the establishment. It is to be a culture that does not have as its goal the destruction of the establishment, because by attempting this, it would – in effect – mean that we would fall into the trap of playing their game. The real aim is to overcome the hopeless feeling that it is of no use to try

anything and show that it is possible to do a lot, but only for those who are willing to act and who ask little for themselves, but instead, care a lot for others.¹³

One of the greatest moral authorities to emerge in Central Europe in this period, playwright and dissident Václav Havel, later explained that ‘the phenomenon of dissidence grows out of an essentially different conception of politics than that prevailing in the world today. That is, the dissident does not operate in the realm of genuine power at all. He is not seeking power. He has no desire for office and does not gather votes [...] he offers nothing and promises nothing.’ If the world of the dissident appeared to many to be a ‘mad’ world, then, he suggested:

It is meaningful because, within its limits, it is consistent. It is tactical because it does not let itself be guided by tactical considerations. It is political because it does not play politics. It is concrete, real, effective – not in spite of its madness but because of it. To be sure, it is also this because there is something honest about this ‘madness’, it is faithful to itself, it is whole and undivided. This may be a world of dreams and of the ideal, but it is not the world of utopia.¹⁴

This book considers the relationship between the position of experimental artists in what Havel called post-totalitarian Europe and this ‘mad world’ of the dissident. The visual artists discussed below, albeit to different degrees and in different ways, were also ‘political’ because they did not ‘play politics’. The relationship between art and dissidence, however, is far from straightforward, and it is not my aim to claim that these artists were dissidents in a straightforward sense. Nevertheless, like their dissident counterparts, they were undoubtedly in part responding to post-totalitarian conditions, and in order to better understand their work, we need a robust understanding of the particularities of life in Central Europe after 1956.

Havel compared his life in post-totalitarian Central Europe to the life of a political prisoner with asthma forced to remain in a cell with smokers. The political prisoner’s case has little chance of being reported internationally. As Havel put it in his essay ‘Stories and Totalitarianism’: ‘Asthma is not a story. Death would make it one.’¹⁵ Similarly, the mechanisms of power were no longer, strictly speaking, totalitarian enough to attract the attention of the Western media. Havel was vociferous in denouncing the particular evils of the post-Stalin era, though, and warned that older forms of terror had been replaced by a new model. Post-totalitarian control was anonymous and

characterized by more subtle forms of control than those under Stalin: ‘The advanced totalitarian system depends on manipulatory devices so refined, complex, and powerful, that it no longer needs murderers and victims. Even less does it need fiery Utopia-builders spreading discontent with dreams of a better future.’ On the contrary: ‘The epithet “real socialism”, which this era has coined to describe itself, points a finger at those for whom it has no room: the dreamers.’ Under the Brezhnev Doctrine, ‘lawlessness’ in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, according to Havel, ‘put on kid gloves and moved from the torture chambers into the upholstered offices of faceless bureaucrats.’¹⁶

If a citizen of our country wishes to travel abroad, get a new job, exchange his apartment or his stove, organize an amateur event, he is usually compelled to undertake a long and exhausting march through various offices for the necessary permits, certificates, recommendations, and he must frequently demean himself or bite his tongue. It is tiring, boring, and debilitating. Many people, out of disgust, or for fear it will drag them down, quickly give up on their most personal plans.

As sole employer, the state had accrued immense power to manipulate the day-to-day existence of citizens.

The bureaucratic regulation of the everyday details of people’s lives is another indirect instrument of nihilization. It is here that public matters infiltrate private life in a way that is very ‘ordinary’, but extremely persistent. The sheer number of small pressures that we are subjected to every day is more important than it may seem at first, because it encloses the space in which we are condemned to breathe. There is very little air in that space. But not so little that we might suffocate, and thus create a story.

Havel proposed that the ‘destruction of the story by “real socialism”’ was the main reason why these pernicious processes remained invisible to many citizens.

An excellent theorist of the relationship between the personal and the political, Havel explained that if the ‘double pressure’ of censorship and self-censorship forced the ‘creative person to turn his attention to private life’, then this was in many respects an artificial distinction, for, as he observed, ‘private and public life today (particularly under totalitarianism) are inseparable; they are like two linked vessels, and one cannot be represented truthfully if the other is ignored’. On the one hand, ‘Private life without a historical dimension is a façade and a lie’; on the other, it is ‘extremely difficult to grasp the historic quality of a moment when a global

attack on the very notion of history is taking place'. Havel argued not only for the importance of history, therefore, but also that individuals should try to nurture and cultivate their own, personal stories. He cautioned that 'the process of surrendering oneself begins with small matters', with individuals' day-to-day decisions to 'renounce something of their own potential story' and to fall into line.¹⁷ The power of the ordinary citizen, which Havel famously termed the 'power of the powerless',¹⁸ lay in the subject's ability to refuse to reinforce centralized ideology at the level of day-to-day life, to refuse the post-totalitarian lie, and to 'live in truth'. A key aspect of the struggle against oppression, then, was the battle to overcome 'social quiescence' on a personal level, thus bringing to light the 'invisible war between the totalitarian system and life itself'.¹⁹

The key aim of this book is to reconnect the private and historical dimension of artists' stories. Abandoning the art object to engage in various forms of Happening, action-based practice and conceptualism, producing their own social reality and moral criteria, the artists I discuss were thinking along lines comparable to those developed into the characteristically Central European theory of dissent I have briefly sketched out above. This being so, I argue that a stronger engagement with the writings of dissident intellectuals such as Václav Havel, György Konrád, and Jacek Kuroń is essential for the development of a more nuanced and historically specific understanding of the directions pursued by experimental artists in the region. It is for this reason that I have chosen to methodologically frame this study principally through their writings.

Following his release from a five-year prison sentence in 1984, Havel sought to characterize the Central European mindset for a Western audience. 'An Anatomy of Reticence' argued that if dissidents, not to mention ordinary citizens, remained cautious about co-operating with Western peace activists, despite the threat of nuclear annihilation facing the Cold War globe, they were reticent for good reason: 'For thirty-seven years, every possible and impossible open space in Czechoslovakia has been decorated with slogans such as "Building up our homeland strengthens peace", "The Soviet Union, guarantor of world peace"'. In such circumstances, Havel explained, 'the word "peace" – much like the words "socialism", "homeland" and "the people" – had been reduced to 'serving both as one rung on the ladder up which clever individuals clamber and as a stick for beating down those who stand aloof'. But as Havel went on to elaborate, the lack of enthusiasm among Czechs for 'peace' was also a symptom of another feature

of post-totalitarian life – fear; for, as he explained, ‘even the most diffident expression of disagreement with government policy in an area as sensitive as defence is infinitely more dangerous in our countries than in the West’.²⁰ Decades spent living in the ideological climate of late socialism made their mark on the whole attitude to life in Central Europe: ‘a distinctive Central European scepticism is inescapably a part of the spiritual, cultural and intellectual phenomenon that is Central Europe as it has been formed and is being formed by certain specific historical experiences’. He described this condition as ‘a bit mysterious, a bit nostalgic, often tragic, and at times even heroic, occasionally somewhat incomprehensible in its heavy-handed way, in its caressing cruelty’.²¹ Reticence, then, could take many forms.

Havel’s comments go a long way towards explaining why the artists discussed in this book insisted that their work was not political. They too had to explain to foreigners that they did not consider their art to be ‘political’ as such, and that they were not dissidents. To appreciate the full weight of such claims, one needs to understand the historical circumstances to which Havel was referring when he explained that ‘A citizen of our country simply starts to yawn whenever he hears the word “peace”’. If the word ‘peace’ awakened in the Central European citizen feelings of ‘distrust, scepticism, ridicule and revulsion’,²² then the same could be said of the word ‘politics’. Artists in late socialist Central Europe might well also have yawned when they heard the word ‘politics’, out of a similar combination of distrust and fatigue.

Each of the six protagonists in this book, in his own way, hoped, as Havel did with respect to ‘politics outside politics’, or ‘politics outside the sphere of power’, that what he was doing ‘does make some sense, that by whatever hidden and complex ways it leads to something, summons something, produces some effect [...] bears within itself a certain power, and that even a word is capable of a certain radiation, of leaving a mark on the “hidden consciousness of a community”’.²³ Needless to say, each artist was also a sceptic in his own way. Various forms and degrees of faith, on the one hand, and doubt, on the other, are therefore at the heart of this study. They are, I think, rather particular to the region, and are a reason to link the art of three countries, often considered in isolation, according to a common framework.

Returning to ‘An Anatomy of Reticence’, and Havel’s observation that Central European scepticism also had the ‘ability to turn a provincial phenomenon into a global anticipation of things to come’,²⁴ today, we see how acute his observation was. Provincial as the region remained according to the Cold War logic of two superpowers, it was in Central Europe that the

avalanche leading to the production of a new world order and the dismantling of the USSR began. Just five years after Havel published his 'Anatomy', it became clear that Central European dissidents had indeed anticipated the global turn of 1989 that brought multiparty democracy to the former Soviet-bloc countries, and Havel to Presidency in Czechoslovakia. This book argues that artists played their part in these historical transformations, and that their shifting attitudes, over the decades, served as a litmus test of the wider direction of travel in the social field in the turbulent years 1956–89.

This chapter in Central European history opened with the arrival of a 'thaw' in the period immediately following Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev's denunciation of the Stalin 'cult of the individual' at the Twentieth CPSU Congress in 1956, and the relaxation of censorship in some cases, but also the crushing of the 1956 Revolution in Hungary. Just over a decade later, the region experienced the upheavals of 1968 in Warsaw and Prague and the political normalization that followed in their wake. These events culminated in the social upheavals of 1976 in Poland; the signing by Czechoslovak dissidents of Charter '77 the following year; the formation of the Polish Solidarity movement in 1980; and the eventual collapse of communism in the Soviet satellites in 1989.

Each chapter in this book situates its protagonist and their work in relation to these historic moments in Czechoslovakian, Hungarian and Polish history, and explores how the attitudes expressed in the work were, in part, engendered by these particular circumstances. The broad sweep of the collective narrative told through the six case studies is one of the passage from a commitment to autonomy in the period of the 'thaw', to an increased recognition of the need to establish new forms of social and political dialogue by the 1980s. The book argues that the period 1956–89 witnessed two parallel developments: the rise and fall of antipolitics as a coherent strategy for the reinvigoration of civil society among members of the nascent oppositional intelligentsia, and the adoption of variations on antipolitics as a means to redefine artistic practice among experimental artists.

Chapter One is devoted to the Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor (1915–90) and his commitment to a form of practice he sought to characterize as 'disinterested'. I take his story as a starting point in order to foreground the consequences for artists of having been placed under the Soviet sphere of influence after World War II as a result of the Yalta conference. It could be argued that Kantor, and other Central European artists of his generation, pursued

antipolitics by default, equating the marriage of art and politics with the traumatic imposition of Socialist Realism and the stifling of the rebirth of European Modernism in the late 1940s by the occupying forces. Focusing on his experiments with the 'Happening' phenomenon in the years 1965–68, the chapter explores Kantor's engagement with impossibility and 'poor reality' in antipolitical terms, considering the social possibilities developed through his 'Happening Theatre of Events'.

Chapter Two is devoted to the Slovak artist Július Koller (1939–2007) and his lifelong investigation of the critical possibilities of doubt. Like Kantor – albeit in far more isolated circumstances, particularly in the wake of Czechoslovak 'normalization' after 1968 – Koller was highly sceptical of politics. The chapter elucidates his antipolitical stance, setting his commitment to democratic communication and questioning against his over-investment in the UFO phenomenon and his extraordinary series of so called Universal Futurological Operations of the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter Three turns to Hungary, and to the activities of Tamás Szentjóbý (born 1940) in Budapest, where he was an important participant in the underground culture of the 1960s, orchestrating alternative actions of an antipolitical nature until his forced emigration in 1975. This chapter serves as a linchpin of sorts, because Szentjóbý's poetic actions attacked the absurdities of post-totalitarian society head on. He proposed what he called a 'parallel course' as a model of living without self-censorship, and advocated 'being forbidden' while absolutely avoiding politics.

Chapter Four focuses on another Hungarian who worked in Budapest before leaving for the West in the late 1970s: Endre Tót (born 1937). Tót's antipolitics takes the form of an ironic, humorous attitude to art and life. The chapter follows two threads recurring throughout his work of the 1970s – the theme of joy, or gladness; and the figure zero. I argue that Tót's conceptual actions and mail-art activities enabled him to retain a crucial sense of critical distance from the post-totalitarian situation – and to communicate with an international audience through humour. His activities offer a particularly Central European take on the wider relationship between conceptualism and bureaucracy.

Chapter Five argues that the actions of Jiří Kovanda (born 1953), a younger Czech artist working mostly in Prague, staged the same reticence Havel characterized in his 'Anatomy of Reticence' *avant la lettre*, recognizing, as Havel did, the importance of focusing on oneself – and on 'small matters' – as a necessary

precondition for arriving at wider societal change. Taking his minimal actions into the public space on the one hand, but rendering them all but invisible to passers-by, Kovanda rehearsed the paradoxical predicament of the unofficial artist intent upon making contact with an audience, but unable to do so.

The final chapter, dedicated to Kraków-based artist Jerzy Beres (1930–2012), translates the question of contact and dialogue into the Polish context in the last two decades of post-totalitarian rule, signalling the potential obsolescence of antipolitics as an artistic discourse in the 1980s, particularly with the emergence of Solidarity as a mass movement. With reference to a selection of Beres's crude wooden sculptures and symbolic 'manifestations', the chapter explores his faith in art as a vehicle for debating values and establishing direct dialogue with the spectator in the public space. His commitment to the 'naked truth', and his participation in the famous Polish church exhibitions held when official institutions were boycotted by artists under martial law, are examined in relation to the writings of Adam Michnik on the history of dissent and its relationship to the national question in Poland.

While many of the artistic proposals and actions discussed in the book will be familiar to people in each country, its aim is to bring them together within the context of a new Central European framework for a wider audience, and to construct, in this way, a focused picture of how a range of critical approaches overlapped historically in neighbouring countries. Havel observed, in relation to Kafka, that 'in our Central European context what is most earnest has a way of blending in a particularly tense manner with what is most comic. It seems it is precisely the dimension of distance, of rising above oneself and making light of oneself, which lends to our concerns and actions the right amount of shattering seriousness.'²⁵ This same serious humour characterizes the artistic activities introduced below. Rather than any single heroic antipolitical position, what emerges in the end is a series of surprisingly anti-heroic stories. Their collective historical power has become increasingly clear since 1989.

1

Disinterest

The existential crisis Albert Camus articulated in 1942, when he described the absurd condition of mankind ‘deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come’, had particular resonance in Poland.¹ Singled out by Alfred Jarry to be subject to the rule of his gluttonous despot *Ubu Roi* in his play of 1896, regaining national independence in 1918 after having been partitioned since the late eighteenth century, only to be divided between Stalin and Hitler in 1939, Polish reality itself was absurd.

Theatre director and artist Tadeusz Kantor combated absurdity with absurdity. He had demonstrated his commitment to artistic freedom through his underground theatre in the years 1942–4, putting on experimental productions of Juliusz Słowacki, Stanisław Wyspiański and Jean Cocteau in private apartments in Nazi-occupied Kraków.² The underground theatre played an important role in keeping Polish culture alive in an extremely dark period. Kantor risked his life for his belief that it was art’s duty to ‘reply to reality’ and to wage war on convention, so as to ‘regain the relationship of man to reality’ that had been severed by world war.³

On Kantor’s inspiration, the Artists’ Club (Klub Artystów) in Kraków, whose members included Kantor, Jerzy Nowosielski, Maria Jarema and Jonasz Stern, organized the First Exhibition of Modern Art in 1948 (fig. 1.1), drawing on Kantor’s tales from the capital of the European art world, Paris, which he had visited the previous year.⁴ This major survey of progressive artistic



1.1 *The First Exhibition of Modern Art*, Pałac Sztuki, Kraków, December 1948. Photographer Unknown. Courtesy of Cricoteka Archive, Kraków.

trends in Kraków, Łódź, Lublin, Poznań and Warsaw, however, proved to be not just the first, but also the last for almost a decade.⁵ The ideologues of Socialist Realism began to state their case with increased vehemence that year, and Kantor's passionate case for avant-garde artistic experimentation rapidly lost ground.⁶ Having secured an appointment at the State Higher School of Art in late 1948, he was dismissed by the middle of 1950. An article published in the periodical *Przegląd Artystyczny* in early 1950 conveyed the tone of the new orthodoxy:

Art devoid of ideals or voicing indifference to social matters is fundamentally art whose ideology is hostile to progress, hostile to every working person. There has never been indifferent art and there is no such thing now. A work of art passes the test only when, paraphrasing the words of Karl Marx, 'the idea of art, sweeping through the masses, becomes their material strength'.⁷

The imposition of Socialist Realism as official orthodoxy in mid-1949 – just four years after Poland's 'liberation' by the Red Army – was a painful blow to avant-garde artistic circles.⁸ Kantor disappeared from public view that year. Unable to travel and unwilling to exhibit in the required style, he would work

in private until 1955, producing preparatory materials for projects unrealizable in Stalinist Poland.

The Polish response to Stalinization was ambivalent at best. Most people saw Stalin as ‘primarily a symbol of satrapy and oppression’:⁹ millions had experienced the annexation and Sovietization of the country’s eastern territory in the years 1939–41.¹⁰ The Katyń and attendant massacres of recently conscripted army officers – the flower of the Polish intelligentsia – in spring 1940 were widely known. Stalin had refused to aid the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944, and denied Allied forces landing rights to offer it assistance until it was too late. He had abolished the Polish Communist Party (KPP) at the height of the terror (1937–8), executing many of its leaders and sending others into Siberian exile.¹¹ Meanwhile, he had established a government-in-exile in Moscow: a group that was to be parachuted into Poland in mid-1944, dubbing itself ‘the Lublin Committee’. Although Stalin had signed up to ‘free and fair’ elections in the liberated territories at Yalta, the Lublin group consolidated its hold by a rigged referendum. When the Red Army entered Warsaw, the response was muted. Following Party leader Władysław Gomułka’s removal, as a ‘right-national deviationist’, at the end of 1948, Stalinism was introduced apace, under the leadership of Bolesław Bierut.

In the years following Stalin’s death in 1953, however, there began to be a new note of openness in Polish culture.¹² Kantor was able to make a second trip to Paris in 1955, this time with the *Szary Teatr* troupe. He encountered *art informel*, seeing new work by Jean Fautrier, Wols, Georges Mathieu and Jackson Pollock, commenting with enthusiasm that Pollock appeared to be ‘inside the painting’.¹³ Returning to Poland, he began to think about how to turn ‘the act of painting’ into a ‘manifestation of life’.¹⁴ In view of the polarization of later Cold War debates around Abstract Expressionism, it is worth noting that Kantor’s interpretation of Pollock shared more with Harold Rosenberg’s phenomenological account of the artist’s transformation of the canvas into ‘an arena in which to act’ than with Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried’s account of Pollock’s painting as a self-reflexive, medium-specific enterprise.¹⁵ If Michael Fried later wrote that ‘the success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre’, Kantor’s ambitions for painting had never been any more conceptually confined to the limits of the canvas than his idea of theatre was constrained by the conventions of the stage.¹⁶ Kantor saw the limitations of the formalist account of autonomy: ‘nothing in art is autonomous for ever. After

achieving autonomy every art, and so theatre too – in order to develop – must go beyond its terrain, into the sphere of other conventions foreign to it and realities that lie beyond it.¹⁷ Thus, although his commitment to the freedom of artistic expression undoubtedly chimed in some respects with the formalist account of Pollock, his notion of ‘disinterest’ cannot be equated with the model of ‘autonomy’ elaborated in relation to medium-specificity, not least because, in the same year that saw his renewed enthusiasm for abstraction, 1955, he co-founded the Cricot 2 theatre.

The troupe took its name from the prewar Cricot artists’ theatre in Kraków, which was based there in the years 1933–8 while Kantor was studying painting at the Academy of Fine Arts.¹⁸ The Cricot was characterized by its abolition of a strict division between actors and spectators, its introduction of improvisation, and its affinity with cabaret.¹⁹ The name itself was a word game – ‘this is circus’ (*to cyrk* in Polish), backwards. In the final years of national independence, the Cricot had been the forum for the presentation of the work of dramatist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939). Although he was the son of a Polish nationalist, Witkiewicz had accepted a commission as an officer of the Imperial Army of the Russian Empire during World War I, becoming political commissar of his regiment during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Petersburg. The experience was one from which he never recovered psychologically. The day after Soviet troops entered Eastern Poland on 17 September 1939, just 16 days after the Nazi invasion from the West, Witkiewicz committed suicide. ‘True Dadaists committed suicide. Witkiewicz committed suicide too. He was a true Dadaist. I am not a true Dadaist,’ Kantor confessed.²⁰ Nevertheless, he remained committed to Witkiewicz, and his plays became the basis for many Cricot 2 productions. In spite of his commitment to Witkiewicz’s plays, Kantor insisted that to simply ‘stage’ them was impossible; dramatic texts, for him, were ‘readymade objects’, to be handled ‘in much the same way as I treat other events and objects in the production’.²¹ A play had to be reinvented, in order to be performed. Kantor always insisted that he was neither the author nor the director of the productions of the Cricot 2. Its performances developed dialogically, through intensive rehearsal. If Kantor was always present on stage when the Cricot 2 performed, watching the actors, this too was part of his insistence on destroying the discrete conventions of directing, acting and spectating.

Witkiewicz appears to have been the only artist of the Polish avant-garde to have responded to Marcel Duchamp directly.²² His satirical ‘Manifesto

(Festo-Mani)', of 1921, opened provocatively: 'The most beautiful of arts, and who knows if not the most difficult, is mendacity.'²³ Witkiewicz appended the Polish version of the French term 'blague' – bluffing or hoaxing – to Duchamp's name, and signed his Manifesto 'Marceli Duchąński-Blaga'.²⁴ Kantor continued this playful tradition. In *Le Grand Emballage*, his Happening of 1966 at the Galerie Handschin in Basel, he included his own homage to Duchamp: a toilet issuing forth peals of laughter.²⁵ The Dadaist tactics Kantor most admired were 'derision, disregard, mutiny, protest, negation, and questioning of all social values'.²⁶ He saw strong parallels between his reaction to the experience of World War II and the Dadaists' response to World War I, calling Dada his 'heroic period'.²⁷ Writing in the 1960s, he recalled that 'the spirit of their protests, scandal, and actions was still in the air. [...] Knowing nothing about the Dadaists, I had created a similar pattern of artistic "conduct" and had described my attitude towards the world and art in a similar way.'²⁸

For Kantor, painting and theatre were both part of a wider project: 'to create and safeguard the existence of free and disinterested artistic expression'.²⁹ He qualified the contingency of his early fascination with the act of painting in the following terms: 'I believed, but it was not an absolute faith. I was always, in my *informel* painting too, also concerned with something more than the autonomy of some form or artistic method. I want to apply this method to the whole of reality.'³⁰ Given the degree to which Kantor's avant-gardism aimed to redefine reality itself, rather than merely redefining artistic practice, Eva Cockcroft oversimplified matters in her strident 1974 *Artforum* article 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', when she wrote that Kantor's enthusiasm for Pollock's work was symptomatic of the triumph of the West's Cold War cultural policy in Europe. Although Kantor participated in the New York Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition *15 Polish Painters*, it does not follow that Poland's swift disillusionment with Socialist Realism was the result of Kantor's having been in thrall to North American formalism, as Cockcroft would have us believe.³¹ Kantor's Secret Police file, code name 'Kant', in the Institute of National Memory (covering the period 1959–63) reveals that although the authorities made an early attempt to oblige Kantor to assist them in disclosing information concerning émigré Polish artists, their advances were unsuccessful, and the operation was abandoned in 1963.³² Kantor's commitment to what he called disinterest entailed a strategic ambivalence in relation to the official cultural rhetoric of *both* Cold War

superpowers; his pursuit of an approach that the binary framework of the formalism/realism debate cannot accommodate was what made his approach so characteristically antipolitical.

When Khrushchev denounced Stalin at the Twentieth Soviet Party Congress in February 1956, foreign communist delegates – excluded from the oration itself – were given a copy of the ‘secret speech’ to take home. Uniquely among these, the Polish communists ordered a translation and issued it in multiple copies. The result was an explosion of interest in the ‘Stalin Cult’ and politics in general amongst the Party rank and file. The Polish communists soon put the full text in the public domain, evoking widespread criticism of the imposed Soviet system.³³ Protests spilled on to the streets of Poznań in June 1956, and became a national uprising in October, when the pre-Stalinist leader, Gomułka, was returned to power.³⁴ His acceptance speech set a new tone for Polish politics, announcing that the ‘evil’ of Stalinism was now part of the ‘irrevocable past’. He denounced in particular the collectivization of agriculture, advocated the formation of voluntary ‘co-operatives’, and prompted a wave of spontaneous decollectivization. Appealing to democratic socialists, his leadership offered fresh hope to revisionists, and initiated the revitalization of the public sphere by – among other measures – opening up to the Catholic Church, releasing the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Wyszyński, from house arrest, legalizing group discussion clubs, and admitting Catholic representatives to the Sejm (the state’s legislative body).³⁵

De-Stalinization in the arts also progressed apace. Taking advantage of the slowly melting political ice, the Cricot 2’s first production, in May 1956, was a play by Witkiewicz, whose work had been banned in Stalin’s lifetime. Kantor staged *The Cuttlefish* in the café of the House of Fine Artists (Dom Plastyków). Political readings were immediately forthcoming in intellectual circles. The poet Zbigniew Herbert wrote: ‘Hyrkania [...] a country where a few infallible and unerring partake in the orgy of power and control over society – “a flock of lost sheep” – was neither an abstraction nor, unfortunately, a utopia.’³⁶ Kantor, though, resisted the politicization of his work, arguing instead that his disinterested theatre was an ‘annexation’ rather than a representation of reality. What mattered, for him, was the production’s ability to ‘crush’ what he called the ‘impregnable shell’ of drama. He advocated deploying shock, as a ‘physical device to / break through the / petty, / universal, and / practical philosophy of life of / modern man; / a device to unblock / the channels of his subdued / sphere of imagination.’³⁷ Following the opening of the interpretational floodgates by ‘thaw’, however, educated spectators were

increasingly eloquent in reading between absurd lines. Moreover, to paraphrase a saying among the Russian intelligentsia at that time: 'The censors and the public read between the lines. But we read between the lines between the lines.' While in Britain and America Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was initially taken to be an 'apolitical' play, when it reached the Polish stage in 1956, as Martin Esslin recounts:

the audience there immediately understood it as a portrayal of the frustrations of life in a society which habitually explains away the hardships of the present by emphasizing that one day the millennium of plenty is bound to come [...] a theatre of such concretized images of psychological dilemmas and frustrations which transmuted moods into myth was extremely well suited to deal with the realities of life in Eastern Europe, with the added advantage that, concentrating on the psychological essentials of the situation in a setting of myth and allegory, it had no need to be openly political or topical by referring to politics or social conditions as such.³⁸

Gomułka's new government performed a cultural U-turn after 1956, encouraging the development of a Polish school of modernist painting in a bid to win back the wider artistic and intellectual community. The Polish delegation to the 1958 all-Soviet exhibition the Art of Socialist Countries famously delivered Post-Impressionist Colourism, to the outrage of their Moscow hosts.³⁹ Moscow insisted that the Polish authorities offer an official declaration that future exhibitions should contain no more than 15 per cent abstraction. Of course, this absurd policy proved unenforceable.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there was a sense in which abstraction had begun to be co-opted by the Polish authorities, and Kantor may have seen its oppositional bankruptcy, attributing to his rediscovery of the object his salvation from the 'academic stagnation' of painting.

His new strategy entailed the subtle substitution of subjects for objects belonging to a category he called the 'reality of the lowest rank', which he designated as 'poor objects' – 'disinterested..., worthy of contempt, condemned from the outset not to be taken seriously, funny and shameful'.⁴¹ The underground theatre had already inserted objects such as 'a rotten plank of wood, a rusty rope, a muddy wheel of a cart, old packages covered in dust, an authentic military uniform' into the autonomous zone of theatre, according to an operation for which Kantor used a political term: 'annexation'.⁴² Kantor sought to rehabilitate objects that tended to be overlooked:

'I turn my attention in the direction of reality which has the lowest rank in general opinion [...] forgotten, banal, unimportant.'⁴³ His reality of the lowest rank was to be founded on 'completely disinterested principles, that is to say not directed by aesthetic, ideological or even humanitarian ones.'⁴⁴ Like Duchamp, Kantor considered choice to be 'the essential creative act', but unlike Duchamp, who championed the 'indifference' of chance, Kantor's 'disinterested' approach prioritized an encounter with 'truth'. The reality of the lowest rank was designed to produce, in the viewer, 'a moment of recognition'.⁴⁵ He invested in objects that appeared to him to be somehow 'true', simple and 'neutral', 'without the trace of any formal or aesthetic values'.⁴⁶ Kantor maintained that reality of the lowest rank offered a way to enter the sphere of the imaginary, in which all the most important things coexisted: 'existence, death, love ... / without pathos or illusion ... a poor corner suffices for this'.⁴⁷

His *Popular Exhibition* (1963) was just such a poor corner (fig. 1.2). One of the first artistic Environments in Poland, it was a bold statement against conventional forms of display, populated by poor objects. Installed in the



1.2 Tadeusz Kantor, *Popular Exhibition*, Galeria Krzysztofory, Kraków, 1963. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszkowska.

medieval cellar of the Krzysztofory Gallery in Kraków, a cavernous, crumbling, red-brick space, were lines of string from which the artist suspended hundreds of sketches, letters, photographs, notes, newspapers and other marginalia, displayed ‘like washing hung out to dry’.⁴⁸ Some of these were the product of Kantor’s five-year period of internal emigration, the drawings he had made while retreating from public life after the introduction of Socialist Realism. These years had been formative, enabling him to work in an entirely ‘disinterested’ way, concerning himself with the creative process rather than with end results. Drawing had served as a way for the artist to continue to ‘exercise the imagination’.⁴⁹ Theoretical writing served a similar function. His complete writings fill three heavy volumes of manifestos, commentaries, scores, scripts and letters. Kantor abandoned writing in prose, which he associated with officialdom, labelling it ‘the emptied-out language of the officially recognized political and artistic ideologies’ conventions and their systems of power’.⁵⁰ Instead, he developed his own quasi-poetical style, characterizing poetry as ‘the extension of our reality beyond its / boundaries so that we can cope with it better in our lives. [...] A daring expedition into the unknown / and the impossible.’⁵¹ What excited him about poetry was this same ‘disinterestedness’.

Kantor called his popular exhibition an ‘anti-exhibition’: ‘an inventory deprived of chronology, hierarchy or place’.⁵² The works it contained were not intended as ‘works of art’, but rather as a means ‘to call into question the concept of the work of art’.⁵³ As Jarosław Suchan has argued, Kantor presented himself as a *bricoleur* of sorts, and, in calling into question the nature of the artwork, also sought to question the role of the artist.⁵⁴ To counteract what he considered to be the natural impulse of the artist ‘to create’ – the conventional behaviour of an artist – he advocated the pursuit of ‘shrinking’ as a way to leave the role more open.⁵⁵ The artist should ‘put his own ambition to “create” in the vicinity of a zero point’.⁵⁶ While he does feature centrally in a number of iconic installation shots from the Popular Exhibition, he becomes not the subject of the photograph but merely another element swamped by the disarray of the installation.

The political temperature in Polish intellectual circles rose following the Kuroń and Modzelewski trial of July 1965, which saw two junior lecturers at Warsaw University jailed until May 1967. Their ‘crime’ had been an ‘Open Letter’ to the Communist Party, from which they had been expelled the previous November. The pair had argued that no alternative ideology had been generated since the shattering of Stalinism in 1956.⁵⁷ Now run by a ruling

bureaucracy focused solely on self-preservation, politics and the economy had stagnated. The only remedy was revolution by the working class. A key part of its agenda should be to establish trade unions ‘completely independent of the State and with the right to organize economic and political strikes’, a remarkable anticipation of the rise of Solidarity in 1980. Imprisonment of the authors served to confirm their analysis that the ruling Party, bereft of ideas, could be changed only by pressures from outside.

Kantor was abroad throughout the affair, as he had travelled to the USA for six months in April 1965, funded by the Ford Foundation. While in New York, he produced a plan for an exhibition to be held at the post office. He wrote that it would comprise ‘not only paintings’ but also ‘masses of packets, sacks’.⁵⁸ Full of enthusiasm, Kantor saw the post office as a space in which power relations between subjects and objects were reversed: ‘objects – letters ... / packets, parcels, bags and all their contents / exist for a certain time / independently, / without an owner ... / without a function / almost in a void, / between the sender and the receiver, / where both one and the other remain powerless’.⁵⁹ This, he explained, was ‘one of the rare moments, in / which the object slips away from its fate’.⁶⁰ In the limbo of the post office, Kantor’s poor objects could escape the tyranny of control. If one aim of Kantor’s artistic practice was to ‘regain the object’,⁶¹ the strategy of *emballage* served as a key ritual designed ‘to draw the object into the sphere of art’.⁶² Kantor denied having been influenced by Man Ray or Christo in this matter, claiming instead to have simply found in the dictionary, and liked, this French term, which, he wrote, ‘just means packaging’.⁶³ Packets and sacks of all shapes and sizes, and the prosaic activity of packaging, recur throughout his career: emancipated packages, rescued by the ritual of packaging, play the part of disempowered subjects. In this way, Kantor forged an analogy for the possibility that people too, might ‘slip away from their fate’. The symbiotic relationship between mute, ‘poor objects’ and traumatized postwar subjects was as central to such experimental proposals as it was to Kantor’s theatrical universe. If Kantor’s objects are substitutes for people, then by liberating objects from the tyranny of convention, he was probing ways to reconfigure the alienated ‘relationship of man to reality’.⁶⁴ As he explained: ‘mundane, boring, conventional events and situations constitute the heart of reality ... I keep turning them around, re-creating them indefinitely until they begin to have a life of their own. ... Then such questions as “Is this already art?” or “Is this still life?” become inconsequential to me.’⁶⁵

For Allan Kaprow, whose landmark *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* appeared the same year he met Kantor, 1965, the Happening was 'more active than meditative ... similar in spirit to such phenomena as sporting events, celebrations, festivals, carnivals, the everyday unconscious ritual of department stores and riding on the subway at rush hour'.⁶⁶ Kantor shared Kaprow's commitment to working directly with the everyday in so far as he saw the artist's role as primarily that of arranging pre-existing elements in the world: 'everything I do, I make from known elements, from known reality, from real objects'.⁶⁷ The artist hoped that the Happening might offer a new way to abolish the conventions of both art and life so as to '*depict reality via reality*' directly.⁶⁸ Happenings seemed to offer the opportunity to orchestrate a zone of freedom at a fragile point of intersection between what he called 'the space of life' and 'the space of art'.⁶⁹ The format also clearly offered new possibilities for expanding his strategy of 'annexation', incorporating found persons, objects and social conventions into new 'disinterested' situations. But Kantor's attitude towards everyday life was far more ambivalent than Kaprow's. If Kaprow advocated embracing the bustle of street life in order to reject the inherited conventions of high art and its institutional framework, the late socialist context in which Kantor was working provided a different set of challenges. Kantor clung to the possibility of carving out a form of autonomy in the artistic sphere, and, at least initially, remained tentative about taking his activities out onto the street.⁷⁰

Although Kantor would not formalize his approach to the Happening until 1967, his first took place in December 1965 at the café of the Society of the Friends of the Fine Arts in Warsaw, and was called a *Cricotage*. That its name derives from the Cricot theatre highlights the degree to which Kantor arrived at the Happening format in his own, particular way – via theatre as well as in response to the international trends to which he had been exposed while in the USA. Kantor gave his Happening a French ending, jokingly lending it the sophistication of a foreign import, perhaps catering to his generation's ongoing thirst for an answer to the eternal question: 'What are they doing in Paris?'.⁷¹ As the name suggests, this first Polish Happening was a further variation on the theme of the circus. Like the circus, with its succession of spectacular acts, the *Cricotage* was a polyphonic affair. Kantor collapsed the theatrical convention of a narrative sequence of events into a collage organized so that 'simultaneous actions created compartmental structures that entirely destroyed all logical networks of reciprocal references'.⁷² The *Cricotage*

enabled unlikely elements excised from the non-art sphere to coexist in time and space. Any attempt at interpreting the *Cricotage* as a narrative whole was deliberately rendered all but impossible by the sheer quantity of strands and the multiplicity of possible interpretations of each.⁷³

A contemporary account of Kantor's Happenings remains in part reliant on his unreliable 'scores', produced for each event. The artist claimed, ambivalently: 'one must have a plan, but one ought not to realize it'.⁷⁴ Kantor's approach to writing what he called 'scores' for his events was idiosyncratic in a number of ways. First, these were written in his characteristically poetic style. Secondly, they tend to be detailed, descriptive and elaborate, as distinct from the sorts of event scores that had been proposed earlier in the 1960s by Fluxus artist George Brecht, among others. Thirdly, and perhaps most misleadingly, Kantor tended to write them *after* the event, rather than before. They are thus perhaps more accurately treated as text-based artistic propositions in themselves, fraudulent scripts, excessive records accorded copious poetic licence, rather than as documents of artistic events. Irrespective of their precise relationship to events themselves, though, the Happening scores demonstrate the degree of authorial control that Kantor sought to retain over future interpretations of his work. Kantor's voice has continued to dominate scholarly discussions of the Happenings, resulting in a tendency to narrate events and offer formal analysis, rather than scrutinize them for wider meaning.⁷⁵ His score for the *Cricotage* brilliantly evokes a sequence of mundane activities, obsessively repeated.

There is a woman sitting on a chair in the middle of the crowded room, who gets up periodically and says 'I am sitting'. She uses different tones of voice to declare the infinity of possibilities contained in this most ordinary of actions. Kantor's list of attitudes includes the following: 'conventional', 'with conviction', 'enlightened by the discovery', then, 'dryly, almost grammatically / analytically', and with 'mounting enthusiasm'.⁷⁶ The activity culminates, Kantor writes, in 'wild ecstasy', an orgasmic revelation of the fluidity of possibilities. A girl (naked in the score, but in a bikini according to participants) stretched across one of the tables is covered 'soullessly' in bucketfuls of coal. At a table nearby, three elegantly dressed men perform the meticulous ritual of shaving: the routine soon spirals into a crazed application of shaving foam to all available surfaces, clothing and the audience until everything became a mobile 'sculpture' of 'whitish, slippery soap' (fig. 1.3).⁷⁷ Two men gorge themselves on a suitcaseful of spaghetti – an orgy of 'sticky, pastry-like matter'. A woman stands making telephone calls,

the gist of which is relentlessly conveyed to the audience. Another woman obsessively says she is ‘unstitching / unstitching the whole house / and the people in it, children, women, / old women, old men’, playing on the ambiguity of the Polish verb to unstitch, *pruć*, the old-fashioned slang for shooting someone. Kantor himself moved between a number of roles, at one point playing that of a critic, or a man pontificating about art. The score describes his words as ‘incomprehensible, scientific, / pseudo-scientific, / pseudo-deep, / meaningless, / official, / conformist, / unclear’.⁷⁸ Eustachy Kossakowski’s photographs show the artist grappling with a mass of tangled thread (fig. 1.4). Referring to a Polish idiomatic phrase meaning ‘to speak plainly’ or ‘not to mince words’, literally ‘not to wrap something in cotton’, the artist/critic, all tangled up in cotton, appears not to be having much luck. Adding to the confusion, the score describes ‘some people, carrying unknown / loads, / they squeeze through with the greatest effort, / paying no attention to anyone, / completely preoccupied and absorbed / in their carrying’ (fig. 1.5).⁷⁹ At one point, Kantor wrapped his wife, the painter Maria Stangret, in toilet paper, in the first of a series of what he called human *emballages*. If the aim of *emballage*, for Kantor, was, as he wrote, to protect objects from the world’s ‘stupidity, ignorance and baseness’, we might read this gesture as a moving attempt by the artist to protect Stangret from the baseness of the *Cricotage* itself.⁸⁰ The everyday descended into a frenzy of activity.

Each participant was allocated a certain autonomy, a field for action in which they could imagine themselves to be absorbed independently. Each action and utterance bordered on the compulsive. The *Cricotage* played on the degree to which activities such as shaving, sitting, eating, moving, shovelling coal, speaking on the phone or simply negotiating one’s own emotions within a given environment, are always to a greater or lesser extent performative. While social convention dictates that the appropriate manner is one of restraint, Kantor’s frenetically orchestrated repetitions bring unconscious compulsions to the surface, resulting in excess and chaos. That the majority of the activities and situations acted out here relate to the private sphere – with the exception of the labour of the coalshoveller, whose activity results in the systematic burial of his desire (personified by a young woman), and of the displaced persons on the move (with mattresses, sacks and so on) – would seem to parody a society composed of alienated individuals, each frustrated in their attempts at self-realization. The self-absorption of each participant produced fragmentation. Each action jostled for the attention of the spectator in equal measure. Words and actions





1.3, 1.4, 1.5 Tadeusz Kantor, *Cricotage*, Café of the Society of the Friends of the Fine Arts, Warsaw, 10 December 1965. Photographs by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszkowska.

lost their singular meaning and acquired a multiplicity of situated meanings in a chaos approximating that of the teeming of life itself. Kantor's *Cricotage*, then, might at first seem to be an avant-garde attack on meaning. But while this strategy has been read as a gesture of negation, I would like to argue here that the *Cricotage* also aimed to reconnect participants with reality in new ways, inviting them to explore the potential of reappropriating and redirecting simple actions. The potential for self-realization that this strategy opened up for participants was inversely proportionate to the alienation of the audience that it entailed. The *Cricotage* left the spectator in a limbo to negotiate unmanageable chaos, with only the pedantic marking of the passing of time as a reference point. Borowski recalls: 'every five minutes Kantor would announce how many minutes it had been since the

Happening began. After forty-five minutes, everyone stopped what they were doing.’⁸¹

In a recent interview, the critic Anka Ptaszkowska, co-founder of the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, with which Kantor was closely associated from its inception, revealed: ‘I owe Kantor my self-definition and the consciousness of what is *avant-garde*’. Of her experience of performing the role of the woman sitting in the *Cricotage*, she recalled: ‘It was an experience of incredible intensity, the sensation that one was taking part in the happening of things that are not rationally explicable, but have power and meaning.’⁸² Wiesław Borowski, another co-founder of the Foksal Gallery, had also taken part in the *Cricotage*. These were ‘grey times of poverty’, he recalls. ‘All the same, we had a lot of fun – much of the art was amazingly funny.’⁸³ In a summary of the Happening published at the time, Borowski wrote: ‘Each of the participants in the “Cricotage” is busy carrying out his own activity; [and] does not pay attention to the surroundings or to the activities of the other participants.’⁸⁴ Although he offered no interpretation of the event, he concluded that it demonstrated the immensely original possibilities of the Happening as an entirely new phenomenon in Polish art.

Kantor swiftly produced a meta-critical sequel to this, his first Happening, returning to the question of meaning by tackling explicitly the problem of value judgements, and their inevitability, this time in Kraków. Eight days after the *Cricotage*, Kantor took up an invitation from the Kraków Association of Art Historians to stage an event called *The Dividing Line* at their space on the main square.⁸⁵ Although this time the participants were members of Kraków’s artistic circle, the repertoire of activities was to a great extent the same as that of the Warsaw *Cricotage* (Marek Rostworowski, one of the organizers, recalls that someone was walking around with a motorbike wheel on his head).⁸⁶ The principal difference was that in addition to performing another human *emballage*, Kantor had before him a blackboard, which he divided with a vertical line (fig. 1.6). The action has been described as a sort of a ‘last judgement. On one side he marked those who were authentically devoted to art, on the other those who only pretended to be.’⁸⁷ While the invited participants developed their individual roles – each in isolation, as before – Kantor was writing a list of the names of local artists and art institutions on either side of the line.

The dividing line, Kantor wrote in the score for the event, ‘is made always and everywhere / it fulfils all possible roles / it takes on all possible forms / is



1.6 Tadeusz Kantor, *The Dividing Line*, 22 Rynek Główny, Kraków, 18 December 1965. Photograph by Wojciech Plewiński. Courtesy of Wojciech Plewiński.

eternal / is amoral'.⁸⁸ He offered two lists, divided by a line. On the right, a series of qualities that would seem to apply to objects and ideas, rather than persons: 'that which is not numerous / unofficial / disdained / refuses prestige / unafraid / of ridicule / risky / selfless / completely / without possibility of / implementation / adaptation / without the possibility of / explaining itself / and justifying itself / defenceless / impossible'.⁸⁹ The list on the left, meanwhile, appears to refer explicitly to people – those who are 'backward / proud / those with positions / judges / juries / those tending towards individuality / the flirtatious / the pseudo-avant-garde / ... assimilated / sanctioned / self-legitimizing / legalized ... / shamans / missionaries / charlatans / the prosperous'.⁹⁰ This outpouring, so uncharacteristic of an oeuvre that had, from the outset, shied away from political statements, could be said to mark a shift in Kantor's attitude. The line clearly divides the powerless from those

in power, and it is obvious whose side Kantor is on: he is on the side of the poor object. The inclusion of three terms among the profusion of adjectives gathered on the poor side of the line is particularly significant: ‘unofficial’, ‘unafraid’ and ‘impossible’. In line with later antipolitical thinking, Kantor boldly dismisses the powerful here as backward charlatans, and praises the powerless for their selfless courage.

If Kantor appeared to be talking about art, rather than politics, he was clearly treading a fine line by saying that there was no escaping the tyranny of the prevailing ‘amoral’ binary order. This was a conceptual call to arms: decide once and for all which side of this line you are on – for unless you have committed to being on the right side, you will find that you are on the left. ‘The dividing line / should be made everywhere and always, / quickly and decisively, / because in any case without our will / it will function of its own accord / automatically / and unforgivingly, / leaving us / on this or that side.’⁹¹ By deciding to make the dividing line ourselves, we give ourselves a chance of gaining ‘the impression / of free choice / or the consciousness of necessity’.⁹² What one cannot do, however, is to choose not to choose. That there is no escape was brought home to spectators when they turned to leave, only to discover that while they had been distracted by the Happening, the exit had been bricked up. This scenario, reminiscent of the imprisonment of the dinner guests in Luis Buñuel’s *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), presented the cultural sphere as a psychological prison of sorts, cut off from the outside world. Visitors would remain trapped until they had decided which side of the line they wanted to be on.

The walling up of the exit gave rise to repercussions of a political nature:

The following day some unknown men [members of the SB, the security services] showed up at our department of the Association of Fine Artists and confiscated our official seal. There was a danger that this would mean an end to our activities and result in our space being taken away, which was avoided – the Kraków way – by proposing a compromise. The Head of the Department, Ignacy Trybulski, handed in a supposedly voluntary resignation.⁹³

The potential political overtones of Kantor’s proposal did not go unnoticed by the security services. On the contrary, they appear to have exceeded themselves in their political interpretation of all aspects of the event. Kantor himself was not interrogated, since he had departed soon after the Happening for a three-month sojourn in Paris. Maciej Gutowski and Marek Rostworowski,

who had invited him to carry out the event, however, were called in for questioning. Gutowski recalls the interrogation in his memoirs:

Of course it began with the fatal influence of American capitalist culture and its 'transfer' to Poland by Kantor, with our co-operation. Somehow we resisted these attacks and then a new, completely unexpected element appeared: a symbolic interpretation of the Happening. It turned out that ... the girl lying on the sofa being covered in coal was a symbol of Poland, defiled by the mining industry ... that the Janicki brothers eating noodles from a suitcase were a symbol of the absence of anything else to eat on the market; similarly, wrapping Marysia in toilet paper represented the notorious shortage of paper on the market, and Jurek Kałucki's searching through his own pockets – the poverty of the PPR; Stanisław Wiśniewski's plucking a turkey seemed to them to be a way of showing the bleeding dry of Poland by the Polish Workers' Party (PZPR); Janusz Tarabula's nonsensical address concerning art a mockery of public presentations by the Party leadership; Marysia Beresiowa's refrain, seated on a chair, 'I am sitting' [idiomatic phrase for being in jail], a clear allusion to the situation of the opposition in Poland ... the greatest outrage, though, was aroused by Marek's walling in of the door and Igol's observation that the window was barred. – This was a clear demonstration of the situation in Socialist Poland – they cried – albeit a false one, for even Kantor himself had received a passport, and now he was vilifying Poland.⁹⁴

The security services' interpretation, while absurdly literal, was in line with the Regional Committee of the PZPR's directives concerning "The battle with ideological diversion carried out by hostile foreign circles and operational protection against its infiltration into certain scientific, creative and youth circles."⁹⁵ Anna Baranowa rightly points out that "The authorities were constantly enforcing their own "dividing line". They could not, therefore, tolerate that someone else should attempt to formulate opinions about what is good and bad, in public."⁹⁶ However, Baranowa overstates the case when she argues that these actions were just actions of 'an autonomous, self-sufficient, neutral character.'⁹⁷ The authorities were right to think that they were on to something deliberately provocative, while they may have overestimated the degree to which the critique being levelled could be decoded. In so far as *The Dividing Line* was a denunciation of those persons and institutions in Kraków that fell, for Kantor, on the wrong side of the line, the Happening proposed that those cultural spheres should adopt a conscious moral position, within

the framework of an 'amoral' context. Kantor's opposition of the attributes of the 'unofficial' and 'official' worlds suggested as a model the moral force of refusing to reproduce ideological structures in one's day-to-day life.

Kantor chose the Foksal gallery in Warsaw as the site of his next Polish Happening, *The Letter*, in January 1967. It was based on a one-act play titled *L'événement* (1966) by his friend from Paris, Henri Galy-Carles, whom he had visited the previous year.⁹⁸ A small building sharing its courtyard with Zamojski Palace, which housed the Union of Polish Architects (SARP) and the Chief Prosecutor's Office, the gallery was awkwardly positioned. While the SARP café was a popular meeting place for artists and architects in this period, and conversation flowed freely over coffee, Borowski recalls that this also meant that members of the secret police tended to be present. The invited spectators gathered in the tiny gallery, awaiting the arrival of a letter, listening to a terrifying monologue on a tape recorder, recited by Galy-Carles, who played the part of the 'unknown recipient' of the letter. Without even knowing who the letter might be from, its mere arrival provoked tremendous panic on the part of the recipient, and the paranoia pulsing through the short play is reminiscent of Elias Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé* or Mikhail Bulgakov's *Diabolade*. Galy-Carles's letter torments the 'unknown recipient', who cannot bring himself to open it. He is driven to despair by the fact that the 'event' requires him to act. Unable to do so, he loses his mind, and dies, without having opened the letter. The conclusion trails off: 'I did not want to know the event. ... And the event desired my death! ... I will perhaps finally find the nothingness [*le néant*] of my nothingness ... and I will never know ... never. ...'⁹⁹ As the spectators huddled close together in the gallery, they themselves become unknown recipients, teetering on the brink of a decision to act. In line with Kantor's idea that the Happening should always consist in the 'juxtaposition and representation of the real and the fictional elements of reality', real letters, collected beforehand, were distributed to participants.¹⁰⁰ The score describes these as 'intimate, full of details, ... compromising, conventional', 'letters from relatives ... servants, prostitutes, teachers, mothers to their children, clerics, young girls, lovers and scoundrels'.¹⁰¹ Daringly linking the public and the private, Kantor expanding his Happening to incorporate space beyond the confines of the gallery.

While the spectators waited, a line of retired postmen carried a dispatch of huge proportions (14 metres long) from the general post office, up the main road, Nowy Świat, to the gallery (fig. 1.7). The conceptual artist Edward Krasiński relayed the progress of the letter through the city centre by



1.7 Tadeusz Kantor, *The Letter*, Warsaw, 21 January 1967. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszowska.

megaphone. Anka Ptaszowska, as a representative of the gallery, had been sent, in advance, to police headquarters to negotiate permission to stage the Happening. Borowski recalls that when the local police heard that this was an ‘important art action’, an escort for the procession was granted, ‘to prevent unwanted interferences’.¹⁰² To the organizers’ delight, the Happening thus became officially sanctioned. Carried by men in uniform, with a police escort in tow, *The Letter* had all the trappings of a serious official action. That a police escort was given, of course, emphasized the point that to have one was a legal requirement, lending the whole affair an additional layer of carnivalesque absurdity.

The postmen, in their bulky winter uniforms, entered the gallery. Before long, the recipients avenged themselves for their cruel wait in a cathartic act of collective destruction. The letter was dragged out into the courtyard and

trampled, until all that remained were mottled rags. Krasieński recalls how ‘the rabble rushed and began to cut it with knives’, puncturing the borrowed inflatable mattresses with which the letter had been stuffed.¹⁰³ This aggressive attack on the art object, was another double-edged transgression, akin to the walling in of spectators in Kraków. Ptaszkowska has interpreted this aspect of *The Letter* as a way to make amends for ‘the abuse of the audience’ at the *Cricotage*. Spectators, she writes, were ‘allowed to abuse the letter’, in an acknowledgement of the Happening as a ‘two-way violation’.¹⁰⁴ The collective act of destruction was undoubtedly the planned climax. Kantor arranged his Happenings meticulously, despite their improvised air. He was notorious for always factoring in the ‘overstepping of accepted convention’.¹⁰⁵ As Krasieński explains, he always ‘had everything in his head. A Happening is a work of art, and not ... a brawl’.¹⁰⁶ Following this unconventional excess, the temporary overlapping of life and art came to an end – conventional behaviour became binding once more, and the crowd dispersed.

The Letter offered a moment of temporary liberation, followed by a return to ordinary life, and the restoration of ‘order’, and, as such, shared the structure of medieval and Renaissance carnival, as analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. Written in exile in Kazakhstan during the Stalinist Terror of the 1930s, Bakhtin’s book insisted on the transgressive power of carnival as *actual*. He wrote: ‘Carnival [was] not a spectacle seen by the people; they live[d] in it, and everyone participate[d].’¹⁰⁷ It was not ‘an artistic, theatrical-spectacular form, but rather an ‘as if’ real (but temporary) form of life itself, which was not simply performed, but lived almost in actual fact (for the duration of carnival)’.¹⁰⁸ Carnival, Bakhtin wrote, ‘offered a completely different, non-official, extra-ecclesiastical and extra-political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; built a second world and a second life outside officialdom’.¹⁰⁹ Its aims were:

‘To liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.’¹¹⁰

By transforming humdrum activities into artistic events, barricading his audience into the second world of the gallery, and encouraging them to destroy a letter delivered with a police escort, Kantor, too, sought to construct a ‘completely different, non-official world’. *The Letter* took place in ‘the space

of life', becoming part of the lived reality of the participants for the duration of the Happening, just as carnival 'celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; ... marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions'.¹¹¹ If Bakhtin was captivated by the way that 'medieval laughter was absolutely unofficial but nevertheless legalized', then Kantor's Happenings played upon the same ambivalence.¹¹²

Kantor's best-known and most elaborate Happening was also a legalized affair. *The Panoramic Sea Happening* took place on the beach at Łazy in August 1967, in the framework of the state-sponsored summer art workshops at Osieki – an annual carnival of sorts, at the expense of the Socialist state, on the Baltic coast. Up to two thousand art students, artists and critics are reported to have gathered in the area, participating in the Happening, along with ordinary beach-goers. The beach was home to a strange phenomenon that Kantor called 'vacation civilization'. At certain times of year, he noted, it acquired a completely independent reality, with its own laws, 'a particular morality, a way of behaving free of civilization's conventions'. Kantor called the long stretch of sand 'an impossible space'. He later described Łazy, with its infinite stretch of sandy beach, as a 'daydream' – a zone where the imagination was free to roam. To his dismay, though, he discovered that even here, there were conventions 'as severe as those in everyday life, perhaps even more severe, paradoxically supplanting the natural sand, sea and sun'.¹¹³ He mobilized and attacked these within the Happening. Cinematic as a spectacle and panoramic in its scope, the Happening became a microcosm of social activity – culture, life, death, joy and labour were condensed into four events: A 'Sea Concerto', 'The Raft of the Medusa', 'An Erotic *Barbouillage*' and 'Agriculture on Sand'.

Krasiński, dressed in a tailcoat, arrived by rowing boat and installed himself on a stepladder standing in for a podium a little way out to sea to conduct the 'Sea Concerto' (fig. 1.8). Although the now famous photographs by Eustachy Kossakowski mainly show him from behind, it is clear from his posture that he took his role very seriously. This absurdist attempt to control the sea 'by artistic means' demonstrated Kantor's faith in art's capacity to attain even the impossible. At the risk of offering an excessively politicised interpretation, we might also compare this to a cultural mimicry of the command economy's rhetoric of the 'triumph of planning over nature'. The score went so far as to give precise stage directions for the sea: it 'should be imposing in its movement, rhythm and sound value, while at the same time not exceeding the possibilities of human perception'.¹¹⁴



1.8 Tadeusz Kantor, *Panoramic Sea Happening (Sea Concerto)*, Koszalin *Plein-air*, Osieki, 23 August 1967. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszkowska.

Kantor paced the beach clad in a stripy robe, giving directions through a megaphone, drawing constant attention to his presence, as was his wont when working with *Cricot 2*: the invisible line between performance and rehearsal replacing the idea of a closed work with that of a work in progress. Spectators sat in rows on deckchairs, the incoming tide lapping around their ankles. The Concerto, like John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), was limited to environmental noise. Kantor strode around like a military officer issuing orders to the participants, commanding the spectators to remain in their seats: 'rank and file' were to be maintained in 'square formation', subject to constant correction and reshuffling.¹¹⁵ His orders were of course impossible to follow, as the flimsy chairs sank lopsidedly into the sand with the incoming tide. As the sea gradually swallowed up the audience, the pleasant pastime of concert-going became a borderline scenario, just as the giant letter had threatened to crush the audience in a crowded space, and the bricking up of the exit had prevented their escape in his previous Happenings. Further

affronts were in store for the audience. The score describes how the conductor was to gesture for motorbikes to come hurtling along the seashore, full throttle, and blast between rows of the audience, splashing them (although those in attendance recall there having been just one).¹¹⁶ After the Concerto had ended, Krasiński turned around, reached into a large bucket, and flung dead fish at the spectators, in a classic avant-garde provocation.

The second part of the *Happening* involved the reinvention of Théodore Géricault's romantic epic *Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19). Kantor invited Jerzy Beres to participate. Beres set to work early, turning the production of the mast for the raft into a meditation on labour and enslavement (fig. 1.9). He dug a long wooden pole deep into the sand, and – wearing a heavy halter-ropes around his neck, the end of which was tied to the pole to form a winch – walked in circles around it. By inaugurating the device supposed to propel the catastrophic contraption forwards in this unexpected way, he implied that the only hope lay in breaking free from a vicious circle of enslavement. It was, as he later recalled, a 'somewhat grim' intervention.¹¹⁷ Kantor recognized its significance, and concluded cautiously that it was 'a pure, authentic event'.¹¹⁸ He viewed it as representing Beres's 'liberation of his own personality,



1.9 Jerzy Beres's action at Tadeusz Kantor's *Panoramic Sea Happening (Raft of the Medusa)*, Koszalin *Plein-air*, Osieki, 23 August 1967. Photograph by Józef Piątkowski. Courtesy of Muzeum w Koszalinie, Koszalin.

disinterested pure exhibitionism, or an impudent and risky engagement in a situation extremely offensive to conventional prestige'.¹¹⁹ Kantor's somewhat ambivalent reflections highlight the difficulty he had in fully acknowledging the radicalism of Bereś's approach. The younger artist's physically invested form of action – to which we will return in Chapter Six – ultimately proved irreconcilable with Kantor's schema of disinterest. Bereś foregrounded the problems of agency that the notion of 'disinterested' activity occluded.

Once the raft was ready, reproductions of the painting were distributed to the people on the beach, and they were invited to reconstruct the scene it represented. Kantor was not after a re-creation in period style – bikinis and inflatable mattresses were factored in (fig. 1.10). Participants were instructed by a jury on how best to copy the composition, in a contemporary spoof of the painting's presentation to a salon jury. The *tableau vivant* was thus another policed exercise. Members of the jury issued directions from a megaphone: 'over in the left corner of the painting... there's still too much life in you... sink into yourself... don't be so soft on yourself... try to imagine the superhuman effort of the artist ...'.¹²⁰ The presence of the jury underscored the point Kantor had made in *The Dividing Line*: there was no escaping power and judgement.¹²¹ Participants adopted the poses of the figures in the painting; a man at the top of the triangular composition waved a white shirt hopefully at the horizon. The experience of the present was always a negotiation of the burden of history.

Géricault's epic had been the first history painting shown in the Paris Salon to document a contemporary political scandal. The vast canvas depicted the wasted bodies of survivors and corpses on a raft constructed following the wreck of the French naval frigate *Méduse* in 1816. Of the 147 people thought to have been on board, after 13 days adrift there were just 15 survivors. Their tales of cannibalism and madness caught the public imagination, the incompetence of the captain whose ship had run aground off the coast of today's Mauritania caused general outrage, and the event intensified hostility to the newly restored French monarchy. Kantor's choice of such a charged painting, historically interpreted as a critique of governmental incompetence, was characteristically ambivalent in political terms. Equally characteristically, Polish commentators have sought to avoid remarking on the potential political undertones of this dramatic appropriation. Jarosław Suchan has argued that, in Kantor's omnivorous universe, old master paintings were just so many more 'fragments of "total reality"'.¹²² Kaprow's definition of the Happening had outlawed all art-historical points



1.10 Tadeusz Kantor, *Panoramic Sea Happening (Raft of the Medusa)*, Koszalin *Plein-air*, Osieki, 23 August 1967. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszkowska.

of reference: drawing inspiration from the sphere of art in this way was supposed to be out of the question. Kantor rebelled. For him, the Happening format itself was arguably also a readymade to incorporate into an intertextual scheme of his own. What mattered was, as Suchan argues, ‘building tensions between his own intention and the formulas he borrowed’.¹²³ Kantor was proud of his appropriations – or ‘heresies’, as he called them: ‘I managed to make another painter’s work of art become the topic and reality of a Happening. Within the domain of Happening this was a great blasphemy and heresy. ... I said maybe it was not a Happening, but for me it did not matter.’¹²⁴ If such heresies were symptoms of the consistent disinterest with which Kantor approached the conventions of both East and West, as well as art and life, this ought not, in itself, to preclude a political reading.

Maria Pinińska-Bereś injected a subtle, maverick intervention into Kantor's grand scheme of events.¹²⁵ Using some found objects that had been left in the room in Osieki where she and Jerzy Bereś were staying, she produced a 'collision between the beach situation (a hot summer's day) and a person dressed in a coat (on top of a swimming costume), with her head wrapped in a scarf, as though in anticipation of a storm, and a suitcase in each hand' and 'walked up and down the beach, while the Happening was going on.'¹²⁶ Pinińska-Bereś recalls:

People stopped me and asked if I was planning on going to Sweden. This was a time when many young people, hippies, dreamed of escape. There were attempts to escape by way of the sea; even in Osieki there had been an incident where young escapees had been made to turn back. I think this context influenced the fact that my action was passed over in total silence by Kantor. He was more than careful in matters which might endanger his career.¹²⁷

Her observations suggest another possible reading of Kantor's choice of *tableau vivant*: a group of young people, adrift off the coast of Socialist Poland, waving a flag hopefully in the direction of Sweden, desperately awaiting rescue. As Pinińska-Bereś's action demonstrated, the site was a loaded one. While Kantor consistently refused to acknowledge contemporary political undertones in his work, it is clear that he courted them: teasing the censors with his avant-garde insinuations, while being careful never to overstep the line to the extent that he would risk losing his relative freedom to work and to travel abroad.

'An Erotic *Barbouillage*', the third part of the Happening, is undoubtedly the most problematic from today's perspective. A Polish cross between Carolee Schneemann's well-known *Meat Joy* (1964) – minus the meat, which remained in short supply – the event took its name from the French *barbouiller*, 'to smear'. An assemblage of female bodies writhed around in a mixture of tomato sauce, oil, starch and sand. The score reads like an erotic fantasy: 'a dozen or so naked young girls' bodies / permanently horizontal... tangling / rolling / rubbing / smearing the greasy mass / in a state of euphoria / in a convulsive rhythm... / moving matter / in a total assemblage ...'.¹²⁸ 'An Erotic *Barbouillage*' staged a heterosexual male fantasy in which women become base matter, writhing for their pleasure. Kantor's 'disinterested' exploration of sexuality as a trope of the international Happening phenomenon seems uncharacteristically un-self-reflexive. The

gap between the score and the photographic documentation suggests that the participants (among others, the critic Anka Ptazkowska) did not really play the game, though, and remained clad in swimming costumes, failing to entirely objectify themselves as the score dictated. If one of Kantor's strategies was 'treating social behaviour as a readymade', then the trait exposed here is the convention of reticence about sexuality in the public sphere, on the part of both performers and spectators.¹²⁹

Meanwhile, on another part of the beach, there was a diversion. A group of people were furtively packing a large trunk, as though trying to escape with a stack of documents. The trunk was plastered with all manner of hand-painted warnings ('Fragile'; 'Do Not Bend'), with the instruction that it was to be conveyed 'By Boat' to the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw. Rumours circulated that the trunk contained the gallery's most important documents: proposals for exhibitions, correspondence, articles and exhibits. A crowd gathered to watch as the trunk was loaded on to the raft and rowed out to sea, only to be tossed overboard. The action addressed the question of conceptualism's 'dematerialization', *avant la lettre*, a year before the publication of Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's essay on the 'Dematerialization of the Object of Art' in *Art International*.¹³⁰ This performative 'drowning' resembled a staged attempt by an institution to cover its tracks, ambivalently disposing of evidence of its activities, as well as being a gesture of commitment to the primacy of live artistic facts over their documentary remainders.

The final part of the *Panoramic Sea Happening*, consistently with its other instalments, was another demonstration of Kantor's heretically 'top-down' approach to the Western utopia of audience participation. Newspapers were distributed among the public, and 'instructors' were appointed to line people up in rows, ordering them to make their way along the beach in a voluntary chaingang, stopping and stooping every few strides to dig a hole and plant a newspaper in the sand (fig. 1.11). All aspects of 'Agriculture on Sand' were regulated; intervals between 'plants' were prescribed, as was the amount of newspaper sticking up out of the sand. Sand, of course, is infertile ground. Newspapers, meanwhile, were a crucial arm of the socialist propaganda machine. The deliberate non-productivity of this mass activity thus resonated with communist attempts to run a command economy according to bureaucratic principles, which had increasingly resulted in unprofitable production for production's sake. If this was a playful mockery of the failure of state-run agriculture, whose output targets were set by state policy, Kantor ensured that any critique could be written off as an exercise in absurdity. Borowski



1.11 Tadeusz Kantor, *Panoramic Sea Happening (Agriculture on Sand)*, Koszalin *Plein-air*, Osieki, 23 August 1967. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszowska.

recalls that those involved experienced a heightened sense of the redundancy of labour: ‘finding no aim or meaning in their activities and finding no justification for their presence’.¹³¹ The political overtones of the activity were not lost on the participants. The Hungarian artist Tamás Szentjóby, whose own Happenings and actions will be discussed in Chapter Three, participated in the event, and recalls the strength of the political analogy to this day.¹³² While political analogies cropping up in Kantor’s Happenings can be read only between the lines, and cannot be reduced to the sorts of literal metaphors that the security services had imputed to all aspects of *The Dividing Line* in 1965, the gesture of presenting labour as a fruitless activity was undoubtedly a joke rather close to the bone.

At a time when the Polish authorities were trying to consolidate in the face of increasingly eloquent opposition, they became more and more sensitive to veiled opposition in the form of cultural ambiguity. On 30 January 1968 they banned Kazimierz Dejmek's production of Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) after 14 performances at the Great Theatre in Warsaw. When the curtain fell on the last performance, the audience erupted. Modzelewski called from the gallery: 'Independence without Censorship!' and 300 people marched from the theatre to the Mickiewicz statue outside, festooning it with banners and flowers. This first student demonstration for a decade shocked the political authorities. The Polish Writers' Union held an emergency closed session on 29 February. In response to the Minister of Culture, who blamed the disruptive audience, Leszek Kołakowski declared the state's arrogation of the right to censor theatre as a return to the time of Stalin's cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov: 'We have reached the shameful situation in which the whole of world drama from Aeschylus through Shakespeare to Ionesco has become a catalogue of allusions to contemporary Poland.'¹³³ Students presented a petition against censorship, with 3,000 signatures, to the parliament (*Sejm*).

Following the expulsion from Warsaw University of two students – Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer – for their role in the protests, a mass rally was held at Warsaw University on 8 March.¹³⁴ Protestors pointed out that Article 71 of the Constitution guaranteed freedom of speech, press and assembly. In response, the Rector ordered the students to disperse. As they did so, heavily armed police attacked them. At least 70 were arrested. Students in other cities followed suit, and there were numerous further demonstrations. Hundreds of students were expelled from their universities, and a string of departments of Warsaw University were administratively dissolved. After 11 days of silence, Gomułka made an uncompromising speech. In addition to condemning the student rebels, he hinted that more sinister forces were at work. The March protests were suppressed, and several university faculties were closed down. Some of the authorities used the events as a pretext to launch an anti-Zionist campaign.¹³⁵

Students and Faculty of Jewish lineage were singled out for expulsion, and the events became a pretext for the national 'Partizan' faction of the PZPR (the Polish United Workers' Party) to launch an anti-Zionist campaign, overzealously implementing Moscow's call to break with Israel in the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War, and cementing their influence in the Party by initiating a new purge of liberal intellectuals. Although they had made up some

10 per cent of the prewar population, Polish Jewry now constituted only 0.1 per cent. Even so, half of the remaining 30,000 were driven into emigration.¹³⁶ Jewish officials were expelled from the Party on the pretext of their children's involvement in the protests, and were even held accountable for Stalinism.¹³⁷ The purges of 1968–9 radically transformed the Polish political landscape, deliberately stirring up nationalist sentiments and effectively crushing all hope of internal reform. The intensity of the campaign stunned the population, and a majority of intellectuals, into silence.

In early March Kantor had travelled to Nuremberg, where he would remain until mid-May, working with the director Dietrich Mahlow on the film *Kantor ist Da: Der Polnischer Regisseur, Maler, und Verpackungskünstler* (*Kantor is Here: The Polish Director, Painter and Emballage Artist*). He referred to the event as 'A Great Journey. A Happening recorded on film'.¹³⁸ Key scenes include an *emballage* of his wife on the former Reich Party congress grounds, a *tableau vivant* entitled *The Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt*, and the crucifixion of a man on canvas, all intercut with shots of the artist and a delivery van full of his possessions driving aimlessly around the city.¹³⁹ Although allusions to the contemporary situation are projected into times and places past, the film suggests that the Polish authorities' attack on students, and the waves of anti-Semitism and forced exile which followed, were on Kantor's mind. He plays the role of a displaced person – a permanent nomad. The narrator occasionally refers to Kantor as 'K', invoking the hero of Kafka's Trilogy on his impossible search for justice.

As Michal Kobialka has argued, Kantor's complex conception of disinterest entailed an internalization of Theodor Adorno's belief that 'it is part of morality not to be at home at one's home'.¹⁴⁰ In a lecture, 'About Art (On Dreaming)', delivered to the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków in December 1949, following the introduction of Socialist Realism, Kantor had unexpectedly cited Vladimir Mayakovski as an inspiration. He described how, struggling to write a poem about the suicide of the poet Sergei Yesenin, Mayakovski had taken a trip and slept in various small hotels trying to gather his thoughts, but had returned with nothing. Kantor recounts: 'It [was] only at home that he realized that he [had] stayed in gloomy hotel rooms similar to the one where Yesenin had hanged himself'. He deduced, with Mayakovski, that 'if you want to describe reality... sever your links with it and travel to a different one – it is where imagination and dreams will give this reality of yours its fullness and depth.'¹⁴¹

Kantor is portrayed in Mahlow's film as someone who has cut his ties with familiar reality and travelled to a different place, as Mayakovski advocated. But he has taken with him a vast assortment of pathetic-looking, precious, fragile things, loaded on to a removal van and trailer. The artist's life's work is a grotesque body in pieces – its maker condemned to drag it with him from place to place, to salvage what he can from the past, in an effort to protect it from future harm. A pair of bandaged legs appended to the base of an empty reclining chair is manoeuvred down from a balcony of an apartment block to a lorry below. A package rounding the corner of the staircase of the block turns out to be an oversized relic labelled *The Hand of St Peter Wrapped*, the awkward remainder of a half-forgotten material faith. Kantor's odds and ends seem to be unspeakable remnants of the old, pre-socialist, 'bourgeois' world. He sits with his back to the camera, in a black leather jacket, oblivious to a television set beside him broadcasting a political speech through many microphones to an assembly of delegates. Surrounded by boxes, chairs and antiques, Kantor, who seems to have just moved in, begins to move out again. He wraps his belongings in quantities of tape. The artist cannot help but drag the past along with him, for these pitiful poor objects embody the urgency of remembering. 'What is art?' The narrator asks. 'Everyone knows but no one can remember', comes the answer, followed by an afterthought – 'But artists remember, their way of remembering is action; they remember by doing something.'¹⁴² Did Kantor reflect upon what was going on in Poland, while he was in Nuremberg? Did he act? Not directly, perhaps, but he remembered, nevertheless, by 'doing something'.

Nuremberg, historic centre of Nazi ideals, home of the Nazi Party rallies in the years 1933–8, famously filmed by Leni Riefenstahl in 1934, the site where Hitler had convened the Reichstag to pass the anti-Semitic Nuremberg laws of 1935, and the site of the Nazi war-crimes tribunals in 1945–6. Two dots in the centre of the vast unfinished stadium of the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* turn out to be Maria Stangret, standing on a plinth, with Kantor circling around her, enfolding her in toilet paper (fig. 1.12). The German voice-over speaks of compulsive regret: 'One had not done what could have been done, had not protected what could have been protected, had not hidden or taken away what could have been hidden before the flood, before the first gun-shot, before the crowd shrieked, before the car ran over the portrait of a man. Other things could have been done before, before.' Possessions and loved ones become one. Guilt and desire become intertwined: 'We should at least have wrapped and hidden what was most



1.12 Tadeusz Kantor and Maria Stangret, *Grande Emballage*, Nuremberg, March 1968. Photograph by Rudolf Hortig. Courtesy of Cricoteka archive, Kraków.

precious so as to be able to have it again, afterwards.' The monologue is intercut with the feverishly escalating, chilling sounds of a hysterical crowd. If Kantor is trying to conceal Stangret, he could not have chosen a more impossible place. The couple appear very vulnerable, without any hope of escape. We hear the sounds of shattering glass and the calling of crows, and an old black car begins to circle them, coming ever closer. The *Grande Emballage* is a long way from Kantor's 1962 definition of this procedure as 'a pure ritual / *EMBALLAGE PUR* / completely devoid of symbolization

/ pure / ostentatious act'.¹⁴³ The artist's insistence that the act was 'devoid of symbolization' are at odds with the historical charge of the site. The antipolitical nature of the claim proves to be performative.

The same reticence characterized Kantor's *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt*, also performed in Nuremberg and recorded in Mahlow's film. Disturbingly combining didactic autopsy with strip search, Kantor's free interpretation of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp* (1632) opens with the phrase 'It is enough to take the first step to dare to unstitch something and to discover a new interior world.' Kantor takes for his object a student, laid out on a table, surrounded by a group of young men and women immobilized in positions approximating those of the characters in Rembrandt's group portrait. Using scissors, the artist then performs a dissection of the young man's clothing, deftly scrutinizing and disclosing his intimate personal effects, offering a running commentary as he cuts off pieces of material, and empties pockets. He finds a series of objects: sugar lumps, string, broken cigarettes, tram tickets, a mouse trap, a rag, bureaucratic papers, matches, aspirins, a handkerchief, pornography, an egg, a wallet and a small gun. Deadpan, the artist morphs from professional anatomist to nervous policeman. He holds the observers at gunpoint as he reads aloud an ode to pockets, waving the gun at them: 'intimate hiding-places', a 'true, / not falsified aspect / of individuality, / the forgotten leftovers, / the embarrassing remains, / used and crumpled / pockets! / laughable organs / of the human instinct / of storing / and memory!'¹⁴⁴ Kantor becomes the perpetrator, and the participants his hostages. The demonstration reveals, almost tenderly, the banal remainders of an individual's intimate everyday life, only to point out their meaninglessness and fragility. To the individual, they were integral. To the figure of authority, whom Kantor represents, these are elements conspiring to provide evidence in a demonstration of the subject's guilt.

Photographic stills from Kantor's *Happening* bear a strong resemblance to the iconic series of photographs taken by Freddy Alborta of the corpse of Che Guevara laid out on a stretcher on a cement trough in a stable in Vallegrande, surrounded by a Bolivian colonel, a US intelligence agent, journalists and soldiers, released by the Bolivian authorities to the international press in October 1967 (fig. 1.13).¹⁴⁵ The Polish artist's interpretation of the *Anatomy Lesson*, with its contemporary political overtones, if not a direct response to the Guevara image, undoubtedly makes the same sorts of links between art and power articulated by John Berger in his art-historical



1.13 Soldiers with body of Che Guevara, 10 October 1967, Vallegrande, Bolivia.
Photograph by Freddy Alborta. © Bettmann/CORBIS

analysis of Alborta's post-mortem visual arrangements and their relationship to Rembrandt's painting. Writing in 1967, Berger observed:

The function of the two pictures is similar: both are concerned with showing a corpse being formally and objectively examined. More than that, both are concerned with making an example of the dead: one for the advancement of medicine, the other as a political warning. ... Doctor Tulp is demonstrating the ligaments of the arm, and what he says applies to the normal arm of every man. The colonel with the handkerchief is demonstrating the final fate – as decreed by 'divine providence' – of a notorious guerrilla leader, and what he says is meant to apply to every *guerrillero* on the continent.¹⁴⁶

Kantor's 1968 *Anatomy Lesson* also stages an attempt at objective analysis: the artist's encounter with an array of found objects becomes a moral demonstration of sorts, in which the potentially pathological artist tries to burrow beneath the surface and into a subject's soul (condensed into a pocket). In the process of exposing the other's shameful secrets, he discovers his own potential for violence, calling into question the disinterested gaze of the

professional to reveal his own drives. We might therefore read the *Anatomy Lesson* as a self-reflexive moment in which Kantor demonstrated the degree to which he could see that his commitment to disinterest was an increasingly difficult moral position to sustain after 1968.

The problem with which Kantor wrestles in the various strands gathered together in the Nuremberg Happening relate to the status of individual conscience within a larger social and historical framework. 'Everything that happens, also happens to us', the narrator says, posing the dilemma at the level of individual action. 'How to do things? In accordance with ourselves, or against ourselves?' he asks. The central question being addressed here is the question of what constitutes action. Kantor would be surprisingly eloquent on this point in later years. He wrote: 'I do not feel my calling is to reform or save the world. / On the contrary, / I am carefully taking notes about its mistakes; ... EVIL is real and material and is seen all around us. / Actually it is worse than that: we get used to it.'¹⁴⁷ Kantor plays the role of the clerk, 'carefully taking notes', like Balzac, becoming a 'secretary' of his times. On the one hand, independent action appears to be impossible: 'You can't even die your own death any more, let alone live your own life.' On the other hand, it remains a matter of life and death to act: 'We will all be crucified until we build a ship which will take us to another country.' Connecting the impossibility of life to the martyrological problematic of the nation state, the narrator's musings echo the last part of *Kantor ist Da*, 'The Crucifixion'.

Kantor's Crucifixion metaphorically liberates the soul from its earthly packaging. A man enters the studio, fully clothed, and lies down, arms outstretched, on a canvas on the floor (thus returning to Pollock's 'arena in which to act', discussed in Rosenberg's terms, at the beginning of this chapter). Kantor acts, feverishly, armed with a staple gun, dissecting the crucified man's clothing and stapling it to the white surface. He pays particular attention to the breast pocket of his shirt, carefully stuffing an unknown piece of clothing inside and doing up the button before pinning this, too, to the canvas. The man is stripped to his underpants, but Kantor continues, overpainting the clothes in a parody of gestural abstraction, emptying the tube of paint and, in a final act of aggression, nailing the paint tube itself to the surface. At this point the man gets up and walks towards the white wall at the back of the studio, as though walking into Paradise itself. The soul continues its journey, this time into the next world. But it is a body rather than a soul, and it walks towards a wall, rather than into Paradise. Kantor's answer to the question of whether or not there is a way out is therefore ambivalent

– suspended between materiality and metaphor. In one of the last shots of Kantor and his wife in the film, walking behind the removal van, moving ‘again’, the narrator comments: ‘It is not easy to get out of a difficult material situation. But there must be a way. Or has there never been?’

If Kantor had missed the grim events of 1968 in Poland, by making his *Great Journey* to Nuremberg, he was eager not to miss the Parisian May. He travelled to Paris two days after the General Strike of 13 May 1968 was announced, to have a taste of the events for himself, stayed for two weeks, and witnessed, with excitement, the widening chaos prompted by the student protests. Ptaszkowska argues that the Paris events of May seemed closer than the Polish events of March for the older generation to which Kantor belonged. ‘May was an individualist revolution based not on political programmes but on the right of the individual to self-determination. The slogans of the year ‘68 in France were basically artistic: “All power to the imagination!”.’¹⁴⁸ Kantor also hoped to carve out within reality what he called a ‘new sphere of the imaginary’.¹⁴⁹ He saw the imaginary as ‘a reply to reality’ capable of ‘creating a “different” reality, free, autonomous, capable of achieving a moral victory over the other [kind of reality], of triumphing, of restoring spiritual dignity to our time. ...’¹⁵⁰ His emphasis was on moral, rather than on political, vindication.

Kantor’s disinterested approach was taken to an extreme at what remains perhaps one of the most surprising collective responses to the events of March 1968 – a party at a villa in the suburbs of Warsaw, in June 1968, known as the Zalesie Ball. The garden of the villa was transformed into a slightly less abundant version of Brueghel the Elder’s *Land of Cockaigne* (1567), with sausages suspended from tree branches, a cart heaped full of fruit and vegetables, and life-sized rag dolls laid out on the grass (figs. 1.14 and 1.15). Luiza Nader has described the ball as a ‘heterotopia of compensation’, in relation to the day-to-day reality in which meat supply was closely regulated and sloth was officially taboo in a country of ‘workers’.¹⁵¹ Ptaszkowska, however, claims that a ball seemed, at the time, the *only* adequate response to the atmosphere of hopelessness and defeat that was so pervasive in those times.

The idea of the Ball was not only double-edged, but almost tasteless. People sitting in various jails, students beaten up, we [hold] a ball. But the ball was more than a loud private party of the Foksal Gallery. ‘Farewell to Spring’ was read as ‘Farewell to March’. The word ‘impudent’ probably best describes the undertaking. It was forbidden to have meetings of more than three people – nearly one hundred came.¹⁵²

She argues that the ball was a response to a particularly Polish mentality:

We were showing our opposition to the martyrological tone that had been present in Polish culture since the nineteenth century – the century of failed insurrections. It was bad manners to be joyful in Poland;



1.14, 1.15 *Farewell to Spring*, The Zalesie Ball, Zalesie, 1968. Photographs by Jacek Maria Stokłosa. Copyright Jacek Maria Stokłosa.

we were enlivened by the spirit of play. Disinterested play – an opponent the authorities underestimated – was our weapon and our guarantee of independence both from the authorities, and from the social demand to be long-suffering.¹⁵³

The participants may not have been politically committed, but, Ptaszkowska recalls, they ‘knew what they were against – the Communist authorities’.¹⁵⁴

Was this enough, though, given the enormity of the events of that year? Only a few months after the Warsaw artists bade farewell to spring, artists in Czechoslovakia would have to do the same when the Prague Spring and, with it, hopes for Socialism with a Human Face across the Eastern bloc countries and beyond, were crushed on 21 August 1968 by the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops. If, as Piotr Piotrowski has argued, autonomy was conceived of, in certain Polish circles, as ‘a reaction against politicization of the culture by the state’, and as the ‘basis of art’s right to be concerned solely with itself and, as an existential problematic, to be intimately concerned with the artists’ inner life, rather than the public sphere’, then ‘from a strictly historical perspective ... calls for such autonomy should be called a political campaign’.¹⁵⁵ But Piotrowski takes issue with co-founder of the Foksal Gallery Andrzej Turowski’s claim that ‘the demand for autonomy (seen as a social weapon of art) within the cultural sphere functioned as a warning beacon, since the officials in charge during this period were precisely interested in eliminating such freedom’.¹⁵⁶ He contends that, on the contrary, the state was ‘interested in maintaining, not restricting, art’s autonomy; they wished to do so in order to delegitimize political critique, which was the legacy of the avant-garde’.¹⁵⁷ Artists’ commitment to autonomy, he writes, was encouraged so as to secure the artistic community’s passivity and conformity.

Artists’ emphasis on personal and stylistic freedom, Piotrowski reasons, established a dangerous precedent which the authorities exploited, thus stifling impulses to opposition by appearing to offer freedom of expression. He concludes that if Poland acquired a reputation as the most open, in cultural terms, of the Central European countries of the Soviet bloc, this was to a great extent a measure of the success with which the state had fostered a spirit of opportunism – effectively buying off critique by funding independence in artistic matters.¹⁵⁸ Anda Rottenberg, meanwhile, has proposed that the authorities were simply too busy dealing with dissident writers in this period to ‘bother about in-depth analysis of the “pranks” put up by artists’.¹⁵⁹ Conditions for artists in Poland undoubtedly remained

comparatively relaxed throughout the late Socialist period. As Wiesław Borowski recalls:

The Czechs and everyone were envious of the possibilities and relative freedom we had in Poland at that time, that we could organize exhibitions.... They had much tighter restrictions and control there. All the same, we were not allowed to have any exhibitions with them here.... They wanted to promote a new Poland, free and international, with a happening art scene, but certainly to make impossible the development of any co-operation among artists from the Eastern bloc, to prevent any larger-scale organizations developing, that might be potentially subversive.¹⁶⁰

The official status of the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, founded in 1966, operating under the aegis of the Fine Arts Workshops (PSP), paradoxically lent it a degree of immunity from state intervention.¹⁶¹ Borowski maintains that the gallery's commitment to an 'apolitical' stance, served to lead the authorities 'by the nose'.¹⁶² It provided an asylum of sorts for a small circle of artists, a forum within which avant-garde attitudes could remain spiritually alive in conditions of late socialist stagnation.

Piotrowski contends that the 1968 Ball was a step too far, describing it as a heavily mythologized event, which, 'in reality', signalled an 'unambiguous rejection of politics', claiming that while it may have been significant in psychoanalytic terms, in political terms it was 'banal'.¹⁶³ He argues that in the context of the Polish Ideological State Apparatus, Kantor and the Foksal circle's divorce from the realities of the day undermines their claims to critical avant-gardism. While Piotrowski's critique of the impotence of autonomy as an artistic goal, defined as an attitude of 'self-contained independence *vis-à-vis* external reality', is compelling in the context of the Polish authorities' aggressions of 1968–9, my own reading of Kantor's work has sought to stress that 'disinterest' was, nevertheless, powerful, when seen from a historical perspective, in so far as it was an attitude committed to determining autonomous values. While I concur that the direct political 'impact' of Kantor's activities was negligible, my purpose in opening the book with a discussion of the happenings described has been to argue that, at this stage at least, that was to be expected, as the situation was not yet ripe for cultural activism. Following the trauma of Soviet annexation, the imposition of Socialist Realism and the political events of the 1960s, an outright rejection of politics on the part of

artists was a prerequisite for the birth of a new ‘politics of antipolitics’ in the cultural sphere.

When, in January, 1969, the Foksal Gallery organized another major event, entitled the *Winter Assemblage*, Kantor invited a group of hippies to collaborate with him in producing a second version of the *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* (fig. 1.16). In this way, the rather hermetic artistic circle to which he belonged moved to build a bridge to another marginal, but symbolically significant, group in society. The slogan ‘the end of so-called participation’ was scrawled on the walls of the white cube space, and features, along with a noose suspended from the ceiling, in a number of photographs of the event (fig. 1.17). The ambivalence of these words in this context is tantalizing. On the one hand, they may have been intended as a challenge to the formulaic nature of the Happening and the limited nature of the roles it provided for ‘so-called’ participants; Kantor’s Happenings, the slogan suggests, were a one-man show. On the other, in the context of the grim atmosphere following the crushing of the Prague Spring, this same declaration of the end of participation may also have announced a refusal to continue to accept the status quo. Retrospectively viewed, the slogan signals an important shift that took place in Central Europe in 1968: a new refusal of the political – one that led to the development of a more viable, socially orientated antipolitical approach to the challenge of late-socialist disenchantment. It was this that would lead to the rebirth of civil society, and to the beginnings of the end of the morally bankrupt system.

Although he was, naturally, scarred by the experience of war and annexation to the Soviet bloc, as a member of the prewar avant-garde Kantor had declared that it was not an artist’s role to shape the future – ‘we need to think about the past (let others deal with the future – not artists)’.¹⁶⁴ In view of this statement, Kantor’s approach serves as one example of Havel’s claim that East-Central Europeans were necessarily ‘cautious in their own distinctive manner’ under post-totalitarian conditions.¹⁶⁵ The apparent hopelessness of the political situation led Kantor to believe that only a parallel, artistic field of action was available to him, prompting him to argue that if a situation is ‘impossible / and inconceivable / in life, / this “impossible” / can be achieved successfully / in art / on the condition that / the elements of this / “process” / are bereft of any other aim / ... / than simply / to be perfectly useless / and

Opposite: 1.16, 1.17 Tadeusz Kantor, *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt*, and hippies at Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, 24 January 1969. Photographs by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszkowska.



disinterested'.¹⁶⁶ I want to propose that his statement contains the germ of antipolitical commitment. Freedom, Kantor wrote, 'is not a gift from politics, nor authorities. ... Freedom exists within us, we must fight for freedom within ourselves, in our most intimate inner selves, in loneliness and suffering.'¹⁶⁷ In line with the democratic opposition that was beginning to emerge across the region, he insisted that it was crucial 'not to lose hope. To maintain one's aggressiveness.'¹⁶⁸

2

Doubt

In neighbouring Czechoslovakia, Július Koller was developing his own antipolitical attack on artistic conventions. If Kantor's focus was the past, Koller, with a healthy dose of doubt, appeared to be committed to the future. He wrote that his intentions were twofold: on the one hand, to 'artistically express the truth about this era', and on the other, to 'skip over it to the future'.¹ He sought to 'consciously... stand in the position of a theoretical witness', while remaining 'sceptically optimistic for the fantastic future'.² If Kantor embodied some aspects of Havel's take on Central European scepticism – particularly its tendency to be 'a bit nostalgic, often tragic, and at times even heroic' – Koller's scepticism resonates with other traits listed by Havel to illustrate how Central European scepticism differs from English scepticism – that it is 'generally rather stranger, a bit mysterious, occasionally somewhat incomprehensible in its heavy-handed way'.³ Koller's position is best characterized by an attitude of permanent questioning. His doubts were cemented by the experience of 1968. 'All my work was marked by the tension, scepticism and disillusion following the 21 August invasion by Soviet troops,' he confessed.⁴ His remark lends weight to Havel's observation that scepticism is 'inescapably a part of the spiritual, cultural and intellectual phenomenon that is Central Europe as it has been formed and is being formed by certain specific historical experiences'.⁵

Czechoslovakia had experienced little in the way of an officially sanctioned 'thaw' before the early 1960s and, unlike Poland and Hungary, no mass protests in 1956. The long-standing Stalinist dictator of Czechoslovakia

Antonín Novotný (First Secretary of the Communist Party from 1953 to 1968, and President from 1957 to 1968) made no major policy changes following Khrushchev's Secret Speech. In the absence of a regional tradition of hostility to the USSR, in part because Czech communists had 'the strongest indigenous support in the region... and the USSR was seen as the liberator and guarantor of national independence', his regime largely retained the support of a majority of intellectuals into the early 1960s, despite the extensive purges of the 1950s.⁶ However, this was possible only as a result of continued economic progress. An economic slowdown in the early 1960s, which saw negative growth for the first time in postwar Eastern Europe, prompted the rise of revisionism in Czechoslovakia. Economists now argued that the Stalinist prioritizing of heavy industry had led to a lack of investment in new technologies and proposed market-led reforms. These new ideas, combined with growing pressure from the creative unions, most notably at the Writers' Congress of 1967, at last produced a shift away from the Stalinist model, a shift towards reform communism, and greater freedom in the cultural arena.

In January 1968, Novotný was finally replaced by Alexander Dubček, the First Secretary of the regional Communist Party of Slovakia. Dubček announced an Action Programme intended to create 'socialism with a human face' in April of that year, introducing cultural reforms to combat the hitherto sluggish pace of 'thaw' in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and to tackle economic stagnation.⁷ Among Dubček's moves towards decentralization, the 'Prague Spring' saw the growing federalization of the ČSSR into two republics. Although the reform was top-down, formal suspension in late June of state censorship saw unofficial groups begin to clamour for political change, thus threatening the Party's monopoly on power, seized in 1948. While the country remained firmly committed to the Warsaw Pact, other Pact members, particularly near neighbours, increasingly regarded pluralism in Czechoslovakia as 'counter-revolutionary', and were worried by contagion in their own countries. The Polish hero of 1956, Gomułka, was now a prominent critic of political change. His concerns proved well founded when, in March 1968, Warsaw students chanted: 'Poland is waiting for its Dubček'.⁸ After five months of hesitation, a Warsaw Pact invasion was launched, and the dream of socialism with a human face was crushed.

Koller referred to the events of 1968 as a 'superpower happening' that 'absorbed us all'.⁹ That he called the invasion a 'happening' backhandedly indicates his parallel reservations about artistic developments. The Bratislava

artist was as sceptical of Happenings – which arrived in Czechoslovakia, as they had in Poland, in the mid-1960s – as he was of recent political developments. He called art and politics to account in equal measure, deploying doubt as a critical strategy to target both.

The generation of artists reaching maturity in late 1950s Czechoslovakia had tentatively begun to push the boundaries of Socialist Realism, although they had not abandoned figurative painting outright. A group of young artists, who claimed Mikuláš Galanda as their ‘spiritual father’, began to paint non-naturalistic provincial scenes, eschewing didactic overtones.¹⁰ Ernest Špitz and Marián Čunderlík founded the Galéria Mladých in Bratislava, where the Mikuláš Galanda Group exhibited in 1958, after the gallery had been renamed the Galéria Cypriána Majerníka.¹¹ By the mid-1960s they were bold enough to begin to show work by experimental artists such as Josef Jankovič, Milan Dobeš, Jana Želibská, Július Koller and Stano Filko. As of 1961, artists in Bratislava organized the so-called *Konfrontácie* – studio meetings that successfully circumvented the censorship characteristic of the official sphere. Local versions of *art informel* and Neo-Constructivism developed and, as Zuzana Bartošová recalls, by 1964 the art scene in Bratislava was extraordinarily pluralistic, incorporating and combining aspects of new figuration, pop art, kineticism and environment. The long-awaited ‘thaw’ appeared to have arrived at last, and artists had reconnected with the European art scene.

Koller graduated from the painting studio of Jan Želibský at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava in 1965.¹² Želibský’s approach was relatively relaxed, and students graduating in the mid-1960s were well informed about international artistic developments. In addition to the Polish art journals available in the library, Koller and his colleagues could consult magazines such as *Výtvarný život*, *Výtvarná práce* and *Mladá tvorba*, share magazines and catalogues procured on trips abroad, watch Austrian television due to proximity to the Austrian border and catch Western radio stations.¹³ As Aurel Hrabušický has put it: ‘Our artists had their aerials adjusted in various directions (if they could put them up at all), and from the signals received, they produced their own image.’¹⁴ An explosion of international information took place in a relatively short space of time. The cohort of young artists finishing their studies in the mid-1960s took full advantage of it to develop a strong experimental scene in Bratislava, distinct from the scene in Prague. Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčík, Jana Želibská, Vladimír Popovič and Péter Bartoš all graduated at around the same time as Koller. They were a generation who had experienced World War II as

children, and felt little inclination towards the existential soul-searching of *art informel*. More importantly, they came to maturity in the brief hiatus between two periods of political and cultural repression. It was an opportunity they used to full advantage – expanding the definition and ambitions of art to such an extent that for the most part what they did was so off the register that it was not considered art by the authorities. This left them, for a time at least, free to pursue their experiments.

As early as 1964, Alex Mlynárčík carried off an unexpected coup when, on a trip to Paris, armed with his portfolio, he rang on art critic and theoretical architect of *nouveau réalisme* Pierre Restany's doorbell. The result was a lifelong friendship that opened the door to further exchanges and visits from foreign artists, as well as raising the international profile of Mlynárčík and some of his friends.¹⁵ Restany soon became foreign correspondent for a number of Czechoslovak journals, and was instrumental in bringing the AICA (Association of International Critics of Art) congress to Bratislava in 1966. The art historian and critic Tomáš Štrauss also played a leading role in disseminating information on international developments in art. His report 'On the question of the transformation of the "Art Work" to the "Art Action"' in *Výtvarný život* in 1967, for example, included illustrations of works by George Segal, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Yves Klein and Wolf Vostell, alongside photographs of an action by Vladimír Popovič and an environment by Stano Filko.¹⁶ News of foreign avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art in *Výtvarný život* was plentiful after 1965, peaking in around 1968, then petering out after 1970, with the onset of normalization.¹⁷ Interestingly, though, the journal carried little news about experimental Slovak artists. This pattern was repeated in other journals of the time. The Czech periodical *Výtvarná práce* was a little bolder, sooner, reporting on experimental tendencies in Prague. It published, among others, an article/lecture on Happenings by Milan Knižák in 1965.¹⁸ By 1972, when Socialist Realism was reintroduced as official orthodoxy, the international section of the journal had shrunk dramatically, to be replaced by ideologically unadventurous articles on Soviet tapestries, Willi Sitte, 'Czech Art in its Fight against Fascism', 'The Art of Socialist Countries. 30 Victorious Years...' and 'Lenin's Conception of Art and the Struggle of Ideas of Aesthetics'. The type of information flowing through official journals is indicative of the vicissitudes of cultural policy – registering peaks and troughs, loophole periods and moments of clampdown and reaffirmation of orthodoxy.

Gestural painting certainly held little appeal for Koller. He derided abstraction as an ‘escape from fighting evil’, and disapproved of its eschewal of reality in favour of ‘vagueness and play with the lyricism of colours’.¹⁹ One series of early paintings combines childlike figures with headlines clipped from the Communist press. *Artist* (1963) (fig. 2.1) is a playful satire on the situation of the Czechoslovak artist, here personified as a balloon-like smiling figure balancing precariously on top of an edifice of ideological slogans proclaiming ‘vast economic potential’, commanding that ‘proletarians of all countries unite’, and announcing the intention to ‘deepen ideological activity’. Other early paintings were melancholic images of the transformation of the landscape by industry and modernization, such as *Industrial Landscape* (1965) (fig. 2.2). Koller’s deliberately poorly crafted, almost slapdash paintings, however, were double-edged in their reinterpretation of 1940s Czech Civilism: ‘I showed my personal experience of the sultry atmosphere in urban areas of the socialist industrial civilization. The structures are interpreted with intentional naïve, infantile and primitive simplicity, joyfulness and Dadaist irony.’²⁰

Alongside his paintings, he had also begun to experiment with pictograms – words dissolving into figurative images. *Sea*, 1963–4 (fig. 2.3), is arguably the most developed of these, and consists of the Slovak word for sea (*more*) painted in white on a blue ground in tilting italic handwriting that resembles the crests of a series of waves. The word morphed into the object it designated, fusing signifier and referent, image and text. While Tomáš Štrauss argued that this work proved that conceptualism in Czechoslovakia developed directly from painting, in contrast to how it evolved in the West, Radislav Matuščík countered that *More* could not be used as evidence in such a case, as it was not intended to be displayed alone, but rather, as it was in Koller’s 1967 exhibition at the Galéria Mladých, with an inflatable beach ball suspended nearby, as though it were a giant eye ‘looking at the beach’. He concluded that it had been conceived of as an installation/environment, rather than as a work of Conceptual Art, as such.²¹ Koller’s friend Péter Bartoš, meanwhile, who attended the exhibition, made a connection between the painting and another work in the exhibition – a glass of water on a plinth. This, in turn, produces a reading of *More* along the lines of Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* (1965). It is certainly interesting to note the potential parallel explorations that Koller was undertaking, within his own conceptual universe. Like Kantor, Koller repeatedly theorized and recapitulated his own



2.1 (above) Július Koller, *Artist*, 1963. Collection of Zoya Gallery, Bratislava. 2.2 (below) Július Koller, *Industrial Landscape*, 1965. Collection of SOGA, Bratislava. Courtesy of Gabriel Herczeg.





2.3 Július Koller, *The Sea*, 1963–4. Collection of SOGA, Bratislava.
Courtesy of Gabriel Herczeg.

production, filling countless green exercise books and postcard-sized scraps of paper and card with notes, definitions, sketches and comments.²²

Koller was also producing crude readymades and assemblages early on. In *Painting B (Object-ready-made)* (1963) he cut a rectangle in the centre of a canvas, leaving only the frame of the picture. He expressed a strong interest in the ‘tension between the illusiveness of art and the truthfulness of pure reality’.²³ He later remarked: ‘For me Dadaism is important above all in terms of its doubting of received and supposedly self-evident certainties.’²⁴ In addition to casting doubt on certainties, Koller dialectically reversed the operation – treating dubious phenomena as though they were realities. Another of his early objects revealed the shape of things to come. To an oval mirror Koller added a curved line, calling the object *Head (Saucerman)* (1963) – in Slovak *ufon*. His fascination with extra-terrestrial civilization and the UFO phenomenon, as his wife, musician and photographer Kveta Fulierová recalls, dated from the 1950s. Even at school, she remembers, her generation were fascinated with UFOs, although, as she explains: ‘at this time, this was necessarily a very secretive interest, as UFO was officially forbidden’.²⁵ Koller would later take this schoolboy fantasy to an extreme, observing potential evidence of UFOs everywhere.

Like the other artists discussed in this book, Koller openly declared his debt to Duchamp, saying that ‘Marcel Duchamp’s Dadaistic-conceptual creation has opened free and infinite artistic possibilities for me to express reality, ideas and context’.²⁶ His *Pleasure Machine 3* (1964) is clearly a homage to Duchamp’s *Coffee Grinder* (1911), just as his *Suitcase – Travel Object. Object with Three Pictures* (1963–4) (fig. 2.4) is a reworking of Duchamp’s *Box in a Valise* (1935–41). The suitcase is especially interesting, dark and paranoid: one small picture shows a huddled figure in grey standing beside what appears to be a frontier staring into the distance, where we see a watchtower. Tucked neatly into the base of the case (as though concealed in this way to be smuggled out of the country) is the painting, which has a series of undignified blobs on a red background on the left, and a seascape with a fallen cross on the right. A nametag became the third image – a portrait of a man anonymized by his pink glasses. Koller’s early references to Duchamp are evidence of the degree to which the retrospective of 1963 in Pasadena resonated on the other side of the ‘Iron Curtain’, despite the restrictions on the flow of information that the Cold War division of the world entailed. What fired Koller’s imagination was not so much the common reading of the Duchampian strategy of the readymade as a means to transform the everyday into art but, rather, a more nuanced reading, more closely related to Duchamp’s own ambition to test the possibilities and limits of producing, through a creative operation or action, a work that is not ‘of art’. Koller called it ‘culture’. ‘I’m interested in the transformation of everyday situations in life into “cultural situations”, which I as an individual turn in a “non-studio way” into an objective reality through a subjective intervention’, he declared.²⁷

Koller rejected what he saw as the fashion for Happenings. The first of his so-called *Text-Cards*, produced in 1965, bore the following announcement, stamped with a green children’s printing set: ‘JÚLIUS KOLLER / 1965 / ANTI-HAPPENING / SYSTÉM / SUBJEKTIVNEJ OBJEKTIVITY / ČESKOSLOVENSKO’. He was wary of the plethora of new trends sweeping through the Bratislava art scene, and warned that this radicalism could all too easily become dissipated into a form of ‘new social entertainment’.²⁸ When he went on to elaborate this concept into a manifesto, a censored version of which was published in the journal *Výtvarný život* in 1970, he explained that the anti-Happening was his ‘expression of a position against modern art, arranged theatricality, cultism, fashion, and primitivism’.²⁹ His alternative, Czechoslovak ‘subjective objectivity’, was a tongue-in-cheek statement of rejection delivered in what has been called ‘the speculative language of



2.4 Július Koller, *Suitcase – Travel Object. Object with Three Pictures*, 1963–4.
Courtesy of Július Koller Society.

STANO FILKO • ALEX MLYNÁRČIK

DOVOLEJÚ SI VÁS POZVAŤ K ÚČASTI NA

premnent la liberté de inviter à participer à

HAPPSOCI.

BRATISLAVA, 2.—8. V. 1965

REALIZÁCIA :

1. prvá skutočnosť BRATISLAVA 2. mája 1965
2. druhá skutočnosť BRATISLAVA 3. mája 1965
3. tretia skutočnosť BRATISLAVA 4. mája 1965
4. štvrtá skutočnosť BRATISLAVA 5. mája 1965
5. piata skutočnosť BRATISLAVA 6. mája 1965
6. šiesta skutočnosť BRATISLAVA 7. mája 1965
7. siedma skutočnosť BRATISLAVA 8. mája 1965

RÉALISATION :

1. première réalité à Bratislava, le 2 mai 1965
2. deuxième réalité à Bratislava, le 3 mai 1965
3. troisième réalité à Bratislava, le 4 mai 1965
4. quatrième réalité à Bratislava, le 5 mai 1965
5. cinquième réalité à Bratislava, le 6 mai 1965
6. sixième réalité à Bratislava, le 7 mai 1965
7. septième réalité à Bratislava, le 8 mai 1965

TRVANIE: 1.—9. V. 1965

Durée:

OBJEKTY

1. Ženy	138 036
2. Muži	128 727
3. Psi	49 991
4. Domy (s provizóriami)	18 009
5. Balkóny	165 238
6. Poľnohospodárske usatrosť	22
7. Prevádzkové budovy	525
8. Byty	64 725
9. Vodovody v bytoch	40 070
10. Vodovody mimo bytov	944
11. Sporáky elektrické	3 505
12. Sporáky plynové	37 604
13. Pračky	35 090
14. Chladničky	17 534
15. Celá Bratislava	1
16. Hrad	1
17. Dunaj v Bratislave	1
18. Pouličné lampy	142 090
19. Televízne antény	128 726
20. Cintoriny	6
21. Tulipány	1 000 801
22. Divadlá (aj ochotnícke)	9
23. Kina, komíny, elektrický, autá, vieshy, trolejbusy, písacie stroje, rádiá, obchody, knižnice, nemocnice atd.	

LES OBJETS

1 Femmes	138 036
2 Hommes	128 727
3 Chiens	49 991
4 Maisons (avec provisoires)	18 009
5 Balcons	165 238
6 Cités agricoles	22
7 Bâtimens d'exploitation	525
8 Appartemens	64 725
9 Robinets aux appartemens	40 070
10 Robinets hors d'appartemens	944
11 Aires électriques	3 505
12 Aires à gaz	37 604
13 Machines à laver	35 090
14 Réfrigérateurs	17 534
15 Tout Bratislava	1
16 La Citadelle	1
17 Le Danube à Bratislava	1
18 Réverbères	142 090
19 Antennes de télévision	128 726
20 Cimetières	6
21 Tulipes	1 000 801
22 Théâtres (y compris les théâtres d'amateurs)	9
23 Cinémas, cheminées, tramways, automobiles, tavernes, trolleybus, machines à écrire, appareils de radio, boutiques, bibliothèques, hôpitaux, etc.	



2.5 Stano Filko, Zita Kostrová and Alex Mlynárčik, *HAPPSOC 1*, 2–8 May 1965, Bratislava. Courtesy of Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčik, and Galerie Lara Vincy, Paris.

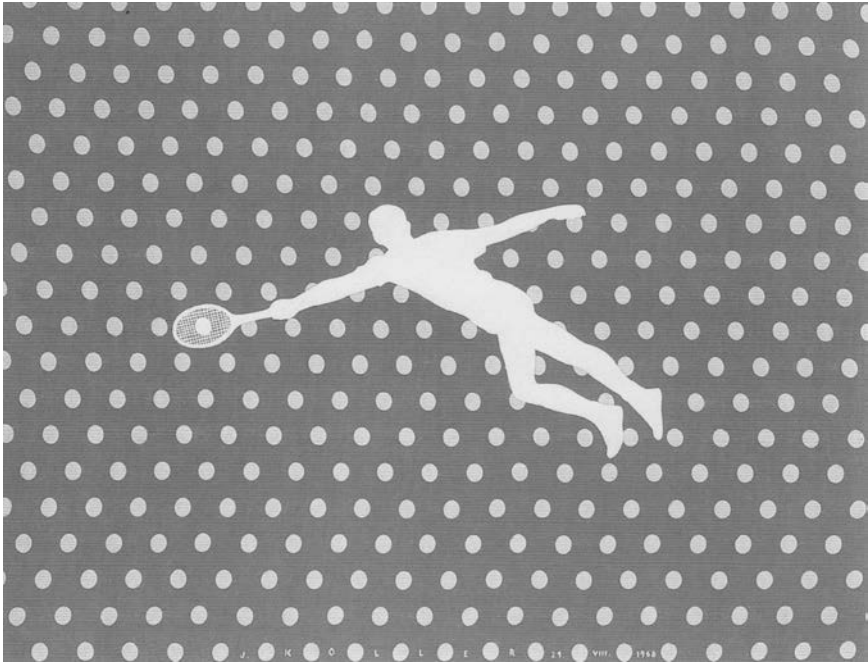
dialectical materialism'.³⁰ Playing with adopting an official tone of condemnation, his announcement usurps the authority of the bureaucrat to parody the efforts of other young artists to transplant Western artistic liberties on to Czechoslovak territory. The piece may have been in part a reply to Alex Mlynářčik, Stano Filko and the theoretician Zita Kostrová's *HAPPSOC I* proposal of April 1965 (fig. 2.5).

HAPPSOC I was a critical response to the international trend for Happenings, lent a socialist spin. Its title left readers to interpret the two syllables as they chose: happy, happening, socialist, sociological, etc. Taking the form of a conceptual declaration, this was a nominalist event rather than a performative one, highlighting the obstacles to organizing a large-scale artistic Happening unofficially. The authors declared that Bratislava in its entirety would become a work of art between 2 May and 8 May 1965 – framed on either side by the state holidays 'Labour Day' and the anniversary of liberation by the Red Army on 9 May. The photographs accompanying one version of the declaration show a 1 May procession with vast portraits of socialist leaders and a banner reading PROLETARIANS OF ALL NATIONS, UNITE!; and a Liberation Day display of military prowess, with tanks and lorries full of soldiers aligned geometrically in an enormous square. The photographs emphasize the two main weapons of state control: ideology and the military; although the authors maintained that their selection of state holidays was an arbitrary one.³¹ The *HAPPSOC I* declaration listed a series of 'realities': '1. First Reality: BRATISLAVA, May 2, 1965 / 2. Second Reality: BRATISLAVA, May 3, 1965 (etc.)'. The authors made no distinction between subjects and objects; everything was listed under the heading 'objects': women, men, dogs, houses, washing machines and so on. Dubious-looking statistics (said to have been taken from the census) were used to support the claim that this was an objective schematization of Bratislava reality. The portrait painted was positive, in materialist terms; a high proportion of people appeared to own fridges and electric cookers. But fact began to spiral into fiction when they claimed that the number of tulips in the city was 1,000,001, and that there was apparently only one TV antenna fewer than there were men: 128,727. In addition to a series of postcards of Bratislava, inscribed with the title of the project, the list was originally accompanied by a text entitled the 'Theory of Anonymity', explaining that the aim of the project was to provoke the 'enjoyment of reality, released from the stream of everyday existence' by using 'objectivity to stimulate a subjective way of looking at things' resulting in a

‘synthetic manifestation of social existence’.³² This was a playful critique of Czechoslovak life as a life measured in terms of access to consumer goods. *HAPPSOC I* was far from uncritical of the international Happening phenomenon, and Aurel Hrabušický’s observation that Koller’s negation of *HAPPSOC I* may have entailed a misunderstanding of sorts seems plausible. To the extent that the Slovak unofficial art scene was characterized by the sharing of ideas and collaboration, it also developed into a field where egos conflicted over defining positions, and rivalries developed.

Koller pointedly referred to his 1965 Anti-Happening proposal as a form of ‘active non-participation in void exhibitionisms’.³³ He took his own situation as a starting point for a new ‘system of subjectivity objectivity’, and declared that an entire year of his life, from 3 August 1965 to 3 August 1966, was an Anti-Happening entitled *For 365* (1965); it would become an ‘individual cultural phenomenon’.³⁴ The year he offered up for cultural interpretation was his year of compulsory military service following graduation. Koller later explained that his Anti-Happenings were a way to instigate ‘the expansion from artefacts to a multidimensional and psychophysical reality. This reality... was a readymade medium for singling out a part, a section or an idea of my life.’³⁵ According to Cartesian logic, objective reality did not exist, for Koller, independently of subjective experience. Only personal experience could serve as a basis for ‘subjective objectivity’. His textual announcements recorded his ‘subjectively undertaken activities’, and ‘offered’ these ‘to the disposition of others’, for the most part to a small circle of friends.³⁶

As of 1967, Koller proposed to transform sport into a cultural situation. He announced his intention in the text-card *JÚLIUS KOLLER 1967/ ORIENTACIA: ŠPORT – HRA*. His interest in sport was at once personal, and an example of the possibility of expanding individual experience according to the system of ‘subjective objectivity’. Koller had been a keen sportsman from an early age, playing volleyball, football, ice hockey, tennis and table tennis, among others. He now sought to ‘spiritually’ transfer this experience into the cultural field – using sport as a model for communication and the promotion of a new concept of subjectivity. For Koller, sport was a paradigm of democracy, a model for conducting oneself in everyday situations characterized by the codes of ‘fairplay’. Such an attitude implied even-handedness, willingness to accept defeat, and acting with the determination and composure of the professional sportsman, for whom there was an ethical imperative to play, but also to recognize that it might not always be possible to win. In the summer of 1968, he invited his friends to the Anti-Happening *Time/*



2.6 Július Koller, *Tennis (Antipicture)*, 1968. Collection of SOGA, Bratislava. Courtesy of Gabriel Herczeg.

Space Definition of the Psychophysical Activity of Matter (Tennis). Spectators experienced in real time Koller's preparations for the game, watching him repainting the lines of a tennis court, and were then invited to play tennis with him in the space he had marked out before, finally, coming together to discuss the topic 'what is art?'. His activity provided an independent forum for reconfiguring relations in time and space, and an opportunity for dialogue with his peers:

I chose such a game ... as a symbol of democratic communication, where it's still possible to preserve, according to some 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 individualizing of this attempt at communication.³⁷

After August 1968, however, communication began to cease functioning '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.'³⁸ Koller's *Tennis (Anti-Picture)* (1968)

(fig. 2.6) shows a player struggling to hit one of the scores of dots printed on a length of pink textile. The date, 21 August 1968, inscribed beneath the figure, is a reminder of the overwhelming force of the invasion, and of the importance of continuing to play on despite the impossibility of returning the multiple blows.

In addition to a number of paintings in latex on textile (Anti-Pictures refusing the conventions of oil on canvas), Koller responded to the events of 1968 with another text-card, or, as he sometimes called them, an 'invitation card to an idea'. The card, which he sent out to his acquaintances, was dated 21 August 1968, and warned recipients of *Shockialism* (fig. 2.7), combining the Slovak 'šok' (shock) and 'socializmus' (socialism). A year later, on the anniversary of the invasion, by which time it was becoming clear that there would be no return to 'socialism with a human face', Koller sent out another card, offering 'Permanent Entry to all Actions of Shockialism'. As Daniel Grúň has argued, the cards offered 'prepaid entry into a life space where shocking "actions" have become a part of everyday reality'.³⁹

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and some 5,000 tanks crossed the Czechoslovak border from the north, south and east; by the early hours of 21 August 1968 they had occupied the entire country and rolled into central Prague. Although the Czechoslovaks had ruled out military resistance in



2.7 Július Koller, *Shockialism (Anti-Happening)*, 1968. Courtesy of Generali Foundation.

advance, they undertook numerous spontaneous acts of non-violence against the invaders. Over the next few weeks, inhabitants deployed textbook tactics of civil resistance; legal organizations passed resolutions refusing to recognize a government led by anyone other than the reformers; 'slogan centres' co-ordinated an avalanche of graffiti, placards, petitions, jokes, songs and poems; citizens fraternized with the invading soldiers, reducing their willingness to open fire; street signs were removed, impeding foreigners' navigation through the city; and two short general strikes were co-ordinated.⁴⁰ Protests following the invasion included a three-day demonstration by university students in November 1968 and the self-immolation of the student Jan Palach in Wenceslas Square in early 1969, as well as those of two further students later that year.⁴¹ Thousands of ordinary citizens took part in acts of resistance, and the civilian process of restoring 'normality' was far from smooth. Gustav Husák replaced Dubček as First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and in April 1969 an extended period of repression began, with forced emigrations and political purges across society.⁴² During this long period of what came to be termed 'normalization', Husák offered a tacit deal of economic benefits in exchange for political conformity and passivity.⁴³

The political situation in the years immediately following the events of August 1968, however, was far from clear, and the cultural position even less so. Koller's *Anti-Picture (Wall Slogans)*, from 1968 (fig. 2.8), records the political chaos. Disjointed, semi-legible words such as democracy, communism and ideology vie for space on its surface. Hrabušický recalls that 'the walls of our dwellings were covered with similar mutually contradictory terms'.⁴⁴ After the invasion, Dubček had been effectively 'kidnapped' and taken to Moscow, where he was coerced into signing the Moscow protocols, before being ordered not to reveal their contents, and returning to his post in Prague. A hiatus had occurred in the Soviet plan, when the coup they had sought to engineer to coincide with the invasion failed to materialize. Although 'In Poland and Hungary, fledgling oppositionists perceived the invasion as the death knell for reform communism', 'it was not immediately clear to either outsiders or insiders that the reform process was dead'.⁴⁵ Protracted negotiations with the USSR ensued, while the 'temporary' occupation of Czechoslovakia continued. Provisions were made to tighten up on public order, and police powers were extended. Directives about censorship in various sectors resulted in its reintroduction in waves. When censorship of the press was reintroduced in March 1969, the Prague Spring was portrayed in the press as a counter-revolution. The scale of Husák's purges was



2.8 Július Koller, *Anti-Picture (Slogans on the Walls)*, 1968. Courtesy of First Slovak Investment Group, Bratislava.

extraordinary. Almost half a million Communists lost both their Party cards (through resignation or expulsion) and their employment, leading many to take work far below their qualifications.

Artists in Bratislava experienced no clear reprisals for longer than expected. It was a measure of the vicissitudes of ‘normalization’ that the international

exhibition Danuvius '68, originally planned for the end of August, still went ahead in October and November 1968.⁴⁶ The event had been conceived of as the first edition of a new biennale showcasing the work of Czechoslovak and international artists under the age of 35, and was modelled on the Paris Biennale des Jeunes. Most of the artists who had previously agreed to participate did so, perhaps feeling that to pull out would be to admit defeat, thereby ignoring a call mailed out by Alex Mlynářčik to boycott the exhibition in protest at the invasion. Mlynářčik's flyer cited Martin Luther King and the spirit of revolution on the streets of Paris that he had witnessed earlier that year, and urged artists to allow the blank walls of the gallery to serve as a testament to their fight against violence.⁴⁷ Instead, Koller used the occasion to poke fun at conformism, exhibiting a length of brightly coloured striped fabric bearing a small latex message: *Official Exhibition POPular Form*. The piece proposed an Eastern bloc take on pop art, as did his other so-called *textillages*. These were fabrics mounted on stretchers – translucent, florid or radiantly psychedelic, often with shopping bags either attached to the surface or trapped between two thin pieces of fabric. This was pop art with a difference: consumer goods, other than fabric itself, were absent, and ideological messages or empty bags served as substitutes for other unavailable commodities.

Although the introduction to the special issue of *Výtvarný život* devoted to the event and published in early 1969 written by one 'Zykmund' consisted of a tirade against the 'principles of neo-Dada', decrying the degree to which these were 'becoming the predominating principles of contemporary creation' and explaining that by pursuing this trend 'the artist yields to the pressure of triviality, renewed triteness and repeated provision of his complicated and idyllic visions in order to become as insolent, unashamed and aggressive as is the reality amidst which he lives', the issue also included extracts from reviews by a number of foreign critics. Pierre Restany's review made explicit comment on the political situation: 'The morale of the population is here, even more than in Prague, buttressed by the Dubček myth; this is because in Bratislava Dubček represents not only the warrant of honour of a strangulated country, a defender of the last material values, but first of all the victorious protagonist of federation.' He went on to praise Danuvius '68 as 'an exhibition of the kind not known up to the present in Slovakia', referring to it as an East-West 'international confrontation'.⁴⁸ Frank Stella from the USA made a big splash, along with Austrian, German, Italian and other artists (as one critic remarked, 'of course' the USSR was not represented). Critics boldly praised two experimental

installations, both alluding, albeit obliquely, to recent political events.⁴⁹ The first, by Josef Jankovič, *Great Fall* – a post-Surrealist grotesque constellation of limbs in the colours of the Czechoslovak flag protruding upside down from the ground – was awarded the first prize. The second went to Stano Filko's environment *Cathedral of Humanism* – a room of PVC, Plexiglas and mirrors with two slide projectors, one showing images of prominent Czechoslovak politicians, the others showing scenes from everyday street life – another one of five works to be purchased by the state. The reviewer from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* offered the following interpretation of Filko's environment: 'Everybody who knows the atmosphere full of tension in October in Bratislava will understand how exactly this work reflects the country's inhabitants and their relationship to the politicians. Filko with his environment demonstrates how art, if politically engaged, is in certain conditions able to express protest.'⁵⁰

That same year, Koller and Péter Bartoš found a new mode of exhibiting their work that did not require a gallery. In the years 1968 and 1969 they appropriated the window of a communal tights repair company opposite Koller's house, propping their objects up on the window ledge in front of the display when the shop was closed to make their own 'display' (fig. 2.9).⁵¹ In a text-card of 1969, Koller initiated another mode of refusing conventional forms of exhibition, inviting his friends to his idea of the *non-EXHIBITION (Anti-Happening)*. Koller wrote that he considered 'the presentation of artefacts in galleries was an outdated, conventional, communication'.⁵² Although he did have a number of shows of his textile works in 1969–70, sending some to the 1969 Paris Biennale and others to an exhibition of young Slovak artists in Cuba, he was becoming increasingly focused on more radical, un-exhibitable, text- and action-based works.

The aim of Koller's cultural play was not the production of 'art' but the introduction of new possibilities for communication through cultural situations. He defined cultural situations as the 'communicative medium between the individual and the community, differing from an elite art language by the general understandability and simplicity of its means, and an interactive universalism'.⁵³ He enlisted the question mark in his project: 'The question mark is a symbol of doubt. I doubt everything. ... But not in a pessimistic sense, in a realistic sense. Questions and asking questions are aimed against illusions, against lies and ignorance; they help us to see and know things and implications realistically.'⁵⁴ He began to insert question marks into public spaces – either painting them in latex, or spraying them on walls with shaving cream.



2.9 Július Koller, Display on Klobucnicka Street, Bratislava 1969.
Courtesy of Květoslava Fulierová.

The question marks were always white, which he described as the ‘universal anti-colour of metaphysical energy’,⁵⁵ explaining: ‘I have so many questions, so much unsatisfied curiosity that the very question mark symbolizes the quantity of those questions as a whole.’⁵⁶ *Question Mark – Anti-Picture* (1969) (fig. 2.10), for example, shows a white question mark painted on textile suspended from what looks like a rusting shower at a derelict outdoor pool. The question mark was installed on a site in decline – a plan never completed, or abandoned, half-finished or forgotten, and served as a mysterious invitation to consider both the material situation and universal questions.

Koller’s conception of what might be called real was initially limited to a few basic relationships, which he listed in a text-card that read: ‘JÚLIUS KOLLER 1969 / KONTAKT / MAN – NATURE – / OBJECTS – MATERIALS / TRUTH / BRATISLAVA’. His return to these basics was indicative of his mistrust of both art and politics. One of his Anti-Happening text-cards warned of the ‘PERMANENT MYSTIFICATION EVERYWHERE CONSTANTLY IN ALL THINGS’ (1968). In the years that followed, his goal would be demystification; he explained that ‘information on the sway



2.10 Július Koller, *Question Mark – Anti-Picture Otaznik*, 1969. Courtesy of gb Agency.

of politics over art in an ideologized culture turns into cultural demystification'.⁵⁷ He later called 1969 his 'conceptual state zero' – when he abandoned 'cheap artistic answers' and 'false solutions'.⁵⁸ 1969 was the year that politics and sport collided in Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak ice hockey team beat the USSR in Stockholm. Koller proudly recorded the score in a work entitled *Anti-Picture – Colour Picture (CSSR – ZSSR 2:0 Hockey)* (1969). The victory was followed by 'massive popular demonstrations in many cities and violent actions, in several places, against Soviet installations, including Aeroflot offices in the centre of Prague'.⁵⁹ Their upshot: an intensification of the political crisis, which accelerated Dubček's removal from office by the Soviet Politburo and fired the protracted purge of remaining reformers from the Czechoslovak leadership.⁶⁰

In 1970, Koller organized an 'active environment' which he manned over the course of a month at the Galéria Mladých. Koller's *Ping-Pong Society* ('club' and 'society' are synonymous in Slovak) was a means of fostering dialogue and exchange through sport, by inviting visitors to play ping-pong with him.⁶¹ As Koller later recalled, 1970 was the last time when it was 'still possible to address the public directly in normal art venues as part of normal cultural life'.⁶² This proved to be the third-to-last of a series of exhibitions of young artists programmed by Igor Gazdík, followed by Rudolf Sikora's exhibition in May and Juraj Meliš's in June. Thereafter the series came to an end, in line with the arrival of stricter normalization.

Late 1970 also saw Bratislava's unofficial artists and critics begin to organize themselves in alternative ways more systematically. The youngest artist of the circle, Rudolf Sikora, was instrumental in promoting new forms of communication among the circle of artists whose work he respected; this included hosting the legendary 'First Open Studio' at his home on 19 November 1970.⁶³ The whole house, the yard and the garden were transformed by the 19 participating artists into a space full of installations, actions, ecological objects, sound objects and so on. Marián Mudroch's opening event, 'Focus your attention on the house's chimneys', sent two neat streams of smoke, one red, the other blue, out of the chimneys of the house and up into the atmosphere above the city. Koller put up a series of signs, and shared a version of a telegram, with sections of the bureaucratic form carefully completed by hand, reading *umeNIE!*, rendering the final syllable of the word for art in a larger typeface in order to turn the Slovak word for art (*umenie*) into a declaration of its own negation. The second syllable read

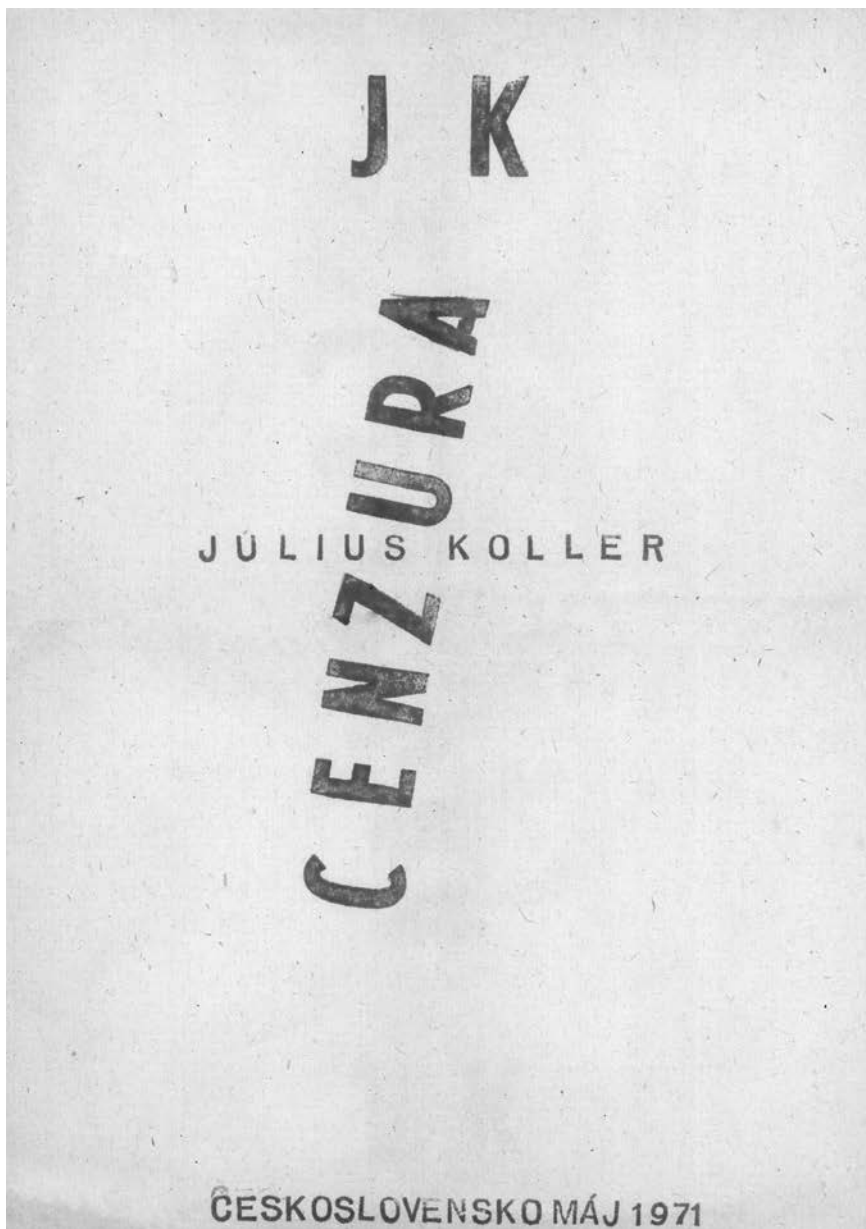
no (*nie*) – so that art became *NOT art!* Other highlights included a lecture ‘On the State of Art /After the Duchamp Initiative’ by the important Prague critic and gallerist Jindřich Chaloupecký, who had already been banned from publishing at this stage. Its success was followed up through meetings and discussions at Sikora’s house on Tuesdays, regularly attended by Štrauss. These events bore fruit in numerous collaborations, many of an interdisciplinary character – between artists, musicians, scientists and mathematicians.

By the following year, however, it was clear that the political circle was closing in on the cultural field. Koller issued a number of text-cards commenting on the new situation: one exclaiming *SOS Socialist Occupation of the Subject* (fig. 2.11); another, dated May 1971, bearing the word *Censorship* (fig. 2.12) stamped diagonally across his name; and a third declaring his commitment to *Active Neutral Opposition* (1971). In May 1971, Husák signed the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation, and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union, confirming that Soviet troops were to remain in Czechoslovakia, and announced that the process of normalization was now ‘complete’.

Radislav Matušik’s landmark ‘critical chronology’ of experimental Slovak art between 1964 and 1971, *Crossing Boundaries*, initially written without reference to contemporary political events, was completed in the summer of 1971. As a result of the turn of events of 1972, it did not appear until 1983,



2.11 Július Koller, *S..O..S. (U.F.O.)*, 1971. Courtesy of Generali Foundation.



2.12 Július Koller, *J.K. Censorship (U.F.O.)*, 1971. Courtesy of Generali Foundation.

and even then only in samizdat, in a revised version with an amendment to the title, alluding to the subsequent political changes: ...*Before. Crossing Boundaries 1964–1971*.⁶⁴ The decisive cultural crackdown came in autumn 1972, when, extraordinarily, even by Soviet bloc standards, Socialist Realism was reintroduced at the Second Congress of the Association of Slovak Fine Artists.⁶⁵ The Congress was the occasion of an aggressive purge of the Association's membership. The yellow book, as it became known in unofficial circles, containing the materials from the Congresses of Artists' Associations held between May and October 1972, published in 1974, is testimony to this powerful reimposition of cultural orthodoxy. The first speaker announced: 'We are unanimously in favour of the Association of Slovak Fine Artists pursuing a programme that is in accordance with communist ideology, with ... Marxist-Leninist ... scientific views and proletarian internationalism.'⁶⁶ The progressive democratization of the cultural sphere of the 1960s was condemned as elitist deviance, designed to weaken the functioning of the state; those responsible for initiating an emphasis on art's expressive role were identified as deviants from Marxist orthodoxy (among them Matuščík, whose name recurs with more vehemence and frequency than any other); the Mikulaš Galanda group was condemned as formalist; the Association regretted the trust it had put in those appointed to mediate international artistic relations – naming, among others, the commissioner of Danuvius '68, Kára and Štrauss. Matuščík was condemned for contributing to the spread of information about abstract art and 'the so-called new, modern artistic tendencies of the capitalist West'; artists such as Jankovič, Mlynárčík and Filko were accused of using their opportunities to exhibit internationally to seek fame abroad through personal contacts. The international AICA Congress in Bratislava in 1966 was singled out as a mistake, an event that became no more than another propagation of bourgeois Western art. The speaker quipped that Mlynárčík's *Permanent Manifestation* (an environment in a public lavatory during the congress) was in fact a *permanent 'Western' manifestation*.⁶⁷ Weichart's politically inflected review of Danuvius '68 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (mentioned above) had not escaped the speaker's vigilant eye. He painted a detailed and sorry picture of how, over the course of two decades, Socialist Realism had been maliciously betrayed, by named individuals, and turned into a topic about which artists 'either discreetly or with a smile remained silent'.⁶⁸ While the picture painted of Slovak art was a black one, long lists of conformist artists were also thrown in for good measure, presenting the call to order as an enormous task, but not an

impossible one. Delegates were reminded that art's most important message should be economic.⁶⁹ The speaker concluded on a predictably upbeat note, reminding his listeners that the full potential of art can be fulfilled only in a free socialist society. An action programme to put the Association back on ideological track was agreed.

Those criticized in person at the Congress of 1972 faced severe repercussions. Zuzana Bartošová recalls that many of them became extremely isolated afterwards, cut off from their former colleagues, and too intimidated to continue to produce anything that might be deemed subversive.⁷⁰ Others continued to write, in private, about the unofficial scene, but tended to avoid offering any political interpretation of the work they discussed. Bartošová cites Chalupecký, Matušík and Štrauss as examples. The artists condemned at the Congress were expelled from the Association of Fine Artists and forbidden to disseminate or exhibit their work. Of course, they were just the tip of the iceberg. In autumn 1972, all experimental artists and their associates received letters of expulsion from the Association of Fine Artists. Koller's was dated 10 October 1972. It informed him that his membership was being terminated for 'cultural political reasons'.

Brazenly (or naively), he replied, on 28 October, requesting a reversal of the decision and stating his commitment to the new Party line: 'In my artistic work I try to be as useful as possible to the creation of socialist culture in our Republic, and I ask for a reconsideration of the decision.'⁷¹ In support of his request he pointed out that he was contributing to socialist culture in two ways: through his 'individual exhibition of paintings' as well as other 'cultural-political activities' at the Bratislava City House of Culture and Enlightenment, where he taught amateur painters; and working as a functionary at the Gallery of the Young and the City of Bratislava Cultural Commission.⁷² His letter was ignored, and he did not dare to follow it up.

Although he no longer had the right to participate in exhibitions organized by the Association of Fine Artists, or to apply for funding through them, Koller was still permitted to continue to earn a living of sorts by selling paintings, as he had done hitherto, to supplement his income, via the State Visual Arts Fund *Dielo*, the only official art market at that time. Over the years, Koller produced some 200 paintings for the State Visual Arts Fund: landscapes (primarily of the Tatra Mountains) and cityscapes of Bratislava. In private, however, he intensified his conceptual activities, producing a vast

parallel archive, which is still being processed today. He wrote notes to himself, trying to untangle this schizophrenic situation:

To remain a professional artist here, I have to make traditional art, so that I can do non-traditional art, and so that I don't have to prove, like an amateur, that I make art. It is a paradox springing from our social determination. If I were an amateur, nobody would believe that what I do is art at all. But is it necessary to persuade [people] in this way, that what I do is art, when I myself do not consider it art, but culture? How can I then get out of the art context? I have to put non-art into the art context, because then it would not be art, but some sort of pastime – a hobby.⁷³

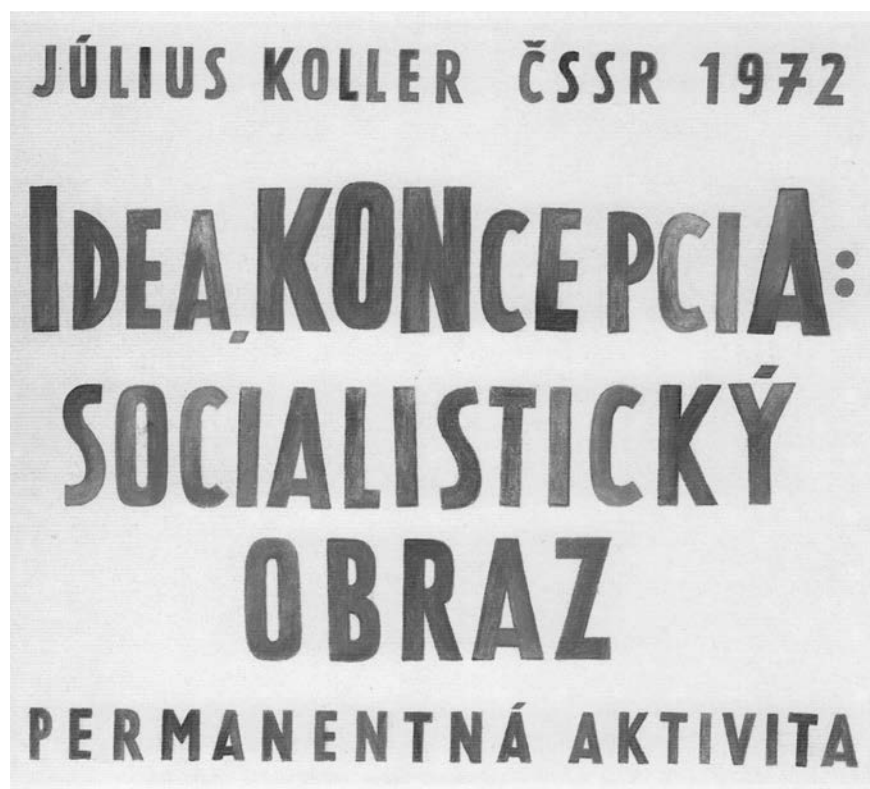
Koller had, in any case, already been working on two fronts: making what he called 'poor pictures' on the one hand, and pursuing his experimental 'cultural' activities, such as Anti-Happenings, on the other. He wrote:

My "kitschy", artistically poor pictures hold a mirror to the culture in our society. By the whole method of their creation they are shitty, just as the entire official cultural policy is shitty, supporting the petit-bourgeois and fascist propaganda in culture. ... It is a conscious desertion from the illusion that art has greater significance in human society.⁷⁴

Several of his text-based pieces, from the mid-1960s onwards, render explicit the extent to which he understood the double-bind he was to remain in for decades to come. Besides launching his *Anti-Happening System of Subjective Objectivity* in 1965, by stamping the words in green on a cream text-card, he had also produced a business-card-like text-card, giving his profession, his name, his address and the date. He offered, with a dash of self-irony, his services as an Academic Painter, using the title Akad. Mal. to which his graduation and attendant membership of the Association of Fine Artists entitled him, adding, in brackets, that the exercise was part of his *Anti-Happening* series. Another text-card simply reading *Dielo* (1966) likewise played on the absurdity of a cultural situation in which a deliberately bad painting for *Dielo* was considered a saleable work 'of art', while a conceptual work could represent the word *dielo* but could not exist 'as art' for official presentation. In 1972, Koller offered to strike a compromise between conceptualism and normalized orthodoxy, producing a socialist painting in words: *Július Koller. ČSSR. 1972. Idea, CONception: Socialistic Picture.*

Permanent Activity (fig. 2.13). This new addition to his ever-expanding series of Anti-Pictures ironically overidentified with the new situation, referring to the reinstated permanence of Socialist Realism, nominally pandering to the authorities' thirst for the iconicity of painting, while delivering nothing but a series of neatly painted words on canvas.

As a supplement to his censored creative identity, Koller now adopted an uncensorable extra-terrestrial alter ego: *UFO-naut J.K.* As he later explained, having two identities was one way to resolve the 'discrepancy between Utopia and real life'.⁷⁵ Koller redefined himself and rewrote his relationship to the universe, relativizing his position on earth (as 'merely a human ape'), and declaring that he was 'also a human extraterrestrial'.⁷⁶ Having invested so much in questioning the world around him, he felt ready to take the next step – turning himself into a question mark.⁷⁷ Although the mission of *UFO-naut J.K.* predates the events of 1972 by a few years, his activity undoubtedly



2.13 Július Koller, *Idea, CONceptioN, Socialist Picture*, 1972. Collection of SOGA, Bratislava. Courtesy of Gabriel Herczeg.

intensified as the 1970s progressed. His task on earth was to carry out what he called *Universally Cultural-Futurological Operations – UFOs*. These were initially conceived of as a form of ‘total painting’: ‘subjective cultural actions...directed into the future. The operations will effect psychophysical projects of cosmo-humanistic culture and instead of a new art-aesthetics will create a new life, a new subject, awareness, creativity and a new cultural reality.’⁷⁸ UFO-naut J.K. was Koller’s embodiment of his commitment to a ‘non-anthropocentric principle of understanding man in nature, in the cosmos’ – and his desire to contribute to its realization as a new form of ‘cosmo-humanistic culture’.⁷⁹

Conceptions of the universe had shifted dramatically in the late 1960s: the cosmos suddenly became a reality. The first trip to outer space by Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who succeeded in orbiting the earth on 12 April 1961, and US astronaut Neil Armstrong’s first moon landing, on June 21 1969, were events that enraptured the public imagination, popularized science and technology, and spurred the proliferation of science fiction.⁸⁰ Koller had become a great reader of the work of the bestselling Swiss author Erich von Däniken, whose *Chariots of the Gods?* was published in 1968 and soon translated.⁸¹ Chapter titles include ‘Are there intelligent beings in the cosmos?’, ‘When our spaceship landed on Earth’, and ‘The search for direct communication’. Discovering, with delight, that he was the ‘descendant of extraterrestrial civilization’, Koller prepared to put these new ‘contacts’ to use, and to enlist the support of extra-terrestrials in a cosmo-military operation to save humans from what he had referred to in his text-card as the ‘socialist occupation of the subject’. Fulierová recalls that he wrote a number of letters to Däniken, signing them UFO-naut J.K. – probes sent out into a Western void from socialist Czechoslovakia. Although he received no replies from the man himself, he was pleased when a brief letter of acknowledgment arrived one day from Däniken’s secretary. An altogether shady character, convicted several times of fraud, theft and embezzlement (the proceeds of which he used to travel the world carrying out his ‘research’), whose work has been largely rejected by scientists and palaeontologists, Däniken was a suitably unsuitable character to solicit in the context of the repressive orthodoxy of the normalization era.⁸²

According to his own inimitable logic, Koller decided that the best place to seek to establish ‘direct communication’ with aliens would be a tennis court. He raked its surface into a series of piles resembling mini-craters to produce a *Universal Futurological Observatory (U.F.O.)* (1971) (fig. 2.14), and

waited 'for the arrival or anticipation of something to come, for example, from the cosmos, from some extra-terrestrials who might become our partners – perhaps in a more communicative way than our terrestrials, our society of the time'.⁸³ A series of photographs show the artist standing alone on the desolate tennis court surrounded by scrubland and bare trees, staring intently into the sky above, scanning it for possible visitors from outer space. Koller referred to the site as the *PRAVDA Compound (UFO)*, and in one image can be seen sitting calmly on the steps of the small hut beside the court, waiting for the arrival of a new form of truth.

Koller was by no means alone among Central Europeans in declaring his desire to communicate with an extra-terrestrial audience. Tadeusz Konwicki's novel *Polish Complex* is also addressed to aliens. The story takes place over the course of a day that the characters spend standing in line at a jeweller's, from early morning until night, holding out for goods that may or may not arrive. Konwicki opens his novel with a brief description of the planet Earth and summarizes, for potential extra-terrestrial readers, how 'protein-based life, after millions of years, created intelligent beings called people ... civilization, which ... aids us in combating the ancient misfortunes of human existence (and creates new and increasingly menacing ones)'.⁸⁴ He then explained, for human readers:



2.14 Július Koller, *Universal Futurological Observatory (U.F.O.)*, 1971. *Anti-Happening [Tennis]*. Repro: Werner Kaligofsky. Courtesy of Generali Foundation.

I am compelled to make these few superficial explanations in the hope that some copy of this book which I now labour over will reach the hands, antennae, or computers of other intelligent beings who may happen by our galaxy, intelligent beings from the central regions of the universe, from the more elegant neighbourhoods of the Lord God's metropolis, better beings and wiser than we, the noble supermen of man's imagination. I write with such an ambitious, indeed unusual intention, only because I am bored with communication with my fellow men, my fellow wise men and idiots, my fellow prophets and scoundrels, my fellow torturers and victims.⁸⁵

Konwicki's boredom with communicating with his fellow men was the same exasperation that enveloped Koller in the early 1970s, when normal communication was rendered impossible by the abnormal constraints of 'normalization'.

Koller's mission was, in theory, by no means an individualistic one. 'We are all UFO-nauts', he proclaimed, optimistically. Accepting this dual citizenship opened up all sorts of possibilities – above all the opportunity to step back from the constraints of politics, and to view oneself as a being in 'space-time', no longer confined by human limitations. Koller was fascinated by what he called 'the unknown "blank areas" in the history of humanity which are related to the mystery of contacts with extraterrestrial civilizations', and the 'investigation of spaces between conventional and non-traditional science, between ideas and beliefs'.⁸⁶ He noted that the initials J.K. were also the initials of Jesus Christ in Slovak. His initials therefore seemed to him to 'allude to the humanist culture that forms the fundamental concept of my life. From that comes a universal concept which says that humans are beings between heaven and earth.'⁸⁷ Koller's understanding of the human condition as at once earthly and celestial implies that humanity itself is a condition suspended between dimensions. This opened the floodgates to new dimensions of 'subjective objectivity'. Its author's objectives swelled to cosmic proportions. Light years from the determinism of Marxism-Leninism, Koller decided to see history as 'an incredibly attractive moving process of ever-changing points of view'; while 'contemporary existence' could be redefined as 'a subjective reaction to and influencing of present space and time in which the past flows like a flux into the future'.⁸⁸

He became increasingly systematic in documenting his 'personal cultural situation'. The *Universal Futurological Orientation (UFO)* project involved the annual transformation of the artist's head through 'photo-visualizations'.

Photographic experiments served as a new site for reconciling irreconcilable worlds – reality and imagination, the terrestrial and the cosmic. The first portrait, *UFO-naut J.K. (U.F.O.)* (1970) (fig. 2.15), is closely cropped, the torso and head filling almost the entire picture space, and shot from a monumentalizing low viewpoint. UFO-naut J.K. has ping-pong balls resting behind his glasses in front of each eyeball, and appears through these perfect, albeit alien, eyes to be seeing into another universal future, like an extra-terrestrial pioneer whose forehead evaporates into the sky, lending the shape of his head an eerie uncertainty. In the top pocket of his blazer he carries a ping-pong bat, with a badge bearing the initials J.K. The image is of a strange new man, armed, identified and ready for whatever he is to encounter on his mission. Given this bold opening shot, the second in the series is surprisingly terrestrial: it consists of two black-and-white photographs of the UFO-naut, unmasked, and clearly Koller, as though posing for a police mugshot – a frontal and a side view, according to the convention. A comparison between the two speaks volumes about Koller's progressively worsening 'personal cultural situation' on the eve of his expulsion from the Association of Fine Artists. The portraits from subsequent years experiment with techniques of photographic defamiliarization, introducing programmatic confusion through doubling, reversibility and the combination of positives and negatives, reflecting Koller's multiple identity crisis. His mutating portraits played with the politics of visibility, invisibility and interference.

As of the mid-1970s, when Fulierová took over as Koller's photographer, UFO-naut J.K. is shown standing on the balcony of his flat. Fulierová recalls that the portraits were 'spontaneous performances, with many variations', and that it was typical of his sense of humour to stand out on the balcony waiting for a UFO to pass by.⁸⁹ Sometimes Koller would make the portraits using a collage technique, or drawing on to the surface of a photograph, as though defacing his own documentation – for example, by adding a strip of question marks covering the self portrait's eyes and rendering the sitter anonymous. *UFO-naut J.K. (U.F.O.)* (1979) (fig. 2.16) shows Koller hooded, in a plastic bag, as though he were being suffocated. Sporting props also proliferate throughout the series, along with UFO references, question marks, and, later on, books, behind which Koller hides. The individual images playfully court narrativization, while retaining a sense of an unsystematic, spontaneous approach. They are snapshots of what Harald Szeemann called, in 1972, an 'individual mythology' – through which the 'individual is capable of creating



2.15 Július Koller, *UFO-naut J.K. (U.F.O.)*, 1970. Photograph by Květoslava Fulierová.
Courtesy of Květoslava Fulierová and Generali Foundation.

some sort of territory regulated by the rules of intuition and creativity, and to claim it to be a concrete world'.⁹⁰

The *Universal Futurological Orientation (UFO)* series provides a record of Koller's expanding universe of selves. In parallel, Fulierová also made another series of portraits of Koller standing on the balcony: this time in the guise of Academic Painter, holding up his paintings for *Dielo* for the camera, with a dour expression on his face, as in the photograph subtitled *Július Koller (Anti-Happening Akad. Mal.)*, 1976 (fig. 2.17). Photo-documentation enabled Koller to turn his life into a 'cultural situation'. Photographs of himself and Fulierová were mounted on paper and labelled *Universal Family Organization* (1975) (fig. 2.18). Kveta's photographs of Koller with her grandson were also annotated and transformed into a *Flying Cultural Situation* (1982) (fig. 2.19). Standing side by side with looks of intense concentration, the bearded artist and the child play with the idea that it is only a matter of believing, and they will soar far above the grim



2.16 Július Koller, *UFO-naut J.K. (U.F.O.)*, 1979. Photograph by Květoslava Fulierová. Courtesy of Květoslava Fulierová and Generali Foundation.

backdrop of housing blocks and the desolate concrete play area. Koller saw opportunities for dialogue everywhere, transforming everyday situations and interactions into models of democratic communication, as in *Dialogic (U.F.O.)* (1982) (fig. 2.20), where his grandson is allowed to respond to having his hair combed by combing Koller's hair.

UFO-naut J.K. had mutated into an extra-terrestrial being carrying out a proliferation of subversive activities framed by the acronym UFO. On an undated text-card called *Universal Futurological Orientation / Oracle*, he prophesied: 'there will come a time of another order'. He made private schemes for conspiratorial organizations: among others, an *Underground Fantastic*



2.17 Julius Koller, *Antihappening Akad. Mal.*, 1976. Courtesy of the Slovak National Gallery.



2.18 Július Koller, *Universal Family Organisation (U.F.O.)*, 1975. Courtesy of the Slovak National Gallery.



2.19 Jülius Koller, *Flying Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)*, 1983. Photograph by Květoslava Fulierová. Courtesy of gb Agency.

Organization (1975), a *Universal Futurological Organization of the invisible man on earth* (1975), and a *Universal Physicultural Organization* (1979), shuttling between his interests in fantasy, futurology and sport. UFO-naut J.K. carried out a steady stream of Universal, Utopian, Futurological, Factographic, Functional, Operations, and Orientations. Koller's doubt was accompanied, at least performatively, by what Jan Verwoert has called an 'unruly optimism'.⁹¹ 'UFO is that which is not here', he once wrote to himself on a text-card. 'UFO is not an answer, it is a question.'⁹² Fulierová maintains that, to this day, 'it remains a mystery and a question to me, like the UFO itself, how seriously or ironically he believed in the existence of unidentified flying objects and extraterrestrial civilization'.⁹³ If he continued to nourish the hope that the unknowability of the universe might still hold some untold future promise, this was by no means a negation of his commitment to doubt. His overinvestment in dubious phenomena was, for Koller, a matter of 'moral and philosophical principle'. He explained that he sought 'to look for truth in various opinions and ideas', precisely because of, not in spite of, his doubt: 'In practice, it has never been the case that only one fanatic idea and practice could hold the entire truth – truth is always approximately in the middle between two contradictory ideas... according to dialectic principle, everything so-called bad contains also the so-called good, and vice versa; exactly pursuant to relativity.'⁹⁴ Insisting that it was dialectically materialist to take New Age mysticism seriously was perhaps Koller's most outrageous antipolitical claim, embodying the radicalism



2.20 Július Koller, *Dialogic (U.F.O.)*, 1983. Photograph by Květoslava Fulierová.
Courtesy of Květoslava Fulierová.

of his commitment to doubt and its power to undermine the truth claims of socialist ideology. This was the ultimately absurd attack on the Soviet monopoly on reality and truth, as conveyed to the population by Party organs such as the newspaper *Pravda*. In the action *Universal Futurological*

Abandoning of the Picture (UFO) (1979) Koller performed the problem, by apparently seeking to liberate a crude picture from its earthly constraints, and abandon it to the freedom of the winds. He took a rectangular piece of cardboard with the word *obraz* (picture) painted on it, and turned it into a kite by adding a tail made out of newspapers such as *Pravda*, *Nove Slovo* and *Sloboda*. Photographs show him running along trying to get the picture to take off, without success. Tellingly, the official newspapers *Truth*, *The New Word* and *Freedom* seem to be dragging the kite down rather than enabling it to fly.

Rather than seeking to establish any one concrete truth, Koller's activities implied that rationality and irrationality were plausible and implausible in equal measure. The question mark could cast doubt on disbelief as well as belief. The 1970s and 1980s saw Koller include an ever wider arsenal of signs in countless doodles, text-cards and notes to himself: Bermuda or 'devil's triangles', Moebius loops, waves, spirals, yin-yang signs. Koller's question marks morphed into an infinity of possible cultural references:

The interrogative twisted line of the question mark is a sign of scholarly writing, only to become a satanic reptile expelling humankind from Eden as a result of our rational curiosity and questioning... the metaphysical sign for infinity, the magic look of e.t., the Moebius multidimensional loop, Einstein time-and-space relativity, an oscillatory energy curve, magic folk spiral ornaments, the patterns on a tennis ball, ritual patterns carved in stone... cultural-archaeological phenomena, rooted in the ancient prehistory of the earth and humankind, in the region of the Atlantic ocean, in Atlantis, the cradle of human civilization.⁹⁵

The myth of the lost civilization of Atlantis came to preoccupy Koller in particular, not least because it appeared to be a historical warning: 'the story of Atlantis ends in catastrophe. For me, it's a symbol of a civilization that could perhaps be an analogy of European history. By that I mean the ever-recurring problems and tragedies of superpower imperialism.'⁹⁶

Koller approached the possibility of utopia 'from the point of view of the question mark'.⁹⁷ To ask the questions was, as Fulierová puts it, enough for him.⁹⁸ He did not pretend to have a solution: 'My activity rests on a recognition of the struggle of antithesis, on an admission of the world's unsolvability. Why should we receive an answer from nature, from God, from people? I don't mind the unknown.'⁹⁹ Koller's cultural operations were 'probes' that

pointed out the impossibility of definitively answering questions.¹⁰⁰ In 1980, he listed some of the questions that most interested him: '1. ART OR MYSTIFICATION? 2. CULTURE OR MANIPULATION? 3. IDEAS OR ARTEFACTS? 4. INFORMATION OR ADVERTISEMENT? 5. PARTICIPATION OR BOYCOTT?'¹⁰¹ Hanáková has argued that 'for artists... who scrupulously defended their moral integrity... Koller was "a different case", an alienator, a *virus*. ... Especially when we realize that for a certain fraction of the counter-culture, Art (with a capital A) was perhaps the only "preserve" of authentic value in the times of socialism.'¹⁰² He openly rejected art, and embraced chaos: 'I, myself, am a demonstration of today's chaos of the whole world. I am the international chaos, and such are also the objects (the so-called art of non-art), which I make. To me, objects are just a means of expressing my yearning for something unearthly, happy, and eternal.'¹⁰³ The photo-documents he produced, sticking series of photographs on to paper and giving them variations on the theme UFO for titles, express this yearning.

If many of Koller's undertakings during the normalization period mark a retreat from the public sphere into the private sphere of the apartment, his ongoing work with amateur painters offered a lifeline away from the isolation many experimental artists experienced in the years of cultural stagnation. Koller would continue this work until 1992. The workshops he ran enabled him to communicate directly with others in a period when collaborations among unofficial artists had become increasingly difficult, public exhibitions in Czechoslovakia were impossible, travel was outlawed and international contacts were hard to maintain. As he recalled: 'amateur art became in a sense our new partner – a partner in civil life, which offered us certain possibilities'.¹⁰⁴ He and his friends from the amateur painting group would go on regular hiking trips in the Tatra Mountains. Some of the photographs documenting these trips, taken by Fulierová, were then turned into new cultural situations upon Koller's return. *Universal Fictional Orientation (U.F.O.)* (1979) (fig. 2.21), for example, shows the forest landscape transformed by a plethora of white question marks, rendering the trip a philosophical exploration of the unknown, and showing the weary hikers lost in a sea of unanswerable questions.

Fulierová recalls that he was always doing three things at once when at home: listening to politics on the radio, watching sport on television and working.¹⁰⁵ In addition to experimenting on his personal photographs, Koller annotated thousands of newspapers and magazines, and collected



2.21 Július Koller, *Universal Fictional Orientation (U.F.O.)*, 1979. Courtesy of gb Agency.

books and found objects. He amassed so many newspapers, magazines and books that the small apartment was soon full. With no shelf space left, the piles on the floor grew and grew, even in the kitchen. To possess such a vast archive of alternative information was, as Aurel Hrabušický has argued, entirely 'contradictory to social organization, which was based on



2.22 Július Koller, *USSR – KREMLIN*, 1976. Courtesy of the Slovak National Gallery.

the limitation of information flow'.¹⁰⁶ Koller had transformed himself yet again, into what was undoubtedly the most risky of all his personas, one that would certainly have meant serious consequences had his apartment ever been searched. In 1977, the year Czechoslovak dissidents signed Charter '77, Koller called himself 'an archaeologist of politics' who, 'without political ambitions (career, power, leadership, and the like)', tried to 'observe the rotten old corpse of politics to unveil its essentials'.¹⁰⁷ His archives reveal extraordinary evidence of a sustained investigation into these 'essentials'. They contain all manner of subversive interventions into official propaganda, amounting to a violent form of counter-censorship – a revengeful,



2.23 Július Koller, *USSR On the Aerodrome*, 1978. Courtesy of the Slovak National Gallery.

deadpan defacement of official lies. One thing becomes its opposite. Party apparatchiks are turned into aliens; apples become UFOs; swine stand for the condition of the masses; photographs of Party cronies in Moscow are revealed to be images of a 'social-fascist state in a feudal atmosphere' (fig. 2.22) and everyone except Brezhnev is doctored out of an official newspaper photograph (fig. 2.23).

Mass Communication Cultural Situation (1987) (fig. 2.24) is perhaps the best illustration of why Koller preferred to administer his daily dose of politics via the radio and the printed media, and keep the television for sport. Sitting with his back to the television and the applauding Party dignitaries, with his hands covering his ears and a terrified expression on his face, after living for almost 40 years under Soviet-style Socialism, Koller performs his



2.24 Július Koller, *Mass Communication Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)*, 1987.
Courtesy of gb Agency.

psychological exhaustion with politics. He consistently refused to receive the messages issued from official sources in the way they were intended to be received. In Havel's terms, he refused to 'live the lie'. Instead, he found myriad ways to call into doubt what passed for truth in *Pravda*, while obsessively exploring as much unofficial information as he could. As such, his 'personal cultural situation' was like 'the "naturally mad" world of the dissident', as described by Havel.¹⁰⁸

3

Dissent

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was signalled in March by writers who called for an end to Stalinism and to cultural isolation from the West. A mass meeting of the students' 'Petöfi Circle' on 27 June became a nine-hour debate on the need for a free press.¹ Although the Circle was banned three days later, the Hungarian public already knew about the Poznań uprising against Poland's communist rule. A wave of workers' protests and sympathy strikes swept Hungary. Miners suggested that 'the Communists' game is now up'.² The crisis deepened on 6 October, when citizens watched the ceremonial reinterment of László Rajk and other victims of the Stalinist show trials,³ and the storm finally broke on 23 October, as a huge rally in central Budapest expressed approval of the 'Polish October' and 'full solidarity with the Polish independence movement'.⁴ Demonstrators demanded an immediate evacuation of Soviet troops and free elections, tearing down the bronze statue of Stalin and parading its remnants through the streets. A massive mobilization of Soviet forces overnight met strong opposition the next day, when at least 25 protesters were killed and over 200 wounded.⁵ On 29 October, the newly installed government of Imre Nagy called for the withdrawal of Soviet forces, and disbanded the internal security service (AVH). It announced that a multiparty system would be restored through free and secret elections. Meanwhile there would be a coalition government, including parties banned under Stalinism.

Though initially hesitant, the Soviet Presidium became persuaded of the need for further military intervention. One worry was spillover into

neighbouring countries. Slovakia had many ethnic Hungarians, as did Romania, which sealed off its border with Hungary. Czechoslovak students held pro-Hungarian demonstrations.⁶ A further concern was the Anglo-French Suez invasion, which Moscow wrongly assumed had US backing. As Khrushchev put it: 'If we depart from Hungary, it will give a great boost to the Americans, English and French – the imperialists. ... To Egypt they will then add Hungary.'⁷ In fact, the US government was deeply involved in a presidential election and had little concern for Soviet behaviour. The dispatch of half a million Soviet troops to Hungary on 4 November encountered strong local resistance. Extensive street fighting led to the death of some 2,700 people and subsequent reprisals to the imprisonment of at least 20,000 and the execution of hundreds more, including Prime Minister Nagy and several of his closest colleagues.⁸ The remaining victims were mostly young workers who had engaged in street fighting. Around 200,000 of Hungary's population of 10 million fled to the West, many of them young intellectuals. György Konrád recalls the brutality of the era:

The family men setting out for the factories had gone through a lot to join the ranks of street-fighters. It was a time when half-naked, brutally bruised or bulleted and spat-upon bodies were hanged from their feet in front of Party Headquarters. The victims of these lynchings came chiefly from the State Security Agency. Such was the price they paid for their terror.⁹

The intervention had shown that communism in East-Central Europe could not be overthrown by force. In the aftermath of the crushed revolution, intellectuals organized a six-month protest, and visual artists boycotted official exhibition spaces.

In late October 1956, János Kádár was installed as leader of the renamed Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (formerly the Hungarian Workers' Party). He had been condemned to life imprisonment under Mátyás Rákosi in 1951, but was released following Stalin's death. In exchange for continued loyalty to the USSR, Kádár secured increased economic freedom domestically and more leverage to determine cultural policy. Many began to nourish fresh hopes for 'a reconstruction similar to the political one on the fine arts scene'.¹⁰ Poland seemed like a shining example now that Gomułka was in power. But those who hoped that the thaw would follow the Polish model were to be disappointed – particularly in the cultural sphere. The pace of change was slow.

Pluralism in Hungarian cultural life had come to an end in 1949, as in the other Soviet satellites. Artists' groups were dismantled, and the Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists was formed to reorganize artistic life in accordance with Socialist Realist orthodoxy. Although Imre Nagy's government had allowed a partial rehabilitation of Post-Impressionism and other expressive figurative styles in 1953, abstraction remained out of the question. Nevertheless, a number of important artists continued to pursue Constructivist, Surrealist, Post-Impressionist and abstract tendencies in private. Modernism's survival was guaranteed by the commitment of figures such as Béla Czóbel and groups such as the European School and the Four Corners of the World.¹¹ Dezső Korniss, initially associated with the folk-art-infused Constructivist-Surrealist style of the Szentendre colony, also refused to toe the Socialist Realist line, and carried out innovative experiments in gestural and calligraphic abstraction in the second half of the 1950s, opening his studio to younger artists.¹² Aurél Bernáth, meanwhile, who taught at the Academy of Fine Arts, became instrumental in establishing Post-Impressionism as the new orthodoxy as the thaw slowly unfolded, and was ambivalently regarded by younger artists.

In 1957, it seemed that hopes for cultural thaw were beginning to have some basis in fact. 'While in everyday civil life, in literature and at the theatres, an age of forced silences, arrests and executions began, in our parts, in the fine arts, it was the beginning, at least partially, of a golden age', recalls János Frank, who was a functionary of the Budapest Műcsarnok (Kunsthalle) in this period. If this was a 'golden age', though, it was a very brief one, and was largely down to the efforts of one man: Agamemnon Makris, who became the official in charge of the fine arts in 1957. As Frank relates, through a combination of his 'masterful tactics and aggressive manner', Makris 'managed to "sell" to the highest circles of the Communist Party the idea that the proper art policy of socialism is modernity'. The key artistic event that year was the Spring Exhibition at the Műcsarnok. Although the exhibition remained overwhelmingly naturalistic and figurative, Frank recalls that at least there was 'not a single painting or sculpture of political propaganda (it would have caused an outrage six months after the revolution)', and a few abstract works were included.¹³

Hardliner György Aczél took control of cultural life in 1958, however, and saw to it that change remained sluggish. Aczél pursued a policy of exclusion, expelling artists from the state-funded Artists' Foundation, imposing fines, placing certain people under police surveillance, purging the

artistic associations and making minimum 50 per cent Party membership obligatory. A newly organized structure of institutes and offices was set up to control exhibition venues, the state's monopoly on purchasing works, and access to studios and stipends. Unlike in Poland and Czechoslovakia, those graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest had to join the Studio of Young Artists for a number of years, to prove their loyalty either as figurative painters or as realist sculptors, prior to being admitted to the Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists. Although some stylistic pluralism remained permissible, the late 1950s saw a fresh wave of Socialist Realist exhibitions.

The early 1960s, in turn, brought 'not the kingdom of soc-real, but the kingdom of boredom', as Frank recalls: "Careful progress" was begun, with particular care devoted to remaining a step behind at all times. The abstract remained forbidden.¹⁴ By 1963, the hard opposition had been largely wiped out and the Kádár regime could afford to make gestures signalling the relaxation of the regime. An amnesty for political prisoners was announced and censorship controls were loosened. Monitored condemnations of the atrocities of the 1950s began to appear. Kádár aimed for social compromise, trying to win over non-communists as of 1961 with the slogan 'he who is not against us is with us' – a spin on his predecessor Rákosi's maxim 'he who is not with us is against us'. Trade-union rights were recognized (though not the independent workers' councils formed in 1956) and Hungary saw a greater opening to the West, particularly for credit and technology. Kádár announced that the dictatorship of the proletariat was over, and sought to promote an image of Hungary as 'the happiest barracks in the [Soviet] camp'. The state's strategy for dealing with culture was now conducted according to a policy dividing art into three categories, 'supported', 'tolerated' and 'prohibited', known as the 'three T's', from the adjectives *támogatott*, *tűrt* and *tiltott*.¹⁵ Artists sought to take advantage of political shifts to test the new boundaries, while knowing that these categories left the authorities leeway to prohibit activities as they saw fit.¹⁶

New artistic tendencies gained ground as news of postwar international trends flowed into Hungary following the listing of restrictions on travel (for the loyal). The results were first displayed publicly on a large scale at the exhibition Studio '66, marking the tenth anniversary of the formation of the Studio of Young Artists.¹⁷ Péter Sinkovits has described the exhibition as a 'ceasefire' in the battle between the exponents of new tendencies and the authorities.¹⁸ Studio '66 made it clear that realism was now just one

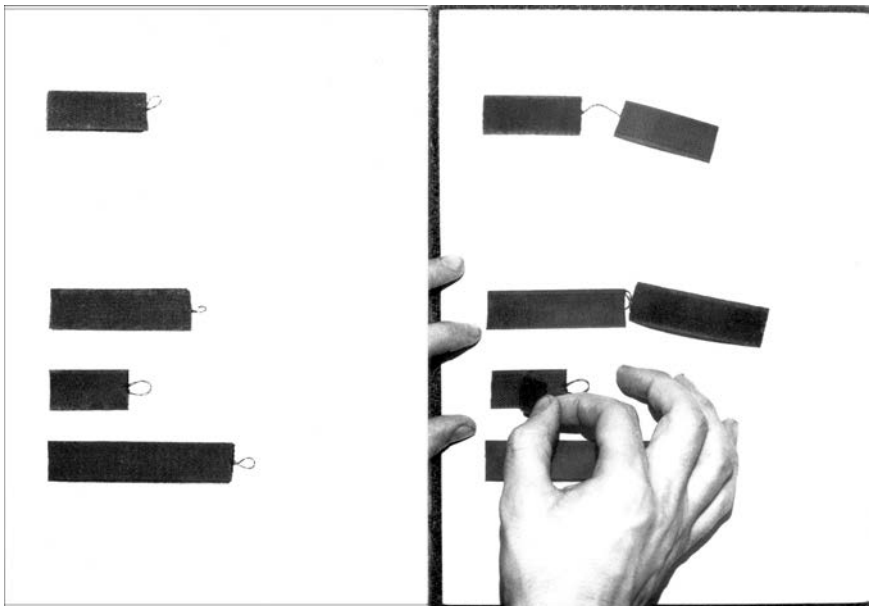
painterly trend among many – along with sur-naturalism, magical realism, Constructivism, geometric and lyrical abstraction, and variations on minimal and Pop Art. The exhibition catalogue audaciously explained that the exhibition was geared towards enthroning an ‘aesthetics of truth’.¹⁹ The Studio ’67 exhibition, at the Ernst Museum, though, was heavily censored.

The young poet Tamás Szentjóby, a member of the Dumb Poets’ Circle comprising Gábor Altorjay, András László and Zoltán Tárkányi, began to expand his repertoire of activities in the years 1965–67. An important figure in prompting this shift in his thinking had been the experimental musician László Végh, whom he had met in 1961: ‘He had an immediate, very significant impact on me and on my friends by his outlook, dress, style, behaviour, words, ideas, etc. He became the centre of the bunch by shouting about Stockhausen, Boulez, Kafka, Bécart, etc., whom we never heard about before.’ When Végh presented his concrete and electronic music to Szentjóby and his friends, in 1962, Szentjóby remembers that the ‘evening changed my and my friends’ life. I was derailed from adolescence to adulthood.’²⁰

As of 1961, the Hungarian authorities had allowed citizens permission to travel to Socialist countries, including Poland, which seemed like America from the Hungarian perspective. As Gábor Altorjay recalls: ‘with its liberal cultural policy, the country was our Mecca; we learned Polish, there was jazz, and Wajda, Cybulski, Polański, Penderecki, Lutosławski, Gombrowicz, Witkacy and Mrożek were shining examples. In 1965, we saw Fluxus (Cornelius Cardew) for the first time there at a night concert at the Warsaw Autumn, without knowing that it was Fluxus.’²¹ Altorjay and Szentjóby travelled to Poland regularly between 1963 and 1967, consulting books and magazines – among others, *Studio International* – in libraries. Despite the authorities’ ‘filtering’ of information, they sought to ‘build up a new way of thinking from these fragments’ and from their world. Szentjóby’s encounter with Anglo-American Pop Art also proved formative. He decided he could no longer continue with his traditional writing and embarked on fresh experiments: ‘I suddenly mixed two poems by Nietzsche and Böhme with scissors and dirty words... R. Hamilton and A. Warhol guffawed in my room.’²² He expanded into visual poetry, using transfer techniques and collage, working with unorthodox materials to produce visual poems such as *Velcro-Verse* (1967) (fig. 3.1). Szentjóby describes his efforts to produce pop poems as ‘an endurance test’ that surprised him and transported him from the world of metaphysical poetry ‘back to my old, sweet home, back to reality, not in metaphysics, but in the sub-real, in the pop underground’.²³ Altorjay and Szentjóby found ways to

transform their idea of poetry and overcome what they saw as the limitations of a genre traditionally 'limited by its own self-imposed isolation'. They sought a new 'territory for poetry', through a 'return to the physical'.²⁴ Pop Art and actionism also prompted a shift away from metaphysical contemplation to joyous destruction: 'we immediately started to tear up the material: down to its molecules, atoms'.²⁵ Szentjóby referred to these explorations of the 'material world' (which recalled in some respects Kantor's attempt to reconnect with 'poor reality') as the 'adventure of our disappointment with poetry'.²⁶

The pair planned to hold an apartment exhibition: 'to show a lot of pop, Dada objects, for example: bean-dish on a heater, a well-known policeman, the British ambassador, the new unit of measure, ourselves – reading in a deckchair, etc'.²⁷ Although the exhibition never took place, as they decided that 'neither the internal nor the external situation was ripe for it yet',²⁸ this 'escalation' of poetry gave rise to the first Hungarian Happening – an extraordinary event, particularly given the cautious nature of Hungary's 'thaw' and the uncertainty of the cultural climate. *The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan)* was held, with the co-operation of the erstwhile artistic guru Miklós Erdély, in István Szenes's wine cellar, on the afternoon of 25 June 1966. Its immediate trigger was reportedly a short text about Happenings that mentioned



3.1 Tamás Szentjóby, *Velcro Poem*, A4 paper, velcro, 1967. Photograph by Tamás St.Turba.
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Kaprow, Beuys and Salvador Dalí in the weekly *Film, Theatre, Music*.²⁹ *The Lunch* was underground in the most literal sense, lasted an hour and a half, and was attended by some 40 to 50 invited guests. On entering the garden, they passed a pram with two ‘tattered toy dolls, hugging each other’, and saw Szentjóby, buried up to his waist, typing on a typewriter tied to a live chicken in the garden next to the entrance to the cellar (fig. 3.2). ‘After a nerve-racking fifteen-or-so-minute wait in the darkness, Penderecki’s “Hiroshima” blasted out of the speakers with a contorted, chopped-up, frantic volume to the point of unrecognizability.’³⁰

Altorjay, Miklós Jankovics and Szentjóby, just visible in the darkness, were dressed in suits with green sunshades on their heads. Altorjay and Szentjóby were sitting on mouldy Secessionist chairs at a table, with Jankovics in the background, beside a fridge and a stopped clock. The room lit up when a vase of roses was set alight. The pair at the table began to eat paprika potatoes, periodically setting the clock ticking for a while, drank hot salted water out of a Thermos, and vomited into a plastic bag. Szentjóby tried to force-feed the chicken, before putting it into the plastic bag and depositing the whole thing on Altorjay’s head. Altorjay recalls that his main concern was staying alive and avoiding suffocation. Jankovics was smeared in toothpaste, dressed in white kid gloves, tied up and forced into a military helmet by the other two. Two white mice appeared out of a handbag, and a bicycle wheel was mounted on to a roller and then on to the table, to which the chicken was then added (fig. 3.3). A feather fight broke out between the performers and the participants, escalating when coloured plaster was added to the mix and hurled about the place. Taking matters into their own hands, several of the participants entered into the spirit of the event and set things on fire in the back row. Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* was played, and a contraceptive filled with pink plaster of Paris was suspended, along with a candle, from the ceiling (fig. 3.4). In the final moments, Altorjay and Szentjóby tried to tie everyone up in string, and smashed the light bulb, so that everything was plunged back into darkness. Participants trying to leave realized that they had been barricaded in, but succeeded in removing the pram and other objects from the doorway. Altorjay recalls that the three performers felt ‘like dazed, burnt-out soldiers coming back from the front’.³¹

Szentjóby remembers that ‘it was an eruption for us, it was a completely new world’.³² A few weeks later, he received a copy of Wolf Vostell and Jürgen Becker’s 1965 book *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme*.³³ He was thrilled to find confirmation that he and his companions were part





3.2, 3.3, 3.4 Gábor Altorjay/Tamás Szentjóby, *The Lunch (in Memoriam Batu Khan)*, Happening, Budapest, 1966. Photograph by Gyula Zaránd. © IPUTNPU-Archives

of a global *Zeitgeist*. Altorjay and Szentj6by began to write theoretical texts about the Happening as such. Szentj6by described it as a ‘parallel situation’ that aimed at both ‘the elimination of the status quo’ and the ‘initiation of a new history’ – a Happening ‘ecstasy’ beside which artistic convention paled into insignificance. He likened the new form of communication established by the Happening to telepathy – except that in this case the environment (the world) functioned as ‘the medium’ – producing a community in which the ‘participants and the performer (the transmitter and the receiver) are the same’.³⁴ The Happening radically reconfigured the relationship between artist and spectator. The experience was both exhilarating and threatening for all concerned. Aspects of *The Lunch* approached Viennese Actionism in their masochistic and sadomasochistic dimensions, albeit with considerably more humour. As Szentj6by wrote in 1968: ‘The Happening makes no accusations or self-accusations: it is a sadomasochistic tragico-*inter-media*. It is sadistic because it forces participation, and masochistic because it endures participation, tragic because, in breaking away from the *status quo* ... it is confronted with the sole task of existence.’³⁵ The Happening constructed new relationships, as though purging participants of everything that had gone before. Altorjay and Szentj6by tried to make the Happening as ‘down-to-earth’ as possible, smashing up man-made objects to reveal their basic elements. ‘It’s difficult to find something more basic, more down-to-earth and physical, than eating and expelling – so that’s what we did. It’s difficult to find something more obvious, more to the point and contemporary, than a cellar at the time of underground ideas and practices.’³⁶

Like Koller, who rejected the term ‘art’, Szentj6by was interested in what he called ‘a kind of parallel process’.³⁷ The Happening seemed to provide a zone of freedom, avoiding compromised official circuits and flying in the face of the rituals of official culture and the forms of artist/spectator relations they demanded. Szentj6by argued that ‘at the edge of convention, the individual recognizes his own position between the absurdity of the historical past and the possible happening-future. He recognizes, in other words, the autonomy of the individual. His will that he himself can determine: his own free Will.’³⁸ Crucially, the Happening did away with value judgements; all forms of participation were valid, and there could, by definition, be no such thing as ‘a bad Happening’. Szentj6by declared enthusiastically: ‘Solitary art appreciation is over! Isolation is over! Long live Hedonist History!’³⁹ These ideas resonated with Fluxus thinking. The artist remembers that when he and his friends first read about Fluxus: ‘George Brecht’s amusement amused us. His words

about the Fluxus art-amusement was the most important idea that I wanted to mix with the social/political meaning of the idea that “anything can be art and anyone can do it”.⁴⁰ Altorjay’s text ‘Life, Material, Happening’, an unfinished manifesto, highlighted the Happening’s contradictory nature – its ability to embrace and to transcend binary oppositions, through ‘the anarchy of pettiness’.⁴¹

The anarchic event did not go unnoticed by the authorities. A 1968 police file bearing Szentjóby’s code name ‘Schwitters’ contains a ‘summarizing report and action plan’ produced by the sub-department of the Ministry of the Interior charged with dealing with the interception of ‘anti-youth reactionary forces’.⁴² An informer’s report on the origins of the Happening phenomenon is included; it makes bizarre art-historical reading, explaining to the sub-department that ‘as regards its philosophical aspect’, the Happening ‘is a declaration of nihilism, darkness, irrationalism and the denial of healthy human activity. Its religion is aggression and hysteria. Its practical realization serves the purpose of scandalizing the public and asserting exaggerated decadence. Its US variant, in its final stage, led to a torrent of violence, mass drug abuse and open clashes with the police.’ The informant (codename: ‘Mészáros’) notes that

Of the Socialist countries, Happenings have become most widespread, and have received the most press coverage, in Poland. / Happenings in the West can be regarded as gestures for scandalizing the public and pastimes for killing boredom. In Hungary, they can be regarded as a turning away from active-constructive activity, and, thus, facilitating the politics of subversive decentralization.

A 660-word account of the 1966 Budapest Happening follows, concluding that ‘the audience generally expressed appreciation for what they had seen; they were afraid to object, lest they be regarded as conservative and opposed to novelty’, before going on to offer descriptions of four further Happenings.

The file included a series of recommendations for action: placing the organizers of all Happenings under surveillance, breaking up the organizers’ circles, and preventing further public appearances by the organizers. The plan lists dates for the implementation of the recommended measures – among others, instructing a whole series of officials and institutions to refuse any future requests to host Happenings: the Director of the University stage, the Communist Youth Association, the Party leadership of the Humanities Department of the Eötvös Lóránd University (ELTE), the Election

Committee of the Communist Youth Association at ELTE, the management of the Eötvös Club, the Ministry of Culture, the Culture Bureau at the Budapest City Council, and Chief Directorate II. The author of the report proposed to exploit ‘conceptual oppositions’ as regards Happenings within the groups of organizers to induce a fragmentation of the scene; suggested that the ‘known persons’ should be kept under surveillance by the Passport Bureau, under what was known as level ‘K’ monitoring; and advised that Szentjóby should ‘be told that if he does not refrain from organizing such events in the future, a recommendation will be made for his treatment in a mental institution’. He also stated that the ‘legal possibilities for referring Tamás Szentjóby to a mental institution must be explored. Under justified circumstances, appropriate measures are to be taken for his removal to this effect.’ Furthermore, the agent with the alias ‘László’ was to be instructed to travel to Czechoslovakia and Poland ‘to terminate the illegal channels related to Happenings’.

A list of agents who had provided information about Happenings was included: ‘Mészáros’, ‘László’, ‘Hajdu’, ‘Tibor Kurucz’, ‘György Fung’, ‘Bárány’, each claiming either a close ‘level of connection’ with a member of the group of young artists, or other means of obtaining information. The sheer number of informers regularly reporting from within the relatively tightknit unofficial scene gives a sense of the degree to which both cultural life and the social fabric itself had been undermined. Lists of participants in *The Lunch*, and the second happening, *Golden Sunday*, were filed, marked on the report as having been provided ‘According to the confessions of Gábor Altorjay’. That the list of names Altorjay provided was noted on the police file as having been ‘a confession’ implies that he was guilty of transgression. But Altorjay and Szentjóby, throughout their many interrogations, always insisted on the legality of their actions. As Altorjay recalls:

... we had done nothing forbidden, illegal or politically precarious – that was our understanding with Tamás (and our strategy to the police), so there was no conspiracy, but an artistic action to which we invited all important intellectuals in Budapest, including the press. (Even if the secret aim of Happenings was the ‘seizure of power’.) It was only the police that made our new art into a conspiracy. We had no reason to conceal who responded to our invitation... Then they had the conspiracy. Not only Happenings, but also participating in happenings is prohibited. ...⁴³

By the summer of 1967 the pair had had enough of harassment and sought to move to the West. Szentjóby had dual Hungarian/Swiss nationality, and the pair travelled by train to Poland. Once there, Altorjay spent the summer working as a guide, as he had done in previous years.⁴⁴ After failed attempts to negotiate his passage to Switzerland at the Swiss Embassy, Szentjóby travelled to Osieki, where the summer workshops were in full swing, and attended Kantor's *Panoramic Sea Happening* (fig. 3.5). Kantor reportedly told the young man not to tell people at the Happening that he was planning to try to leave Poland, as he was concerned about informers.⁴⁵ He was proved right. In addition to Polish informers, Altorjay and Szentjóby had been followed on the train by the Hungarian informer 'László'. Szentjóby travelled to Świnoujście, whence ferries departed for Sweden, but was arrested, interrogated, and put on a flight back to Budapest, where he was investigated by the military psychology unit, but released after a few days. Altorjay, for his part,



3.5 Tamás Szentjóby (fourth from left) in Osieki, 1967. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszowska.



3.6 Tamás Sztjóby, *UFO (Tryst)* – simultaneous action by Miklós Erdély. Happening (without public). Actionists: Katalin Ladik, György Szalay, István Dárday, Antal Dúl, Miklós Urbán, Roger Benichou. Szentendre, 1 May 1968. Photograph by Antal Dúl. © IPUTNPU-Archives

was sent back to Budapest from the Yugoslav border ten days later having had his passport confiscated.⁴⁶ He left Hungary illegally later that year, crossing eight borders on a false passport to West Germany – initially to Stuttgart, and then to Cologne. Szentjóby remained, for the time being, despite being bugged and consistently followed. He continued what he called his ‘parallel course’, organizing actions, although for the most part now avoiding the sensitive term ‘Happening’.

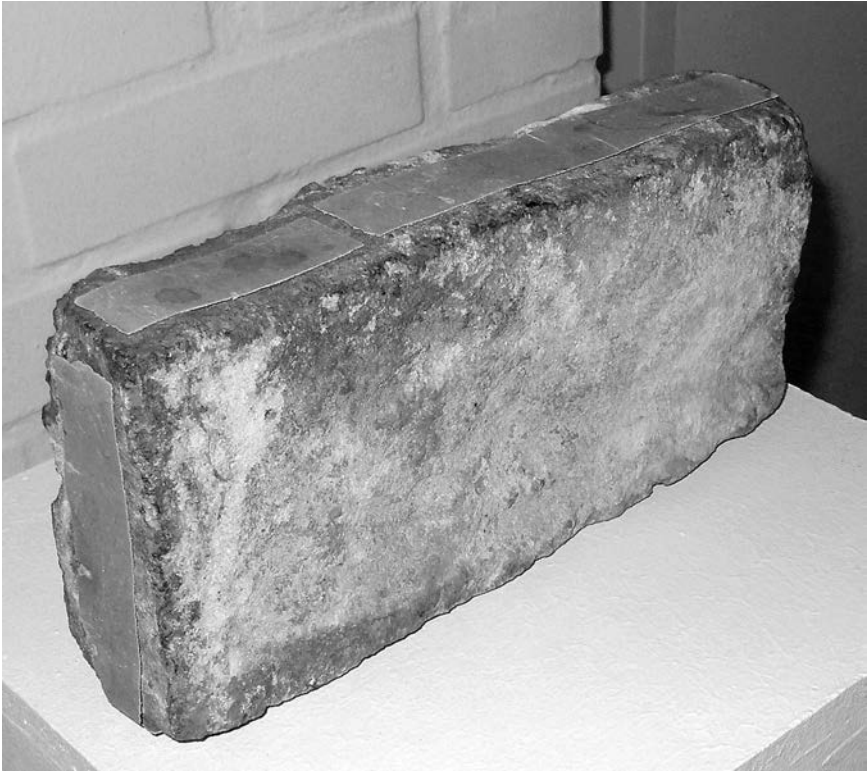
After discovering the extraordinary work of Novi Sad experimental poet Katalin Ladik through the Yugoslav Hungarian-language journal, *Új Symposion*, Szentjóby began to write to her, producing, as he recalls, around 25 kilograms of mail art. The poet responded positively and they agreed that they would meet at a Happening. Szentjóby informed Miklós Erdély about his plan, and invited him to participate. On her arrival in Budapest on the evening of 30 April 1968, Ladik was given a letter from Szentjóby by the hotel receptionist. It informed her that when she left the hotel the next morning she should follow a man waiting there with a dog and, without speaking, get into his car. This she did, and the man drove her through the town to the banks of the Danube in Szentendre. On leaving the car, Ladik saw some men taking photos of her. She followed the dog and found a human-shaped form wrapped

in aluminium foil lying on the grass in the sunshine. She also saw a man – Erdély – sitting on a stool a few metres away, flagellating his naked torso with one arm and having the nails of his other hand trimmed by a woman over a basin of water with some goldfish in it (fig. 3.6). Without any instructions, Ladik did what she supposed to do: she slowly unwrapped the foil. Szentjóby sat up, opened an aluminium sardine tin, and put some fish on two slices of bread. They ate, then Szentjóby opened an aluminium-foil packet of chewing gum and shared the gum with Ladik – still without uttering a word. He then stood up, and they started to walk slowly away from the river. The event was called the *UFO (Tryst)*.

January 1968 had seen the introduction of Kádár's New Economic Mechanism, a set of reforms implementing a shift away from central planning to market forces, changing priorities from heavy industry to consumer development. More autonomy was granted to enterprises in an effort to make them more internationally competitive, and Hungary was opened to extended Western credit and technology, giving rise to what became known as 'goulash communism'. As news of the Prague Spring filtered through, some Hungarians had hopes that the New Economic Mechanism might produce a cultural thaw. Information was deliberately leaked to the public that Party



3.7 Tamás Stjauby, *Para-Emblem*. Wooden box, carpenter tool, sulphur, letraset text (readymades), 1968. Photograph by Tamás St.Turba. © IPUTNPU-Archives



3.8 Tamás StJauby, *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* (1969). Brick, sulphur plate (readymades). Photograph by Tamás St. Auby. © IPUTNPU-Archives

Committee Secretary Rezső Nyers was reported to have said: ‘there cannot be a liberal economy without liberalism in culture’.⁴⁷ Szentjóby recalls that he, too, believed that Socialism with a human face might arrive in Hungary, albeit briefly.

Szentjóby gave his activities the undercover name Parallel Course/ Study Track. He produced an *Emblem* for his programme – a small wooden box filled with sulphur powder, containing a carpenter’s tool (fig. 3.7). This simple portable object resembled a pacifist’s tool kit. In this respect, it is related to an important work from the following year: *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* (1969) (fig. 3.8). Szentjóby had heard news of the invasion of Czechoslovakia on a portable radio, in Balatonboglár: ‘We jumped up and hitchhiked back to Budapest, ran to the Café Hungaria to meet my friends, and saw some old, renegade communists weeping at their little marble tables there.’⁴⁸ He found out that when listening to the radio was forbidden in Czechoslovakia, citizens had conspired to waste the military’s time by carrying

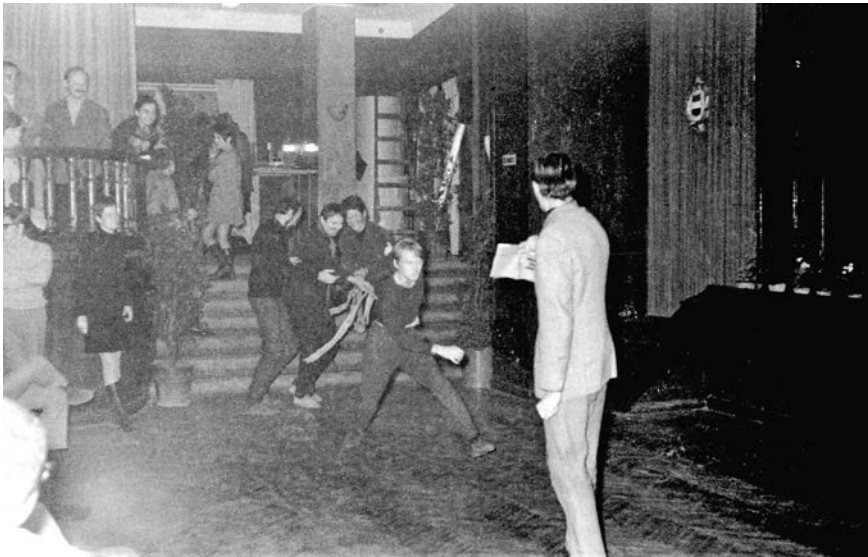
bricks wrapped in newspaper around the streets on their shoulders. These the soldiers duly confiscated, thinking they were radios. The natural resourcefulness demonstrated by the story appealed to Szentjóby's sense of improvisation – and his Fluxus-related commitment to the idea that anyone can be an artist. *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* was also a multiple, to be reproduced by anyone. The various versions of the piece he made himself consist of bricks bearing the features of a radio made out of strips of sulphur.

Like Koller's rejection of oil paint in favour of latex – as a shift away from traditional art into non-art – Szentjóby's interest in basic chemical elements, can be seen in relation to the desire to abandon traditional materials. He was especially attracted to sulphur because of its strong smell. As he explained, 'one cannot ignore it, as one cannot ignore the light or the darkness'.⁴⁹ His sulphur pieces of the late 1960s and early 1970s include a miniature *Sulphur Barricade* constructed from a plate of sulphur; *Connection*, a wooden box filled with sulphur powder and a dozen or so medical clips, used in emergencies to clip a wound until it heals in situations where stitching is impossible; and *Prima Materia*, a test tube containing heated sulphur, salt and mercury, presenting spectators with the charred remnants of what looks like an amateur chemistry experiment.⁵⁰ When an opportunity arose for a solo show at the club of the Central Research Institute for Physics (KFKI) as part of a series of exhibitions by artists associated with IPARTERV (the Institute of Industrial Planning) held every two weeks in May and June of 1969, Szentjóby constructed an environment called *Trap (hommage à Prague)* under the name Tamás Mentjóby, including a selection of works in sulphur. Although he wanted to complete the environment by carrying out an action in the space, the director wanted to close the exhibition before he had even begun. The public had already gathered, though, and he negotiated a compromise, proceeding to slash a sack of sulphur with a sword and scatter the powder on the floor. He recalls:

At the end of the action I distributed sulphur plates to the public – without my telling them, they understood what to do: they ignited them. Burning sulphur has a terrible smell, so we were all running out from the environment coughing and laughing for a long time on the street...I had to dismantle the environment immediately, the young communist director closed the club, I went to a pub with my friends stinking of sulphur.⁵¹

The choice of readymade elements and actions relied on their simplicity and direct appeal, deliberately problematizing the possibility of importing external meanings. Szentjóby continued to insist that his actions and objects contained no ‘artistic, cultural, political [or] social references’.⁵² If there is really ‘nothing to decipher’ in such objects, we must conclude that some of them were simply made, quite literally, to produce a stink. By seeking to imbue such propositions with concrete allusions, constructing spurious meanings in order to ban them, the authorities found themselves in a ‘catch-22’; Szentjóby’s emptying out of metaphorical meaning was an attack on this same drive to interpret.⁵³ On the one hand, the censors’ interpretations were idiotically specific; on the other hand, they rightly sensed the oppositional drift of such non-art-art. Ultimately, it was politicized by default, by those who suspected a political subtext.

In late 1968, the art historian Péter Sinkovits co-ordinated a major exhibition at the IPARTERV offices in central Budapest. The exhibition, which took its name from the space, opened for two weeks on 12 December 1968, presenting work by 11 artists. Sinkovits’ essay in the leaflet produced to accompany the exhibition explained that the show gathered together work which built on the accomplishments of the Hungarian avant-garde while simultaneously seeking to ‘link up with up-to-date trends in the art of the World... under such conditions, where telling the New was always accepted

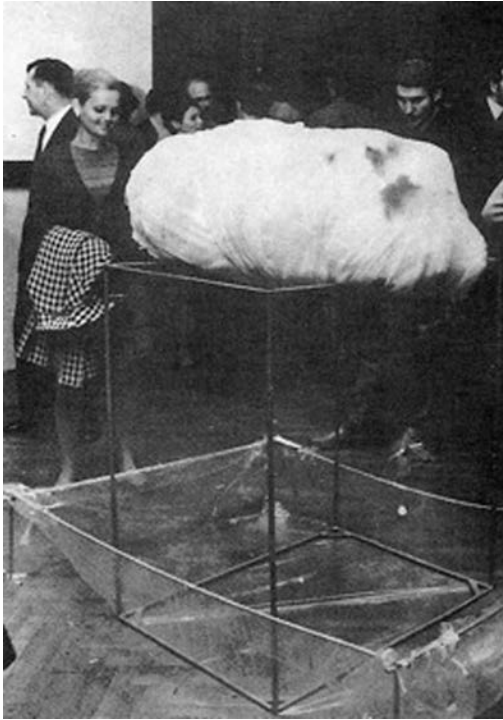


3.9 Tamás Szentjóby, *To Read. Action-Reading* (action), 1968. Photographer unknown.
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with mistrust'.⁵⁴ The leading critic Lajos Németh noted in his review that the exhibition, which included 'Op art, informel, neo-abstract[ion] and abstract expressionism', was remarkable, above all for the 'passionate stance' it took in relation to what he referred to as 'the ruling direction existing in present-day Hungarian art'.⁵⁵ It was certainly groundbreaking.

Szentjóby did not participate in the exhibition itself, but developed a series of actions under the heading 'Do You See What I See?', along with László Méhes and Miklós Erdély, in the weeks preceding the opening. He contributed two actions. *Action with Tape-Recorder* involving pacing the room reciting lines from Verdi's *Aida*, exploring the relationship between language, time and movement. After reading a line he would stop, mark the spot on the floor with chalk and say it again into a tape recorder. He would then take off in another direction, stop, mark the spot, connect the two spots with a chalk line and recite another line. The final line – 'SO BE CAREFUL!' – was delivered in a 'fast, resolute and frightening' way.⁵⁶ The lines were played back from the tape recorder as he retraced his steps, and finally erased. His second action, *Action-Reading*, involved the audience (fig. 3.9). Szentjóby was tied to a rope, whose end was controlled by members of the audience. The poet and writer Nicolaus Urban held a book (in this case the German physicist Werner Heisenberg's *Selected Writings*) at a certain distance, making it possible or impossible for Szentjóby to read from the pages, depending on how much rope the audience released. His access to the book was thus contingent on multiple external agents, and the chosen participants became co-responsible for his restricted actions. Once again, there would, on the surface of things, appear to be 'nothing to decipher' in such actions – but this was precisely the point.

The second IPARTERV exhibition, which opened on 24 October 1969, became the more important one, historically, and contained a number of highly ambivalent objects. At the opening, Gyula Konkoly installed a *Monument* on a plinth – a large block of ice wrapped in cotton wool and gauze, with approximately the dimensions of a human body on a stretcher (fig. 3.10). As the monument melted, a chemical reaction with potassium permanganate took place, causing deep red stains to appear on the wrapped form and a pool of red liquid to collect beneath, as though the ice were a bleeding body. Szentjóby showed three pieces: *Portable Trench for Three Persons*, *New Unit of Measurement* and *Water Cooling Down*. *Portable Trench for Three Persons* was a hybrid between a trench and a stretcher, made of wood, gauze, sulphur, glue



3.10 Gyula Konkoly, *Monument*, 1969. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the artist.



3.11 Tamás Stjauby, *Portable Trench for Three Persons*, 1969. Photograph by Tamás St. Auby. © IPUTNPU-Archives



3.12 Tamás StJauby, *New Unit of Measurement* (1965). Lead tube (ready made, unlimited multiple). Photograph by Stephan Baumann. © IPUTNPU-Archives

3.13 Tamás StJauby, *Water Cooling Down* (1965). Glass vessel, warm water (unlimited multiple). Photograph by Tamás St.Auby. © IPUTNPU-Archives



and reed (fig. 3.11), a matter of fact structure suggesting that one had always to be prepared for battle. *New Unit of Measurement*, a hollow length of lead, despite Szentjóby's protests to the contrary, was lent a political interpretation by many spectators (fig. 3.12). If Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14, three diminished lengths produced by dropping metre-lengths of thread from a height of one metre to achieve units of measurement determined not by convention but by a tongue-in-cheek 'experiment') had called into question the abstract nature of scientific rationality, then Szentjóby's single lead unit, in the post-1968 context, called to mind a police baton. He maintained, though, that he was merely interested in 'changing the one-metre platinum/iridium unit to an approximately 60 centimetres-long lead unit'.⁵⁷ If the simple length of lead attracted political interpretations, denied by the artist, *Water Cooling Down* was another case in point (fig. 3.13). The piece consisted of water in a chemical flask, reheated every 20 minutes or so then left to cool, evaporating further at each step. The artist, however, claimed that all that mattered to him about the piece was 'the wonderful, miraculous, invisible, gentle process of the cooling towards entropy'.⁵⁸

Despite confrontations with the cultural authorities, Konrád describes how 'the good life went on in our group of post-leftists, post-hippies, neo-avant-garde conceptual artists, body artists, sociologists, pre-postmodern film-makers, semioticians, youth experimenting with every fashionable and dangerous trend and field – a beehive of marvellous, fascinating people'.⁵⁹ Artist György Galántai recalls that the authorities' open hostility to what he refers to as artists' 'passive resistance to the aesthetic demands of "Socialist Realism" ... treated as political resistance by the regime' resulted in 'initially apolitical artists grouping together, and step by step becoming more politicized'.⁶⁰ Hungarian experimental artists were more directly connected to dissident intellectuals than their Polish counterparts – in inverse proportion to the level of state intervention to which they were subjected, illustrating the degree to which the relatively lax attitude towards censorship in the visual arts in Poland was an effective strategy for combating dissidence, while the persecution of artists in Hungary (as in Czechoslovakia) proved counterproductive, stimulating dissent. Many poets, writers, film-makers and artists were close, socialized with one another, and followed one another's activities, finding spaces where they could organize joint events.

As of 1970, diverse strands of the unofficial art scene increasingly came together. The 'IPARTERV artists', as they came to be known after 1969, and the Szüenon, a loose grouping of Surrealist and non-figurative painters in the



3.14 The Balatonboglár Chapel in 1970. Photograph by György Galántai. Courtesy of Artpool Art Research Center.

circle of Attila Csáj, joined forces in December 1970 to hold an exhibition in the R-building club of Budapest Polytechnic.⁶¹ Chief Party ideologue Aczél, still in power, visited the so-called R-exhibition himself, and ordered its closure. Galántai recalls that the event marked a turning point in terms of artists' self-organization: they began to operate 'as a culture or a movement-type network'.⁶² Galántai became a central node in this network early on, when he initiated the so-called Chapel Studio in 1970. He had come across a derelict Roman Catholic chapel in the village of Balatonboglár, at Lake Balaton, in 1966, and succeeded, with the help of a local pastor, in leasing it in 1968 (fig. 3.14). The local council were initially supportive of the project, as control of culture was at that stage less severe outside Budapest. After extensive renovations, carried out with other artists, the Chapel Studio opened in the summer of 1970 with a series of exhibitions, performances, concerts and lectures.⁶³ Galántai's description of encountering the place for the first time captures its atmosphere:

Breaking through the bushes after reaching the hill, I spotted the building with its entrance facing Lake Balaton and I immediately recognized the setting for my 'dream'. Set above the sea of water – in the middle of the village yet out of the way – the weather-beaten, ancient building with white walls, a tower and a cross, wrapped in silence and serenity, represented honour – or at least something honourable to me. I thought it was a magical place, a wonder in itself, a site where presumably miracles could take place. A 'superfluous place': a place for culture and art, for ways of behaving and communication, for competence and freedom.⁶⁴

Galántai's Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár hosted between eight and 12 exhibitions a year. Their organization was delegated to artists grouped according to their interests. A sign visible from the village appeared on the chapel in 1971, and stencilled T-shirts were even sold to advertise the venue. Galántai recalls that conceptualist Gyula Pauer provided guided tours of the exhibitions, and explained to locals that the most important factors were the 'attitude, intellectual disposition and behaviour, which characterize our community and hold us together'. Galántai's major triumph of this period was to have fostered a sense of solidarity among disparate groups of artists and different tendencies. This was particularly important in a climate where 'The State Party made sure it turned artists against each other for the most varied of reasons in order to put a stop to and eradicate every self-organizing cultural

formation'.⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, the Chapel Studio group were soon in conflict with the Boglár council, but they were determined to continue their activities.

In the first week of July 1972, a few months after the banning of an avant-garde festival planned by Szentjóby to be held in a Budapest club, Gyula Pauer and Szentjóby organized a Direct Week at the Chapel Studio at Balatonboglár. Galántai recalls that the police organized a large-scale action at night, checking participants' identity papers. He soon realized that the character of the space, conceived of as an 'island of freedom', was radically changing.⁶⁶ Direct Week was not conceived of as an exhibition, as the call for the event announced; its programme would 'make use of means through which we can obtain direct feedback. In other words the audience comes into contact with us not through contemplation but through activity.' People were invited to contribute in one of two ways: 'a) personally – presentations, concepts evolved on site, Happenings, events, body [art], agitation, other actions; b) through various media – film, slide, tape recorder, projects, concept-sheets, messages, correspondence, environments, etc.'⁶⁷

Szentjóby performed *Expulsion Exercise – Punishment-Preventative Autotherapy* (fig. 3.15). He sat, eight hours a day, for the duration of the week,



3.15 Tamás Szentjóby, *Expulsion Exercise – Punishment-Preventative Autotherapy* – (action), 1972. Photograph by László Benke. © IPUTNPU-Archives



3.16 Tamás StJauby, *Sit Out – Be Forbidden!* – (action/demonstration), 1972. Photograph by György Czele. © IPUTNPU-Archives

with a bucket on his head, beside a sign inviting viewers to ask him questions: ‘You can ask the self-sentenced anything’, and ‘You can ask the following’, among others: ‘Can one form a community with another person without being free oneself?’, ‘Can the blockade of the present be broken only by a new attitude?’, ‘Is the realization of the future in the present an acceleration of our

lives?'; 'Does your action include the punishment?'; 'Does your punishment include the action?'; 'Is action a sin? Is punishment a sin?'; 'Is sin action?'; 'Is action punishment?'; 'Is that action the sin that causes suffering?'; 'Is that action the sin that causes no change?'; 'Do you feel particularly exposed because you cannot see who you are talking to?' The questions were designed to be answerable by a simple 'yes' or 'no'. That the piece was classed as a form of 'autotherapy' suggests a talking cure or a confessional. But the repetitive formulas deployed in interrogations also spring to mind, as the list of proposed questions spirals into a series of quick-fire statements, designed to confuse the respondent. The invitation to consider these moral and ethical questions in the context of the re-purposed chapel, as Galántai notes, turned Szentjóby's role into that of priest and confessant together.⁶⁸ In addition to engaging with the sacred, he argues, Szentjóby's action made 'a mockery of the ruling organization by excluding it from the deliberation process'.⁶⁹ Crucially, the action was a parallel form of activity, inviting participants either to invent their own questions or to follow the course proposed by the artist.

The piece related in some respects to Szentjóby's earlier action *Sit Out – Be Forbidden!*, also of 1972, in which he re-enacted Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale's binding and gagging at his trial in Chicago in 1968, transposing it into a Hungarian context (fig. 3.16).⁷⁰ The Western activist's unfair trial had resulted in a four-year prison sentence for contempt of court, despite the absence of any evidence against him in the original case of conspiracy. Szentjóby's homage to Bobby Seale involved sitting for 20 minutes with his mouth strapped shut by a leather belt on the pavement outside the Hotel Intercontinental in central Budapest. The police arrived at the scene shortly after Szentjóby had concluded his action. In *Expulsion Exercise – Punishment-Preventative Autotherapy* Szentjóby had orchestrated a situation where he could reply only yes or no. In *Sit Out – Be Forbidden!* he perfected the art of self-censorship. But by doing so in the public space, he trespassed onto the territory of the forbidden. Szentjóby's motto became 'Be Forbidden!' – not merely referring to the state's policy of 'the three T's' and his own refusal to act in ways that might be accommodated within the 'tolerated' category, but summarizing his wider attitude to life, and to authority in general. As he later said: 'Autocensorship = compromise = precious little'.⁷¹

Béla Hap's 'Soft-spoken Hungarian Underground Manifesto', published in *Expresszió*, the samizdat magazine he produced together with Árpád Ajtony, explains how maintaining a certain distance from delivering criticism overtly had become an important moral standpoint at the time:

WHAT IS THE UNDERGROUND? Unofficial art. A cultural 'movement' which neither supports nor attacks the establishment but is, rather, outside of it. If it attacked the establishment, it would be acknowledging its existence. If it were a true organized movement, it would be playing the games of the superficial world. It does not ban its followers from addressing political themes, since, as a general rule, it neither forbids nor commands, and the emergence of such themes is always the private affair of the respective artist. The co-ordinates of the underground are free-moving co-ordinates... What does the Hungarian underground want? It wishes to be art that is unidentifiable, defies analysis, remains an outsider, and cannot be appraised and corrupted. A PRIVATE ART. Whom does it address? Itself. One artist to another. Everyone who has a positive interest in it. ... What are the relationships like between those in the underground? – Those of friendship.⁷²

The Chapel Studio elevated friendship to the level of the sacred. Everything that took place there acquired new meaning as a result of its relationship to the site itself.

Later in the summer of 1972, at the instigation of the artist and art historian László Beke, Balatonboglár became the site of a legendary meeting between Hungarian and Czechoslovak artists. Although it lasted just two days, this was a highly significant event, on a scale unparalleled in Central Europe in this period. Beke, who had begun to learn Slovak, recalls: 'I had always been irritated by the fact that Slovaks and Hungarians have seemed to hate one another for 150 years', as 'whenever we take a closer look at things, we can co-operate in really productive ways'.⁷³ Having come across a photograph of Warsaw Pact troops playing tug-of-war in a special issue of the English-language art periodical *Pages on Czechoslovakia*, he decided to turn the event into a *tableau vivant* (figs 3.17, 3.18). He succeeded in inviting an extraordinary number of key experimental artists from Czechoslovakia (11 in total, including Bartoš, Filko, and Sikora – introduced in Chapter Two – the concrete poets Jiří Valoch and Jiří Kocman, and the body artist Petr Štembera) to meet their Hungarian counterparts (among others Erdély, Galántai, Pauer, Szentjóby and Tót). The meeting took place on 26 August 1972, almost exactly four years after the invasion. The tug-of-war centred on everyone lining up to grab the magazine with the original image, and although Beke describes it as a naive event it yielded extraordinary historical photographs, and a unique 'action board' documenting a series of handshakes



3.17 Meeting of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian artists, organized by László Beke. Chapel Studio of György Galántai, Balatonboglár, 26–27 August 1972. Photograph by György Galántai. Courtesy of Artpool Art Research Center.



3.18 Photo of Hungarian troops exercising before the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 from *Pages (International Magazine of the Arts)* No. 2. (Winter 1970, p. 39). Courtesy of Artpool Art Research Center.

of solidarity and forgiveness between the Czechoslovak and Hungarian participants. Pauer later recalled: ‘we symbolically made peace with each other, at a time when our political system was still in conflict with Czechoslovakia. We made peace, and that’s what was important.’⁷⁴ Further actions were held in the chapel the following day. Those assembled produced a list of a hundred words that sounded similar in Czech, Slovak and Hungarian. Although it was just one of many important events at Balatonboglár over the course of its three-year programme, the meeting of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian artists was a remarkable testimony to the international significance of the Chapel Studio (as it was known in 1972 and 1973, in distinction to the period of state exhibitions organized at the site under the name Chapel Exhibition [*Kápolnatárlat*] after 1974). That the chapel remained open for as long as it did was due to Galántai’s sustained efforts to negotiate a minimum of autonomy from representatives of the cultural administration.

In the summer of 1973, Szentjóby installed the construction *Be Forbidden!* at the Chapel Studio (fig. 3.19). He cordoned off a section of the chapel space and mounted a sheet of A4 at the former site of the chapel’s altar with the exhortation ‘Be Forbidden!’ written on it in letters so small that they could be read only if one crossed the cordon. Although the piece resonated with the policy of the ‘three T’s’, Szentjóby explains that

the basic concept is embedded in an aesthetic system – it refers to what is determined as forbidden by the state and the church. Not in the order of socialist or state socialism and its church, actually, but worldwide. What was important for me was to name this territory, the territory of what is forbidden, and to suggest that this should be forbidden, as art has always been expressly such for us.⁷⁵

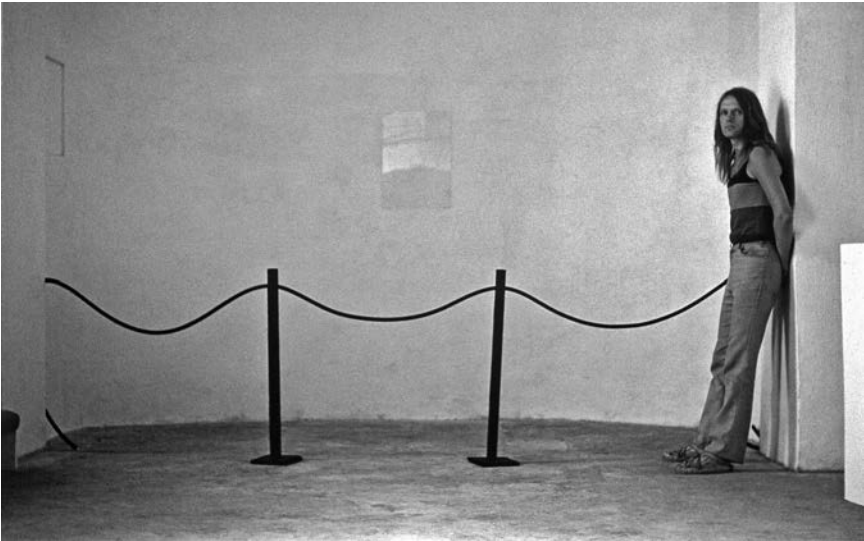
Galántai notes that while ‘the cultural administration continued their creative search aimed at finding overt political content in the artworks... since they understood nothing of the exhibits, they had to leave empty-handed. They did not take immediate action in connection with Szentjóby’s inscription: ‘ART IS EVERYTHING THAT IS FORBIDDEN. BE FORBIDDEN!’ In August 1973, however, the Chapel Studio was closed – on the pretext of a breach in construction law – and boarded up by a team of 40 military policemen. Galántai referred to the forced eviction as

the last and largest-scale happening at Boglár... a real staged/concept event. It mostly resembled a film shoot without cameras. The “actors” – policemen, soldiers, investigators, high-ranking officials, subordinates,

blue-collar workers, a radio reporter, a few friends and tourists who happened to be there – played their roles according to the “script”.⁷⁶

The eviction reflected the renewed crackdown on Hungarian cultural life.

The writer Miklós Haraszti had been arrested in May 1973 for circulating to friends and acquaintances the manuscript *Darabbér* (Piece-Rates), dedicated to Szentjány. The publishing house which had commissioned him to write about workers’ conditions refused to publish it, maintaining that it was ‘hostile’. The manuscript related the author’s experience of working conditions at the Red Star Tractor Factory, describing in detail how the piece-rate system of ‘payment by results’ locked workers into a permanent struggle to exceed impossibly rigged norms – fixed to be attainable only by those who set out to cheat them.⁷⁷ Recounting his arduous attempt to master the art of operating two heavy-duty metal milling machines simultaneously, and to ignore safety regulations in order to try to make a living wage, Haraszti painted a picture of a cynical industrial workforce, deliberately setting their machines at unsafe speeds to ‘cheat the norm’ in the hope of gaining ‘something extra’. Haraszti explained that the piece-rate system set in train a particular psychological mechanism which constantly tempted the worker to believe that if only he exceeded the norm, he could ‘take home money by the sackful’, while making this structurally impossible. Unlike the worker paid an hourly rate, the piece-rate worker would never be dissatisfied with his working conditions,



3.19 Tamás StJauby, *Be Forbidden!* (action-object) 1973. Rope, text, glass. Photograph by György Galántai. Courtesy Artpool Art Research Center.

but would always blame himself for his low income – thinking he could not work fast enough: ‘of course, he knows perfectly well that he is being cheated. But his active participation in this trick against himself makes it impossible for him to see the deception; or to identify it with his conditions in life, as can the worker on hourly wages.’ The same system of pay did not, of course, affect the factory bosses and skilled labourers: ‘this chemically pure form of socialist wage-labour was the privilege of [industrial] workers alone: their bosses had to get by on much more antiquated forms of pay’ – that is to say, regular salaries. In addition to the psychological damage to workers, the system, Haraszti argued, led to the production of shoddy goods: ‘My workmates have long since given up the idea of their labour producing useful goods of high quality. ... It is no longer a question of producing a good job of work, but rather the reverse. To discover every chance for looting.’⁷⁸ Following his arrest, Haraszti immediately began a hunger strike, and was conditionally released in June 1973 to await trial. This trial, in January 1974, saw many dissident intellectuals testify in his defence, among them the sociologist Iván Szelényi, who had offered to publish sections of the manuscript in the journal *Szociológia*, and lost his position as editor after serving as Haraszti’s witness. Szentjóby was also called to testify. Intellectuals’ praise for the book, ‘not made lightly before such a tribunal, was a warning to the Hungarian authorities’ and resulted in what the English translator of the volume calls an ‘uneasy stalemate’.⁷⁹ Haraszti was sentenced to eight months in prison, suspended for three years.

Szentjóby was also exploring the theme of labour in this period, writing and producing the 39-minute film *Centaur* (1973–5) for the Béla Balázs Studio, in an effort, he said, to prove that it was possible to make a good film on a low budget.⁸⁰ He and the cinematographer János Gulyás filmed footage in workplaces and public spaces in Budapest, and their friends read aloud pre-scripted dialogues, which were then combined with sound recorded on location. The film opens with two long still shots – the first of a desolate empty field, expanding to a grey horizon; the second of two closed factory gates – accompanied by the relentless sound of the generator behind them. There follow 12 scenes in different settings: a textiles workshop; a crowded bus; a design office; a busy café; a field; a canteen; a metalwork factory; a lottery-ticket sorting room; a waiting room; a box factory; a workers’ hostel; and a brush factory, staffed by blind workers. Amidst the environmental noise, we hear dialogue painting a nuanced picture of the emotional and political concerns of the anonymous citizens, opening an infinite horizon of

existential possibilities and suggesting that they are perfectly aware of the compromised situation in which they find themselves. The dulling effects of repetitive labour, it seems, have not blunted their capacity to call their day-to-day lives and the structures that govern them into question. While their bodies conform to the rhythm of labour, their minds are elsewhere. Most importantly, they share this alternative space with one another through conversation, both while working and in breaks between shifts. Szentjóby describes how, in *Centaur*, 'there is a visible – understood in the filmic sense – animal part; and an invisible, audible part, which is the Centaur's human side'.⁸¹ The disjunction between people's identity as workers and as thinking beings is signalled by the film's title: they may be slaves of labour – with the bodies of horses – but they have human heads, like the centaur, and thus they retain their capacity to rise above the situation intellectually – by thinking critically, joking together and exercising their imagination.

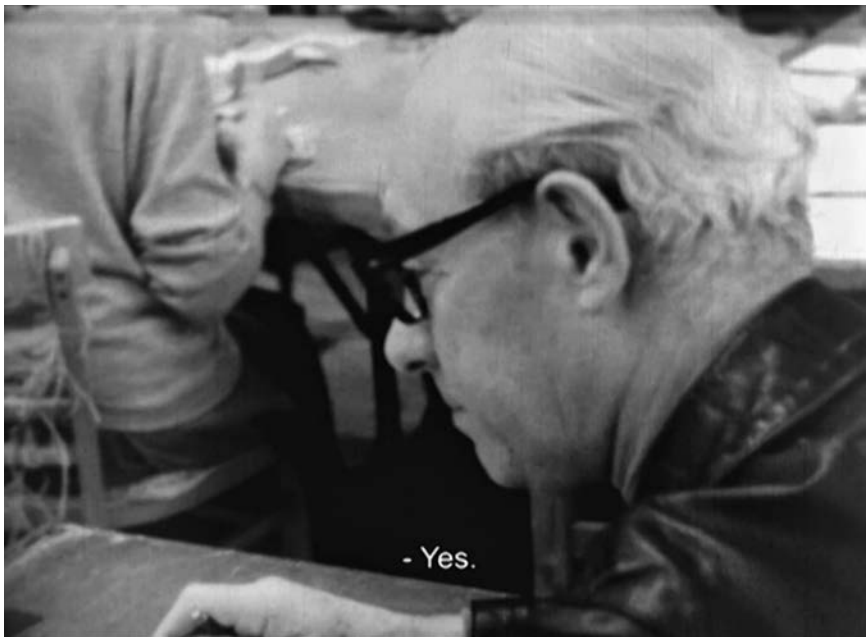
Two women in a textile factory begin a conversation about how 'everything that exists is made up of totally different elements', and list the elements that come together in a movie theatre, such as light, shadow, sound, speakers – making *Centaur* a self-reflexive film from the outset, one in which the characters reflect upon and appear to be aware of the components of the process in which they are participating. The discussion about everything consisting in individual components echoes Szentjóby's own concerns of the 1960s, when he began to experiment with simple elements. The textile workers discuss limits, concluding that the film's limits 'tell us to transcend our limitations and all limitations'. And this is effectively what the film itself sets out to do – to present workers transcending the limits of their manual existence and expressing themselves as intellectuals. Communist newspeak is reinvented in experimental ways in the process, and one of the workers jokes that she likes to say to a skirt she is running through her machine: 'Arise, clothing! Be a class warrior!' Procedures for fabricating material goods and for moulding consciousness enter into uneasy dialogue, and the prospect of de-alienated production arises.

A woman turns to the person behind her on the bus and explains that she thinks work is just not 'economical' – on the contrary, she argues, it just 'keeps an autonomous and unfinished person dependent and locked up'. But, her interlocutor points out, one 'can't have a change of consciousness without social change'. They consider whether speech can have any effect: 'only if you're saying forbidden things' – then 'it liberates the unknown that is within us'. This conversation clearly relates to the mechanism at work

in the film, where people confess their forbidden thoughts to one another, often in hushed tones, and there is an image of a society where everyone is moving towards a higher level of consciousness by speaking their mind, openly and freely. In the design office, a woman approaches her boss and says: 'Hey, boss! ... let me dismiss you!' Rather than outrage, though, the expression of this secret desire to fire the boss is met with gentle flirtation: 'Oh sweetheart, I've told you a hundred times, wait till the time comes.' A man with a moustache points out that 'there'll be a huge mess when it turns out that the time for everything has come'. Everyone appears to be biding their time, considering the present, but certain that the future will bring change.

Middle-aged men in a café are talking in conspiratorial tones – one, referred to by his friend as 'an old anarchist', makes an apocalyptic speech announcing that those 'who thought this kind of thing could only happen in the movies are now going to unleash their secret capacities, to prove before God and man that they are truly creatures of heaven – and free'. For him, 'the private and the politicized are one'. His interlocutor is less than persuaded – he declares in ironic tones that his conscience is 'crystal-clear': 'Nothingness surges out of me. Truth, as you know, defeats me.' Peasant women hoeing the soil, for their part, discuss whether they are in fact tilling earth or money. One of them begins to agitate the rest, and launches into an impassioned speech about how they have been manipulated on every level. She concludes: 'Basically, they tell us what exists and what doesn't!', even though their interests are clearly different from 'those who embalm us into thinking we're the people!' In the scene that follows, an old radical in a canteen sounds off about militarized world trade, boredom, misunderstanding and violence, and informs two young women over soup: 'So, girls, for my part, I shit on exports.' They agree. In a metalwork factory, one worker tells another he loves him. 'What?' comes the reply. 'I love you ... because we represent our interests without hesitation, unconcerned with the interests of the outside world.' Amidst the roaring of machines, the two imagine a future in which everyone will 'wake up to the void that is', abandon their selfish ways and embrace 'ecstatic difference'. An ageing woman in the lottery ticket checking room suddenly gets up from her place in the row of workers and asks a man, further down the line: 'Excuse me, is this euphoria?' 'Yes', he replies, matter-of-factly, and continues with his task – barely looking up (figs. 3.20, 3.21).

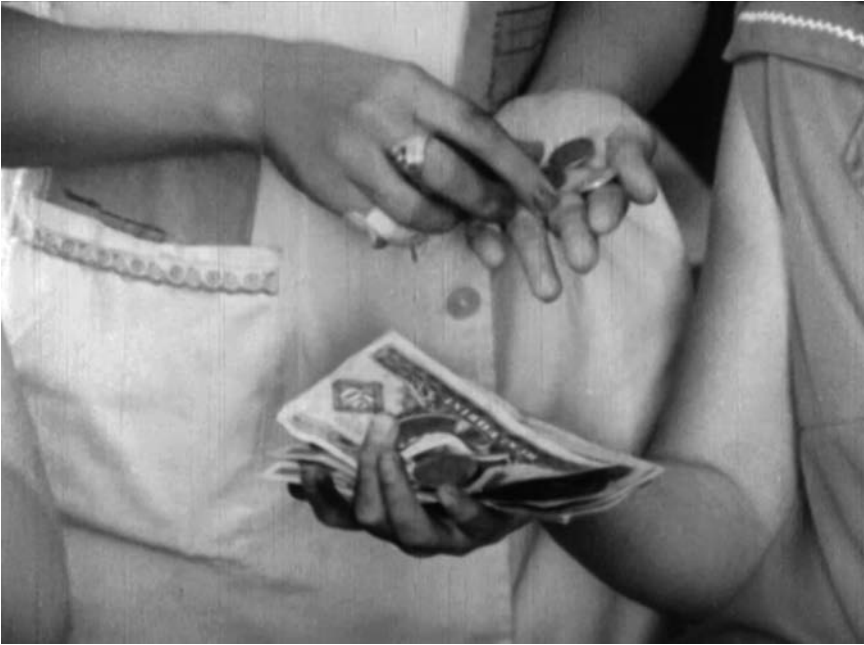
Young women seated at machines stitching boxes together and tossing them on to an endlessly flowing conveyor belt talk as though they



3.20, 3.21 Tamás Szentjóby, *Centaur* (film-still), 1973–75/2009, 39 min., Hungarian, English subtitles. Courtesy IPUT-Archive/Tamás St. Turba.



3.22, 3.23, 3.24 Tamás Szentjóbby, *Centaur* (film-still), 1973–75/2009, 39 min., Hungarian, English subtitles. Courtesy IPUT-Archive/Tamás St. Turba.

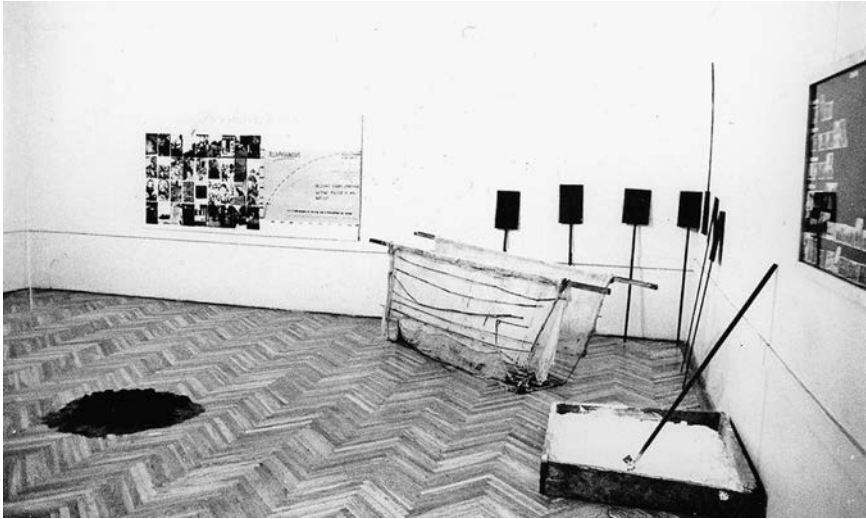


are aware of the camera filming them, and consider modifying their dialogue to conform to the expectations of the officially sanctioned film crew. Should they talk about ‘compulsive neurosis’? No, better ‘talk some more about fashions in headscarves, or whipped cream, our children, and wage increases – just to confuse the film crew. Let us live behind the mask of carefree compulsive neurosis so we can get to the future through our secret inventions – which we can’t speak of now.’ They decide it is safest to continue to ‘play the role of worker’, for now (fig. 3.22). As the unmanageable torrent of boxes streams towards the camera, and is deftly offloaded and folded into piles by invisible workers’ hands, the film reaches a climax of the sort arrived at in Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (though with none of the technological enthusiasm) – except that here the anonymous workers are given a voice, revealing a schizophrenic situation in which the worker’s smile is merely a mask worn for the camera. The final scene takes place in a brush factory staffed by blind workers, where one woman in particular is singled out (fig. 3.23). She wears a particular smile, as though proud of being chosen – even as her blindness is uneasily exploited by the camera – as she nervously threads nylon by hand through the holes of a broom. We see a close-up of her trembling hand outstretched to receive her pay, and watch her slide the money deep into her pocket before continuing

her work, with the same smile (fig. 3.24). Although she does not speak, she suddenly breaks into song, and appears to be joined in chorus by her workmates on the factory floor. It is a nostalgic old song, bidding farewell to the beauty of this world before passing on. The mention of colourful meadows and green woods could not be further from the reality surrounding the workers, but their blindness apparently enables them to continue to dream and to sing their melancholy song about the ‘blue hills’ and ‘lovely unknown realms’ that await them, although ‘My road’s end – Alas – I cannot see’.

The many voices woven together in the film deliver a spectrum of perspectives on surviving reality and thinking the future – ranging from self-reflexive, philosophical, radical, sceptical and schizophrenic to poetic, recalling Bakhtin’s observations in the 1930s about the capacity of the dialogic imagination to produce ‘a verbal and semantic decentring of the ideological world’ – dispersing language into ‘the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia’ in opposition to ‘those forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world’.⁸² What would workers talk about, and dream about, if they had a voice in society, *Centaur* asks? What if they were eloquent in expressing their desire for a change in consciousness, fulfilling their human capacity to think, and to realize their freedom? What if workers thought and talked more like intellectuals? What if they were to become the dominant class, in reality?

If Szentjóby’s presentation of workers’ possible thoughts and conversations de-alienates them, even as they endure the system that oppresses them, *Centaur* also tries to imagine a way out of György Konrád and Iván Szelényi’s sociological conclusion that ‘under the “dictatorship of the proletariat” it is actually the workers who make up the most underprivileged class’.⁸³ Konrád and Szelényi’s study of the role of the intelligentsia in socialism, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, written at the same time the film was made, in 1973–4, argued that while ‘Previous left-wing critics identified the state and Party bureaucracy as the force opposing the working class, and drew a crucial distinction between intellectuals and this new “bureaucratic elite”’, they found that ‘the differences between intellectuals and bureaucrats are gradually disappearing’ to the extent that the bureaucracy now formed a part of what they called the ‘new class of intellectuals’.⁸⁴ Konrád summarized their argument as follows: ‘the intelligentsia was ensuring that the system functioned effectively by refraining



3.25 Tamás Stjóby, retrospective exhibition, Young Artists' Club, Budapest, 1975 (detail). Photograph by Stjoby Tamás. © IPUTNPU-Archives

from calling the power hierarchy into question, while perceiving itself as an abused victim and thereby absolving itself of responsibility'.⁸⁵ Contemporary Eastern European societies were properly socialist in so far as they did away with private property, thus rendering the term 'state-capitalism' meaningless. The authors therefore proposed that

Left-wing social theory must face up to the fact that socialist transformation – the nationalization of the means of production – has not brought about the results expected by nineteenth-century thinkers. Not only has it failed to abolish alienation and inequality, or to produce a more democratic system; it has in fact invented new methods of political oppression and economic exploitation.⁸⁶

They saw the only hope as being the development of a new form of 'self-managing socialism'.⁸⁷

Konrád and Szelényi were under almost constant police surveillance in 1973, and moved to a peasant cottage in Csobánka to complete their manuscript. When they had produced three typewritten copies, they asked Szentjóby to produce a microfilm version, by photographing each page. The handover of the manuscript must have been observed, though, as a raid on Szentjóby's flat took place a few days later, on 18 October 1974, on the pretext of an anonymous report that he was distributing pornography.



3.26 Tamás St. Auby, *Exile*, 5 December 1975. Photograph by János Vető
© IPUTNPU-Archives

The police found and confiscated a typescript, and took Szentjóby into custody. A few days later, the authors of the text were sent to the same jail. They were accused of writing a book that could ‘serve as the programme of a counter-revolution’. After being held in prison for a week, they were issued with a Prosecutor’s Warning banning them from publishing the text, and offered the option of emigrating. Szelényi finally left for London in May 1975 (thence to Australia). Konrád stayed. Knowing that he would soon go into exile, Szentjóby spent the period from October 1974 until his departure at the end of 1975 ‘tying up loose ends’, as he put it, in his Budapest life.⁸⁸ At the end of April 1975 he organized a retrospective at the Young Artists’ Club in the city. The exhibition comprised some 150 pieces from the years 1966 to 1975, including picture poems, objects, environments and photographs documenting the actions discussed in this chapter (fig. 3.25).⁸⁹

Szentjóby left Hungary in December 1975 (fig. 3.26) and settled in Geneva.⁹⁰

4

Humour

When Ludvik, the hero of Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke* (1967), receives a letter from his girlfriend, who is away on a summer Party training course, listing for him the joys of 'early-morning callisthenics, the talks, the discussions', and enthusing about the 'healthy atmosphere', he is annoyed. She appears to be enjoying herself without him, while he pines for her. He rushes off a provocative reply on a postcard: 'Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!' Needless to say, his quip does not pass unremarked by the censors. As the story unfolds, Ludvik's 'joke' results in interrogation, being thrown out of the Party, losing the right to study and eventually conscription to a labour camp. Kundera's is a cautionary tale about socialism's peculiar lack of a sense of humour.

a new life had begun..., and its features, as I remember them, were rigidly serious. The odd thing was that this seriousness took the form not of a frown but of a smile, yes, what those years said of themselves was that they were the most joyous of years, and anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class or (what was equally sinful) giving way *individualistically* to inner sorrows.

The system portrayed is one in which the 'power of optimism' is taken literally. Smiling is an ideological obligation rather than a laughing matter. Ludvik's former friends, turned interrogators, demand to know: 'Do you think socialism can be built without optimism?' Obligatory participation in

the project of building socialism rides roughshod over the nuances of language – allowing no room for ironic jokes, which are deemed incompatible with the noble lexicon ‘Party, optimism, discipline’.

Ludvik is charged with ‘individualism’ by the committee of student Party activists designated to assess his moral credentials:

- ‘It’s the way you behave.’
- ‘How do I behave?’
- ‘You have a strange kind of smile.’
- ‘And if I do? That’s how I express my joy.’
- ‘No, you smile as if you were thinking to yourself.’

Following his interrogation, Ludvik decides to conduct an experiment, by keeping tabs on his smiles. He discovers, to his dismay, that there was indeed ‘... a tiny crack opening up between the person I had been and the person I should be (according to the spirit of the times) and tried to be. / But which was the real me? Let me be perfectly honest: I was a man with many faces. / And the faces kept multiplying.’¹ If he had failed to see a subversive ‘message’ encoded in his joke, his interrogation had led him to question whether there was even a coherent subject behind his multiple faces. Ludvik’s soul-searching reveals the degree to which his everyday behaviour has become a form of ironic posturing, leaving him wondering whether he has any real opinions of his own.

Kundera’s account of Ludvik’s coming to consciousness and recognition of the many masks he wore in daily life, is echoed in György Konrád’s recollection of his student days in Hungary. Konrád recalls: ‘these memories are tinged with irony: I see the faces trying on various masks; I see an army of fresh self-images marching along a road of careers. Looked at it one way, it is an arrogant new elite, but from another angle it is a nest of newly hatched eggs.’² As in Ludvik’s case, Konrád’s smile proved intolerable to his reformist fellow students in 1956. He remembers that in late October, when his cohort succeeded in ‘disarming the Baja garrison officers and moving on Budapest in army trucks’, he was excluded from the operation, having been ‘forcibly removed from the community of officers-in-training’. Echoing Kundera, Konrád writes:

The reason I missed out on my classmates’ military operation was that during our theoretical training at the university I had smiled impertinently when a captain was at pains to describe how horrible the enemy was. / ‘You there!’ he bellowed. ‘Yes, you, with the long hair! On your

feet! You see, comrades? That's what the enemy looks like! Look at him, grinning at our worldwide struggle for peace. I order you to leave the room!' / I promptly stood and headed out of the classroom, a remnant of the grin still on my lips. Few of my classmates expressed their solidarity. They tended to be 'serious' and were therefore inclined to have me expelled from the youth organization of the Communist Party.³

Konrád's memoirs and Kundera's novel elucidate the difficulties faced by Central European artists coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s. The communist authorities were often at least as suspicious of ironic affirmation as they were of outright dissent, to the extent that the line between the two was both extremely thin, and rather difficult to police. Among those to turn to his advantage the ambiguities of irony, with a grin on his face, was Endre Tót, a young Hungarian painter expelled in 1958 from Gyula Pap's Socialist Realist-oriented studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest.

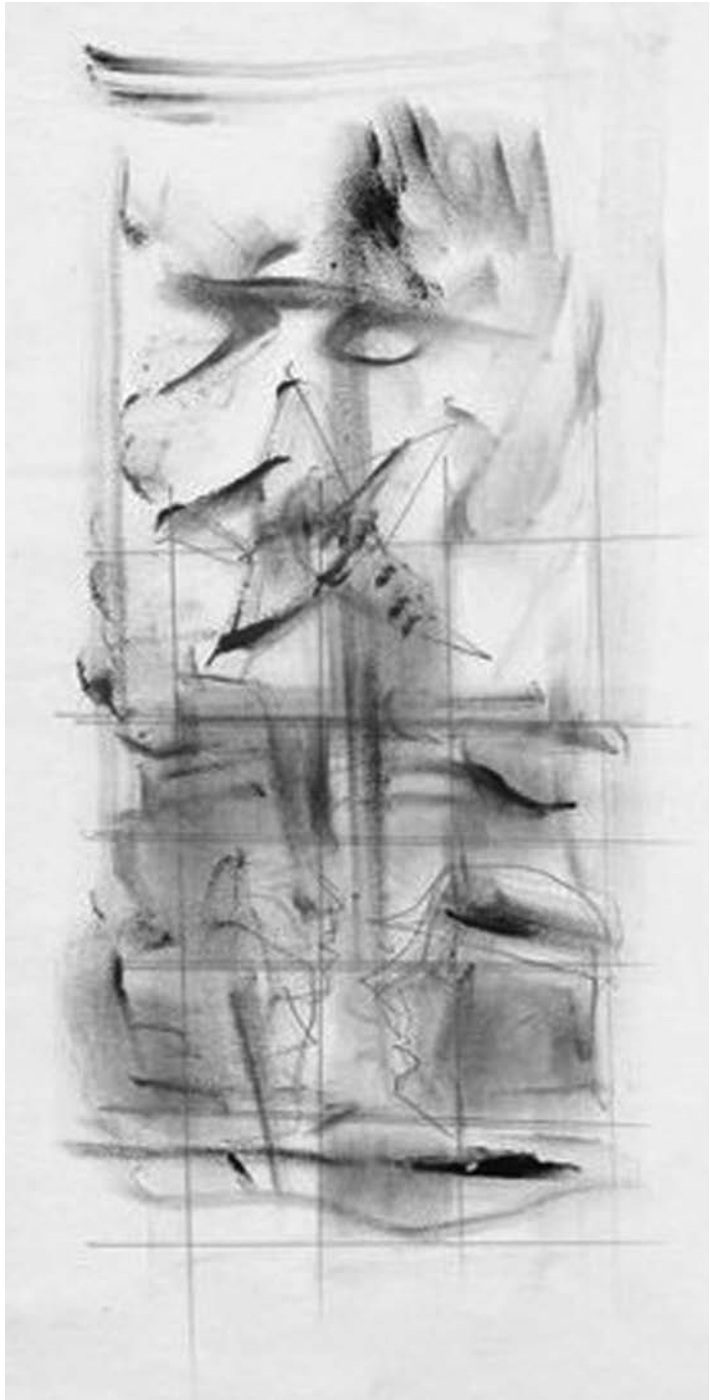
In 1959, Tót succeeded in transferring to the less prestigious School of Applied Arts, where he continued his studies, graduating in 1965. He soon became interested in the performative paintings of Georges Mathieu when he came across them by chance in a magazine,⁴ and began to experiment with colour calligraphy and action painting himself. Later, inspired in part by the work of Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, which he had also encountered in reproduction, he began to produce hybrid canvases and works on paper demonstrating, on the one hand, an affinity for the bold gestures and saturated colours of Abstract Expressionism and, on the other, engagement with more subtle indexical marks ranging from smeared chalk to impulsive pencil scrawls. Combining recent international painterly developments with an understanding of Hungarian Surrealist and Constructivist tendencies, particularly evident in his inclusion of bold typographic elements into a number of compositions, Tót's work of the 1960s played with history and contemporaneity in fresh ways.

His mostly untitled paintings, collages and ink drawings of the second half of the decade mark the collision of heterogeneous styles within a single practice. The result was an exploration of all possible avenues of painterly expression. Judit Szabadi has described these works as a 'search for identity', characteristic of what she calls the 'schizophrenia of two orders: Hungarian and European'.⁵ But one might equally argue that Tót's close dialogue with the older Hungarian artist Dezső Korniss demonstrated the degree to which the complexity of the Hungarian painterly tradition of the twentieth century was itself European *par excellence* – rooted in the dynamism of the Hungarian

avant-garde which, although constantly interrupted, and frequently forced into exile, had contributed substantially to all the main currents of the European avant-gardes: Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism.⁶ The striking feature of much of Tót's early work is the apparent effortlessness with which he borrowed from so many different sources. An interesting example of this irreverence is a picture combining indexical marks with a five-pointed star. Tót's *Untitled (Red Star)* (1965) (fig. 4.1) consists of a series of ink smears partially shrouding a misshapen star, with the hint of a brutish male profile, defying the neat pencil grid structure visible beneath. Other pieces, such as *Untitled (Colourful Picture)* (1966) (fig. 4.2), suggest the influence of Rauschenberg and North American pop art. Tót exhibited his paintings, along with his Budapest colleagues, at many of the important exhibitions of the late 1960s, including the IPARTERV exhibitions of 1968 and 1969, and the 'R' exhibition of 1970, discussed in Chapter Three.

Despite the pluralism that had crept into Hungarian cultural life by the 1970s, Tót recalls feeling frustrated by Hungary's ongoing isolation from international artists and developments, a situation which was not helped by the steady flow of more and more of his colleagues into emigration.⁷ He was also frustrated by his working conditions. Unable to afford to paint on canvas, working on paper and cardboard in his tiny kitchen which doubled as a studio, he could only dream of working on a comparable scale to de Kooning or Pollock.⁸ In 1970, therefore, he decided to become 'a conceptualist' instead of a painter, producing his first self-published artist's book, *My Unpainted Canvases* (1971) (fig. 4.3). This was a 12-page catalogue of his 'future paintings': selection of simple rectangular frames and their dimensions, with nothing inside. Tót began to make contact with independent galleries and publishers in the West, and soon succeeded in printing his artist's books abroad.⁹ He recalls that prior to sending his manuscripts abroad, he had to have the content and layout approved by the censors. This explains, in part, why all content is voided in the early books. The artist engaged in meticulous self-censorship prior to submitting his work for censorship, thus playfully providing the authorities with little or nothing to censor.

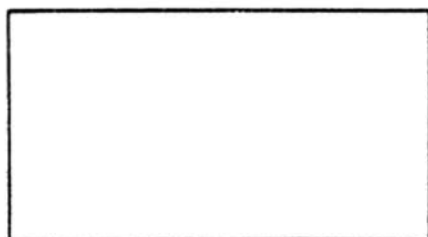
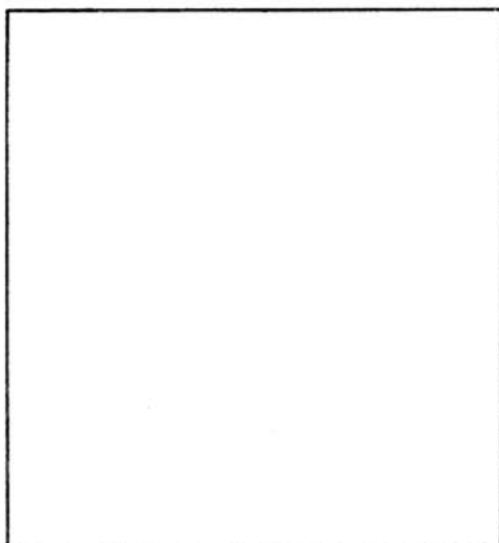
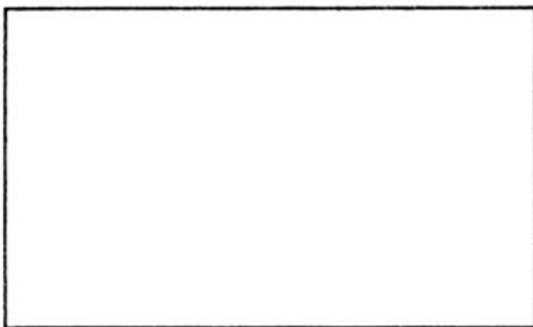
Tót's overriding concern, after 1970, was to distribute his work to a wider audience so as to overcome his marginal position in the international art world. He compiled one of the most comprehensive international artists' mailing lists in Hungary, rifling through issues of foreign magazines, which, at that time, often provided lists of artists' addresses, drawing on his other contacts to expand his list. These investigations yielded the opportunity to contribute to the



4.1 Endre Tót, *Untitled (Red Star)*, 1965. Courtesy of the artist.



4.2 Endre Tót, *Untitled (Colourful Picture)*, 1966. Courtesy of the artist.

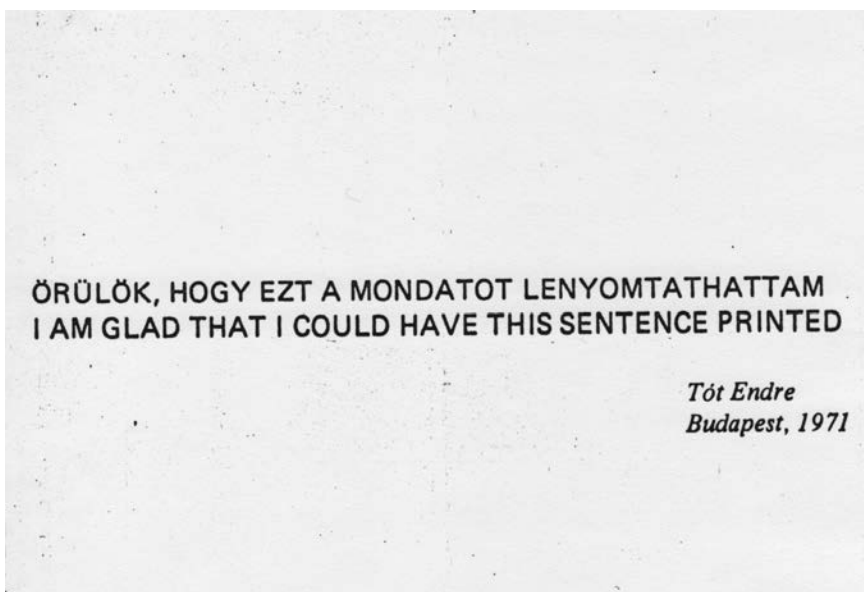


top left: 160x140 cm
top right: 180x296 cm
above: 320x316 cm
centre right: 300x316
bottom right: 120x236

4.3 Endre Tót, *My Unpainted Canvases* (detail), 1971. Courtesy of the artist.

postal section of the VII Biennale de Paris organized by Jean-Marc Poinso, in 1971. Although, officially, East European participation in the Biennale was centrally controlled by appointed commissioners, and national representation at the Biennale tended to be sporadic, reflecting the vicissitudes of domestic cultural policy at different times – with certain editions showing greater openness to new tendencies, while others reasserted orthodoxy, including artists working in traditional media – the Biennale also offered opportunities for artists to participate peripherally, through collateral events. Crucially, it was feasible for artists to send works without themselves being able to attend (Koller, for instance, sent a number of textile pieces for inclusion in the VI Biennale of 1969). The VII Biennale proved to be a very important survey of the latest trends at the beginning of the new decade, with sections organized thematically under the headings ‘Concept’, ‘Hyperrealism’, ‘Interventions’, ‘Group Works’, ‘Artists’ Films’, and a new mail-art section masterminded by Poinso.

In an introductory essay for the ‘Envois’ section, ‘Communication at a Distance and the Aesthetic Object’, Poinso explained that ‘communication at a distance’, taking advantage of the institution of the post, provided an opportunity for artists to ‘take charge of all the problems connected with the dissemination and realization’ of their work, thereby bypassing galleries and artistic institutions traditionally responsible for mediating between artist and recipient.¹⁰ Under the constraints of traditional forms of institutionalized distribution, he observed, the dissemination of an object entails more labour than its production, for it relies on middlemen. Mail art cut out the need for middlemen, enabling artists to distribute their work directly. Poinso noted that all the works received for the ‘Envois’ section had been accepted – as the criterion was that works should arrive in a particular medium, without regard to form or content. Tót sent a ‘zer0 postcard’, ‘zer0 letters’ (consisting largely of zeros) and a telegram reading ‘nothing nothing nothing’, for what would be his first participation in an international event on this scale. These simple communications, consisting of zeros executed on a typewriter, eschewed the expressive indexicality of painting, emphasizing that form and content were less important than the means of their dissemination. If Koller’s artistic universe was split between the doubt articulated by his question marks and his ironic enthusiasm for UFOs, two of the central pillars of Tót’s new conceptual enterprise were to be his espousal of the zero and his humorous parodies of the culture of optimism, articulated via a long-term series of actions which he called ‘Gladnesses’. Both series explored the vicissitudes of Central European censorship sketched out so brilliantly in Kundera’s novel.



4.4 Endre Tót, *I am glad that I could have this sentence printed*, 1971. Courtesy of the artist.

4.5 Endre Tót, *Do you speak English?*, 1971. Courtesy of the artist.



Tót's first Gladness piece, of 1971, was a postcard with the sentence *I am glad that I could have this sentence printed* (fig. 4.4), printed, signed and dated, in Hungarian and English. As he later explained: 'It was printed on a piece

of cardboard, illegally, on the side, at night, in a printing press in Pest. As is well known, permission had to be obtained at that time to print anything.¹¹ In addition to using his personal contacts to produce a simple, apparently self-reflexive text-based piece, he had made an ironic work of art that would be immediately legible in an international context. Tót's simple message conveyed the rare joy of gaining access to the medium of printing, tackling, with his first conceptual strike, the authorities' most powerful weapon in the war against political dissidence. In an equally matter-of-fact and understated way, his postcard announced his new-found gladness in a language that could be understood by foreigners, potentially facilitating international dialogue – which the authorities were seeking to discourage. Another postcard-sized piece of 1971 thematized the language barrier more explicitly. The question *Do you speak English?* was rendered almost illegible beneath a mass of zeros – a performance of self-censorship barely masking the desire to cross the linguistic divide between Hungary and the world, posing the urgent artistic question of a shared or universal language (fig. 4.5).

If Tót replaced his earlier abstract gestures and readymade elements with glad zeros, he recalls that these were to a great extent a 'protest against the impossibility of communication in Communist Hungary'.¹² Other artists were impressed by what they saw as the 'attitude of criticism inherent in Tót's gesture: a talented painter suddenly gives up painting and he is only glad if he can draw 000'.¹³ Zeros replaced Hungarian as another impossible vehicle from which to articulate the impossibility of communication itself, while continuing to convey the expressive desire to communicate at all costs – even if all that could be communicated was this desire itself. 'What you don't understand, write in a language that can't be understood by anyone,' Tót scrawled in the margin of his first artist's book published abroad, *Incomplete Informations / verbal & visual* of 1971–2. That Tót was able to seek the West German artist and networker Klaus Groh's assistance in publishing the book at this early stage suggests he had established himself swiftly in international circuits. Although Géza Perneczky dramatizes the situation, writing that Tót 'used to stealthily board the train in Budapest and ride to Belgrade, to send his mail-art dispatches to the West',¹⁴ Tót recalls that censorship of the mail was erratic, at best: 'My letters were scarcely controlled, or not at all, and because of that I could communicate very well with the Western world.'¹⁵

Tót's overproduction of incomprehensible messages parodied and performed for a Western audience the dilemma of the Hungarian avant-garde

artist seeking to make contact with the outside world. These early 'zero letters' were a handwritten labyrinth of zeros and crossings-out, additions and afterthoughts, like a chaotic draft for a novel. He sent them to important figures in the international art world, among others to Restany in Paris (fig. 4.6). Amidst the zeros one can decipher 'I hope you ... in the ... idealism ... couldn't / I understand ... don't be angry ... don't worry ... it's a fact ... where are you? ... you know that I would tell you everything If I ... do it.' Tót's sweet nothings play with the slippage between meaningless nonsense and a stifled existential urgency to convey an unconveyable message. His addressees, over the course of the 1970s, included such figures as Ben Vautier, Gilbert and George, John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Some of his letters are on letter-headed paper with the motto: 'I write to you because I am here, and you are there', underscoring the importance of the mail as a system for overcoming isolation and bringing people in different places together. Tót's zeros opened out to an infinity of possible interpretations, exporting his desire to communicate without revealing any information that potential censors could comprehend. His accumulations of zeros met on the page with a rival system: erasure. Zeros and the alphabet entered into a silent war to produce undecipherable coded messages, sent out into the world from a country where everyone was, in any case, accustomed to reading between the lines.

In parallel with his zero activities, Tót undertook various actions, documented on camera.¹⁶ In several pieces he played out the compliant attitude officially demanded by the regime, as though fully participating in the optimism of socialist life. The short titles accompanying the photographic documents testify to his permanent state of gladness – declaring his position to be politically impeachable. If – as Konrád remarked, concerning the dilemma of the intellectual under socialism – 'He who agrees to being controlled exists; he who does not ceases to exist,'¹⁷ Tót's actions were a conceptualist manifestation of the impossibility of existing as an experimental artist without some degree of compromise. Needless to say, his participation in the culture of optimism was a deadpan performance. The artist's internalization of the fact that cheerfulness was a precondition for his existence was wryly enacted in gladness works such as *Gaudeo Ergo Sum* (1973–75) (fig. 4.7), showing the smiling artist in a T-shirt with the name TÓT voided by zeros (recalling Koller's textual play on the censorship of his self).

'The Power of the Powerless', Havel's important essay of 1978, elucidated the day-to-day mechanisms of complicity in post-totalitarian societies. His famous example was that of the greengrocer, who displays the slogan



4.7 Endre Tót, *Gaudeo Ergo Sum*, 1973–5. Courtesy of the artist.

‘Workers of the world, unite!’ alongside the onions and carrots in his window. Havel argued that the real message intended by the repetition of Party slogans by citizens in this way was not, of course, that the workers of the world should unite. Instead, the latent meaning of advertising conformist slogans was to signal to the secret police: ‘I am beyond reproach’. But the deeper message of such texts, according to Havel, was not simply ‘I am afraid, and

therefore unquestioningly obedient'; the situation was more troubling. Post-totalitarianism, he explained, relied on the greengrocer coming to believe in the 'ideological excuse'. The greengrocer arranging his window display had begun to think: 'After all, what's wrong with the workers of the world uniting?', enabling him to justify his compromise to himself.¹⁸ If only individuals could recognize and assume responsibility for their place in the system, refusing to believe in the ideological lie and insisting, instead, on rejecting it, and 'living in truth', the system, Havel reasoned, would necessarily collapse. Tót was working through the same mechanism – mimicking the condition of an artist working and thinking in the same way as the greengrocer, living in fear of being reported to the secret police by his neighbours, but also pretending to seek personal justification for going overboard on promoting the notion that all was as well as could be expected in Socialist Hungary.

Several of Tót's Gladnesses mimic the subjection of the body to military discipline. It was well known that Kádár's compromise with the USSR, post-1956, was in part a cynical money-saving exercise: by agreeing that Soviet troops should continue to occupy and police Hungary, Kádár was able to stop investing in the domestic army, shifting the financial burden to the USSR, thus freeing up capital to fuel an artificial consumer boom and placating the frustrated population with access to hitherto inaccessible material goods. Under Kádár, the Hungarian military fell into decline, and many succeeded in avoiding the draft, often by claiming medical exemption. Tót's *I am glad if I can lift my leg* (fig. 4.8) shows the artist lifting a boot-clad leg, his hands casually in his pockets and a studied look of concentration on his face, as though about to march off in military step – but with nowhere to go. The piece finds a companion in *I am glad if I can take one step* (fig. 4.9), this time an anonymous action, for the photographer has left the artist's head and shoulders out of the picture.¹⁹ It had first taken the form of a 16 mm film entitled *One Step* (1972), filmed at the Béla Balázs studio. Tót stood for three minutes in an empty space before taking a step. He recounts how a member of the Party committee at the film studio 'immediately forbid this', asking 'Can you only be glad in our country when you make a step?'. In this way, the action illustrated that taking just 'one step' was potentially already a step too far. Tót comments: 'we lived in an absurd world, in which it was only possible to react with absurdity'.²⁰ He claims that when he screened a film of the action to his colleagues, the military police seized the tape.²¹ The piece undoubtedly raised serious questions: What did it mean to make an action? When and



4.8 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can lift one leg*, 1973–5. Courtesy of the artist.



4.9 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can take one step*, 1973–5. Courtesy of the artist.

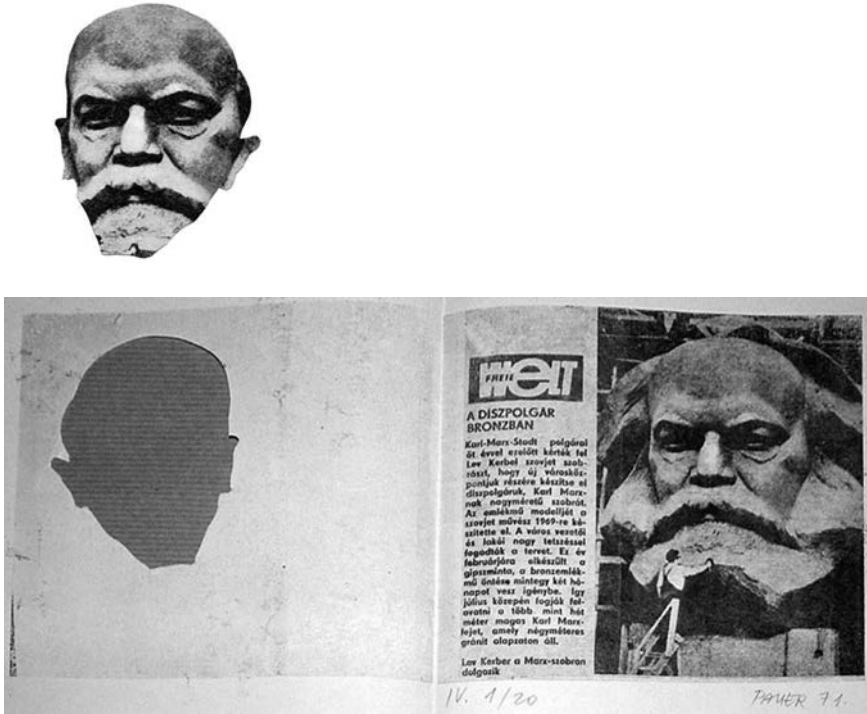
how could an action become significant? Tót demonstrated that every independent artistic 'action' risked being viewed as an 'act' in the political sense. If this was a simple point, it remained important because it tested limits which 'officially' no longer existed, at a time when there was no censorship as a 'legally operating institution' in Hungary.²²

Many of Tót's actions verged on hyperbole. He later recalled: 'My "Joys" were reflections of the totalitarian state of the seventies. I responded with the absurd euphoria of Gladnesses to censorship, isolation, suppression sensed in every field of life, though this suppression worked with the subtlest means, hardly visible.'²³ Apparently thrilled by the plethora of expressive potential in every simple action, he soon expanded his repertoire to include the most banal activities: wiggling his big toe for the camera; putting his finger in his nostril and scratching his behind. In a darkened photograph with the caption *I am Glad if...* he appears to be relieving himself against the side of the building. Such pranks of the mid-1970s were ironic inquiries into personal freedom – tasting the small pleasures of doing small things that one was allowed to do. The trouble was, of course, that these are actions of no wider consequence. In each action, Tót appears to be laughing – the potential ambiguity of his joke ironically offset by the deadpan nature of the text. Tomáš Štrauss rightly described Tót's face as 'a laughing mask'.²⁴ But while the figure of the mask implies doubling – one face in public, another in private – Tót's laughing mask does not conceal a true self, but rather serves to undermine any imputation of possible dissidence, much as his performances of complicity undermine the idea of conformity.

Accounts of late Socialist art often point to irony as the principal mode of communication in this period. Lóránd Hegyi, for example, writes that '*Bitter irony, black humour, morbidness, and self-tormenting, almost masochist self-mockery* are not only typical phenomena of Central European culture, but at the same time act as paradigmatic strategies designed to make the frustration and long-term lack of perspectives more bearable.'²⁵ Tót himself readily describes the Gladness actions as 'very, very ironic'.²⁶ By his own admission, his irony put him at a certain remove from day-to-day realities: 'I responded most indirectly to the age I had to live in. With humour and ease, and some philosophy.'²⁷ He acknowledges the disjunction between the banality of his actions and the excess of his textual joy – the gap between the textual and the visual serving to dramatize the condition of the post-totalitarian subject. Tót admitted: 'If I disregard the stifling effect of the ideology of the age, I would like to say these



4.10 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can stand next to you*, 1973–5. Courtesy of the artist.



4.11 Gyula Pauer, *Marx – Lenin*, 1971–2. Courtesy of the heirs of Gyula Pauer.

were the joys of loneliness, the delight of solitude.²⁸ The solitude of Tót's actions, in marked contrast to the vast network at his disposal, entailed a certain performative contradiction, perhaps like that of the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes From the Underground*, who declared: 'I... am writing for myself alone, and let me declare once and for all that if I write as if I were addressing an audience, it is only for show and because it makes it easier for me to write. It is a form, nothing else; I shall never have any readers.'²⁹ Posing before the camera, Tót played the part of the isolated artist, engaging in international conceptualism for an audience of one – the unnamed photographer.

Tót's captions serve to call into question the legibility of the photographic document, revealing its meaning to be contingent. The Gladnesses reduce the artwork to two basic components, an act and a textual utterance, thus allowing the artist to remain silent, and to reach a secondary audience – via the mail. Two levels of meaning coexist, interrupting and displacing one another, but without revealing any single form of truth behind appearance. This is clearly played out in the actions featuring representations of Lenin. Tót's

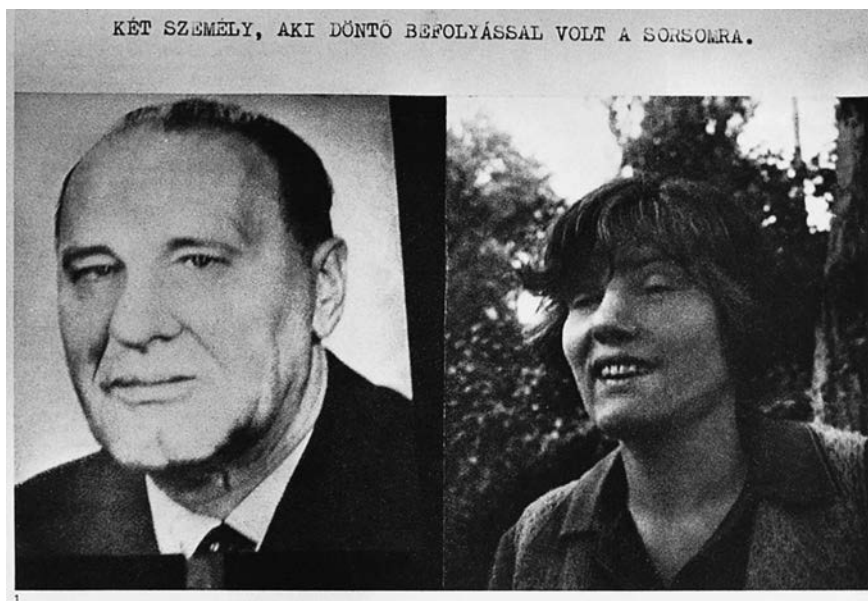
action captioned *I am glad if I can stand next to you* (fig. 4.10) shows the artist standing beside a monumental sculpture of Lenin, which used to stand on Felvonulási Square in Budapest. Despite the apparently sincere artlessness of the statement, the artist is clearly not standing next to Lenin at all, but at the foot of a vast plinth. His shoulder reaches no higher than Lenin's foot; the monument swamps him and renders his figure pathetic by comparison. While the statement suggests equality, the photodocument undermines it, highlighting the degree to which the enormity of the sculpture is incongruous with a revolutionary figure credited with laying the foundations for a classless society. Tót's snapshot mocks the kitsch memorabilia of the 'good Party member' in a country where public space has become the domain of the cult of personalities.

Gyula Pauer had also produced an important inter-generational double portrait a few years earlier, demonstrating his theory of what he called, in a manifesto of 1970, 'Pseudo' sculpture. As he explained, 'pseudo sculpture is a sculpture that conceives of itself as a manipulated sculpture and as such, demonstrates the existence of manipulated existence. Pseudo reveals itself to be a false idea, or rather, a complex object that provokes false ideas'.³⁰ He demonstrated the concept in a postcard-sized work entitled *Marx-Lenin* (1971–2) which was widely distributed among the artists who came together at the Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár (fig. 4.11). The piece was composed of two parts joined in the form of white card that could be opened out. Underneath, Pauer placed a newspaper photograph of a five-metre high bust of Marx in Karl-Marx-Stadt showing a worker chiselling Marx's beard.³¹ Another page with a Lenin-shaped hole was then superimposed upon this one, so that a portrait of Lenin was produced from a cropped version of the Soviet sculpture. Pauer showed Lenin's embodiment of Marx to be merely a manipulation, laying bare the device to the viewer. Likewise, he demonstrated, Marx himself was no more authentic, offered to the spectator in the process of becoming, in the form of a Soviet-made representation. The piece cleverly called into question the authenticity of Marxism-Leninism, as well as the possibility of there being any 'original' Marx to return to, thus contributing to ongoing intellectual debates about the 'reformability of socialism'.³² Pauer's post-card illustrated the tautological nature of Socialism on the one hand, and of visual representation on the other.

Tót's verbal and visual messages also clearly operated according to the logic of a doubling of meaning, and he produced his own double portrait, juxtaposing a photograph of himself with a photograph of Lenin, offering the



4.12 Endre Tót, *You are the one who made me glad*, 1973–5. Courtesy of the artist.



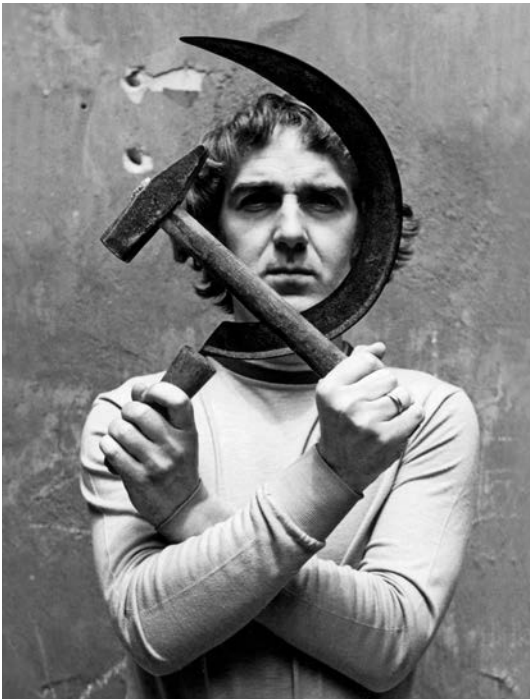
4.13 Miklós Erdély, *Two people who have had a decisive influence on my life*, 1972. Courtesy of the heirs of Miklós Erdély and the Miklós Erdély Foundation, Budapest.

caption *You are the one who made me glad* (fig. 4.12). Lenin is serious, dressed in suit, shirt and tie. By contrast, Tót is boyish, his shirt unbuttoned and unironed, his hair too long, his tie nonexistent. The relationship between the images and the text both mobilizes and irreverently undoes the orthodoxy of the imputed father–son relationship. His piece may well have referred to Miklós Erdély's earlier double portrait of his wife and János Kádár, with the caption *Two people who have had a decisive influence on my life*, of 1972 (fig. 4.13). When the image was published in the Swiss journal *Werk* to accompany an article by Beke on 'Young Hungarian Art' there were unpleasant reprisals.³³ The authorities took action against Erdély's unmasking of the degree to which the state assumed as pivotal a role in Hungarian daily life as one's closest family. Beke recalls that 'the foreign reader capable of seeing the logic of this was able to understand the essence of the entire Kádár era. (Although there could be no doubt as to the truth-content of the work, after its appearance, Erdély's wife was unable to find employment.)'³⁴

I am glad if I can gaze at something nice (1973–75) (fig. 4.14), shows Tót standing in front of a vast official building topped by a five-pointed star, such a ubiquitous feature of the socialist urban landscape that it would for most people have become invisible. Fittingly, though, here it is Tót who is out of focus – the focus is on the star in the distance. Tót restricts his caption to a banal platitude. His performance of admiration for socialist symbols finds an interesting comparison in the work of Sándor Pinczehelyi from the same period. Pinczehelyi's *Sickle and Hammer* (1973) (fig. 4.15) presents these ideologically-loaded tools as just objects like any others, except somehow outdated and ridiculous. Aleš Erjavec has argued that Pinczehelyi's piece demonstrated a 'conscious and complete identification of the secondary discourse with the ideological discourse, thus paradoxically revealing the inconsistencies of the latter, the voids in its purportedly impregnable discursive armour, and especially its ideological nature'.³⁵ Such works were immediately legible jokes, shared among a community of friends. László Beke comments: 'Everyone sensed irony at that time; a man positioned in a heroic stance with a hammer and sickle, yet the police were unable to accuse him of subversive activity.'³⁶ Tót's *I am glad if I can read a newspaper* (1979) (fig. 4.16) was equally ambivalent. The piece involved sitting on a chair reading a newspaper out of which a large hole has been torn out. Through the hole, the photographs show his smiling face, opportunistically inserted into the gap where officially authorized facts ought to have appeared. He carried out the action several times after he had left Hungary, in 1979, with different newspapers, among



4.14 Endre Tót, *I am glad when I can gaze at something nice*, 1973–5. Courtesy of the artist.



4.15 Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Sickle and Hammer I*, 1973. Courtesy of the artist.

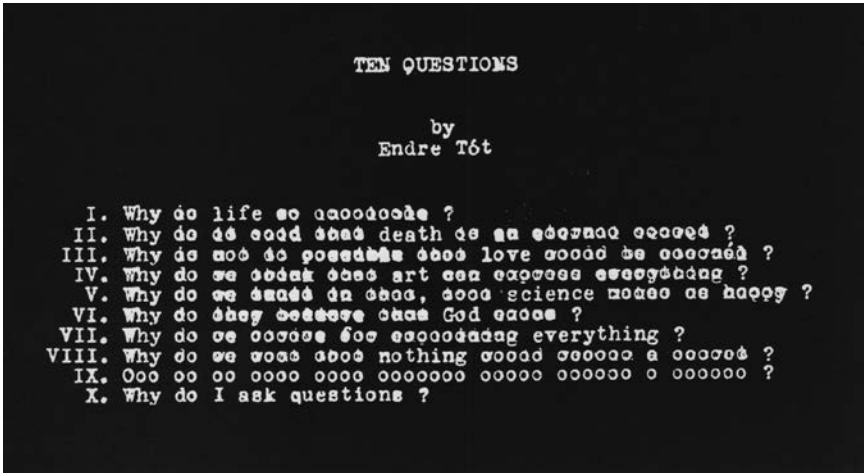
others, *Pravda* (fig. 4.17). Instead of the ‘truth’, the image shows a void at the heart of ideology. The artist made reference to the spirit of 1956, which saw demonstrators cut holes in the new flag that had come with Hungary’s annexation by the USSR – removing the insignia of a wheat sheaf, a golden hammer and the red star. Here, though, this historic act of defiance surfaced only in the form of an ironic armchair re-enactment, calling into question the relationship between artistic and political action.³⁷

The early 1970s saw a steady increase in unofficial Hungarian artists’ participation in international exhibitions, in part due to the efforts of émigrés to support those who had remained behind. The art historian János Brendel, who had emigrated to Poland, was instrumental in producing a number of opportunities for young Hungarian artists to exhibit there. Although officially Poland was the most culturally relaxed of the satellite countries in the 1970s, organizing an exhibition of unofficial artists from a neighbouring satellite country remained no mean feat. It involved a combination of careful negotiation and rule-bending. Following up on his success at having managed to co-ordinate the ‘Exhibition of a Group of Hungarian Artists’ which toured Poznań, Łódź, Sopot, Szczecin and Koszalin in 1970, Brendel succeeded in organizing an exhibition of six of the most important Hungarian experimental artists at the Foksal gallery in Warsaw. In May 1972, the Foksal opened a show of work by St Jauby (one of Szentjóby’s series of pseudonyms), György Jovánovics, László Lakner, Miklós Erdély, Gyula Pauer and Endre Tót. There could be no question of Hungarian artists receiving permission to attend the exhibition through official channels; however, Brendel managed to bring them over on personal invitations. Lakner produced a text painting reading ‘The Form is: the maximum effort in the given possibilities of a given situation’, provocatively citing Georg Lukács’s early essay ‘Aesthetic Culture’ (1910–13). Szentjóby sent his *Portable Trench for Three Persons*. Erdély contributed a complex conceptual piece entitled *Moral Algebra – Solidarity Action*, combining photographs of a Cambodian ‘head-hunter’ with charts and statements denouncing war as a form of ‘institutionalized murder’. Pauer exhibited his ‘Pseudo’ manifesto, which outlined his proposal for designing objects in such a way as to deliberately provoke false ideas – by implication, also using art as a training ground for casting doubt on external reality. Tót carried out a stamping action called *I am glad if I can stamp in Warsaw too* (1972), in which he sat and rubber stamped countless sheets of paper.



4.16, 4.17 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can read a newspaper*, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.





4.18 Endre Tót, *Ten Questions by Endre Tót*, 1973. Courtesy of the artist.

The action became politicized by association, in relation to the provocative propositions by the other artists. As Andrea Bordács has put it, Tót's stamps were implicitly 'filched from the hands of morose secretaries, hefty postmistresses and comrades using and abusing their power'.³⁸ Presented alongside the other powerful works in this extraordinary exhibition, Tót's action quietly mocked the absurdities of socialist bureaucracy.

This was just one of a series of Polish exhibitions Tót participated in over the course of the early 1970s.³⁹ He would also have a solo show at Ewa Partum's artist-run space Galeria Adres in Łódź in Spring 1973, at which he exhibited his *Ten Questions* (1973) (fig. 4.18), voided by zeros. He recalled: 'Poland was at that time for me really very free ... I knew the Polish art scene twenty times better than the Hungarian.' He was also in touch with a number of the Czech artists who will be discussed in Chapter Five – among others Milan Knížák and Petr Štembera (who visited him) in Prague, and the experimental poets Jiří Valoch and Jiří Kocman, whom he visited in Brno. Although at that time it was impossible for these artists to exhibit together, it is clear that an unofficial network of sorts among them existed, nourished by private visits. Visiting the West was more difficult, however. As Tót recalls: 'We could spend thirty days in the West in every three years, but not always.' If the mail served as a partial substitute for other forms of direct contact, then, like Koller, Tót was also more interested in asking questions than in offering answers. *TÓTal Questions by TÓT* (fig. 4.19), for example – a questionnaire which he mailed to his art

I'D BE GLAD IF YOU ANSWERED MY QUESTIONS

/Endre Tót • H-1035 Budapest • Kerék u. 10/

1. What arguments can you advance against the meaninglessness of life ?

.....
.....

2. What makes you regard as death ?

.....
.....

3. What is the connection between life & death to love ?

.....
.....

4. What can you see in being about nothing ?
/What is nothing ?/

.....
.....

5. Oooo ooooo yoo oooooo oooooooo oooooo ?

.....
.....

..... George Bredt
/name & address/
Witdenburgstr. 9
Köln / BRD

↑
please print clearly

44/100

world contacts in 1974, including both artists he knew already and other people whom he wanted to know – consisted of five key ‘zero questions’ about life, death, love, nothing and zeros, but with all the words except ‘what’, ‘you’, ‘life’, ‘death’, ‘love’, ‘is’ and ‘nothing’ largely obscured by zeros. It was answered by Marina Abramović, Anonymous c/o Marilyn Monroe, George Brecht, Jacques Charlier, Hervé Fischer, Ken Friedman, Dick Higgins, Pierre Restany, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi and Wolf Vostell, but, as Tót pointed out when he compiled the responses for publication, remained ‘unanswered’ by Marcel Duchamp.⁴⁰ The replies represent an interesting survey of the deficiencies of international dialogues of this sort. Shiomi replied in Japanese; Saito stamped an image of a handshake in answer to each question; Restany responded with ‘the fear of nothingness’; Dick Higgins gave long-winded answers listing, among others, his ‘friends, love, daughters and sons, community, gardens, wine, grass, dancing, work’ and art; Fischer replied to each question ‘Je m’en moque’; George Brecht circled ‘please print clearly’; and Abramović simply stuck on five Yugoslav stamps with Tito’s profile. Having set the bar for communication at zero point, Tót could not necessarily expect a great deal in return. Nevertheless, each in their own way, the respondents took up Tót’s invitation to dialogue, and several of them suggested potential reasons for its deficiency, highlighting the degree to which this was a tautological operation. The point was communication itself, rather than content.

Beke played a key role in facilitating unofficial Hungarian artists’ opportunities for international communication in this period. Having helped Brendel to co-ordinate the Hungarian exhibition at the Foksal Gallery, and co-organized the friendly meeting with Czechoslovak artists at Balatonboglár discussed above in Chapter 3, he worked together with conceptual artist Dóra Maurer to produce a Hungarian issue of the Beau Geste Press magazine *Schmuck*, using a rotary printing press.⁴¹ The Beau Geste Press had been founded by Felipe Ehrenberg and Marta Hellion, two Mexican artists who had moved to London following the Tlatelelco student massacre of 1968, and settled in an artists’ community in Columpton, Devon. From Devon, they published a wide range of art books and ephemera, together with David Mayor.⁴² Maurer had first met Mayor through Klaus Groh, whom she met, in turn, through Hungarian mail artist Géza Perneczky, who had recently emigrated to Cologne.⁴³ She had received a Rockefeller Scholarship to spend six months in Vienna, where, in 1967, she married the ‘fifty-sixer’ and photographer Tibor Gáyor. This enabled her to acquire dual nationality and to travel

regularly between Vienna and Budapest, helping to foster contacts among Hungarian unofficial artists and their international counterparts, particularly after meeting Beke in 1971.

The Hungarian *Schmuck* was prefaced by a rather opaque statement signed by the 24 participating artists. As though purposefully poorly translated and punctuation-free, it amounted to a tongue-in-cheek disclaimer, veering between eloquence, nonsense and negation:

Considering our special circumstances under we following authors live & work as well as our experience we have gained about the prohibiting measures taken by our supervisory authorities in our firm belief only in lack of understanding declare hereby that we do not assent to the publication & distribution of the Hungarian SCHMUCK.⁴⁴

The contributors to the issue announced their confidence in the Hungarian authorities' lack of understanding of experimental artistic trends, while, for good measure, refusing to accept responsibility for disseminating internationally their unauthorized and supposedly incomprehensible work. The statement amounted to a cool display of self-censorship. Tót, appropriately, contributed a series of zero-code works.

Maurer helped to bring Tót on board for a Fluxus event being organized in the UK: Fluxshoe, masterminded by Ken Friedman and Mike Weaver (a friend of Fluxus founder George Maciunas), with the help of David Mayor, who had studied under Weaver in Exeter.⁴⁵ The Fluxshoe – initially intended to be called the Fluxshow, but renamed so as to embrace a typing error – toured England for a year, beginning in Falmouth in October 1972, then passing through Exeter, Croydon, Oxford, Nottingham and Blackburn, ending up in Hastings in August 1973.⁴⁶ This substantial operation – funded by, among others, Exeter University's American Arts Documentation Centre and the British Arts Council – was described by Mayor as 'no ordinary exhibition'. He referred to Fluxus's roots in the ideas of John Cage, and their continuation through Dick Higgins' Audio-Visual group (founded in 1959) and Higgins's and Maciunas's efforts to 'get performances staged outside the relative privacy of the artists' lofts' in an effort at 'bringing the New Yorkers, Europeans and Japanese together'. The real importance of Maciunas's Fluxus festivals, Mayor argued, was their ability to produce 'private meeting points for artists who had been previously working very much alone, or in isolated groups'. Building on Maciunas's model, the Fluxshoe would present 'a collection of things by over a hundred people

that seems at first to have little coherence: there are films, tapes, slides, plastic boxes, banana skins, bundles of envelopes, sacks, old shoes, post-cards, douche bags, boxes in boxes, cards in boxes, scores, letters, statements, books, bottles, calendars, maps, old loaves ...'.⁴⁷ If it all seemed confusing, this was the point. In George Brecht's words:

Whether you think that concert halls, theatres, and art galleries are the natural places to present music, performances, and objects, or find these places mummifying, preferring streets, homes and railway stations, or do not find it useful to distinguish between these two aspects of the world theatre, there is someone associated with Fluxus who agrees with you. Artists, anti-artists, non-artists, anartists, the politically committed and the apolitical, poets of non-poetry, non-dancers dancing, doers, undoers, and non-doers, Fluxus encompasses opposites. Consider opposing it, supporting it, changing your mind.⁴⁸

Interestingly, Mayor distinguishes the Fluxus embrace from what he calls the 'negative doubt' installed by Dada. Politically, he writes, Fluxus 'is representative overall of an anarchist rather than a Maoist or Marxist viewpoint, and so would now be regarded by many as old-fashioned, apolitical or even reactionary, an introverted hangover from the world of the "sixties"'.⁴⁹ He cites Maciunas's observation: 'Fluxus art-amusement is the rear-guard without any pretension or urge to participate in the competition of "one-upmanship" with the avant-garde. It strives for the monostructural and nontheatrical qualities of a simple natural event, a game or a gag.'⁵⁰ The small scale of many of the works in the show, besides the fact that it was a touring one and therefore had to be able to fit into a smallish van, was also the natural consequence of the degree to which the international Fluxus community relied on the mail:

Separated by oceans from the people to whom they feel closest in terms of what they are doing, they mail their things to others around the world. For them, the sort of art they have contributed to the Fluxshoe is more of a hobby and a game than work or a profession. They belong to an international and semi-underground community like UFO enthusiasts or stamp collectors. ...⁵¹

Mayor's comparison of the Fluxus community to that of UFO enthusiasts resonates, of course, with Koller's desire to be a member of the latter. It also clearly outlines the appeal of Fluxus for Tót, who felt 'separated by oceans' from those he felt most affinity with, in terms of his artistic ideas. Tót was more interested in London than in Paris in the late 1960s and 1970s, having

travelled there for the first time in 1968, again in 1971, and then for the Fluxshoe tour.

His *Statement for FLUXenglandSHOE* (1973) consisted of a hole-punched sheet of black carbon-copy paper with typewritten bullet points of many zeros and the word 'art', signed and dated. Initially, he sent zero letters, among others an *Audio-Visual letter to John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, for inclusion in the Shoe, and then joined the tour in person in 1973. He also proposed to install a *Flux-TV*, consisting of a television screen covered in black card with the words Flux-TV cut out, reminiscent of Nam June Paik's altered TV sets, and devised a *FLUXchess GAME / without playing*. The game was to be an impossible one, as all the pieces were to be set up on one half of the board, leaving no blank space and making it impossible for either player to make the first move. Tót's suggested opponent was to be 'either Dave Mayor / or Bobby Fischer'. The loser was to be the person who, within the course of an hour, either failed to move one of his pieces, or failed to show up. *FLUXchess GAME / without playing* provided an opportunity for the Eastern bloc to secure revenge for Bobby Fischer's famous defeat of Boris Spassky (USSR) at the 1972 World Championships in Reykjavik, a humiliating Cold War event. Mirroring the global political stalemate, in which, as a result of 'mutually assured destruction', it was now impossible for either side to make the first move, thus reducing room for manoeuvre to zero, Tót nevertheless conspired to give the Soviet bloc an advantage by rigging the rules: Bobby Fischer would not be informed of the game, and would undoubtedly therefore fail to show up. In his absence, the two artists would play – who lost would be a matter of chance, depending on who was allocated the white pieces.

Following on from his stamping activity in Warsaw the previous year, Tót intended to carry out one of many zero-typing actions:

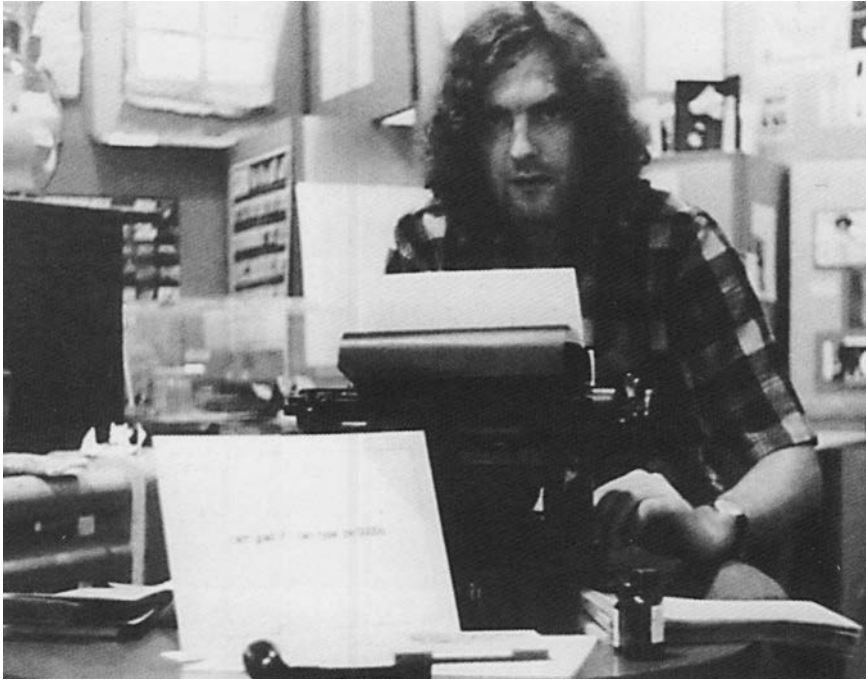
I will be typing at a writing table – in the gallery.

Only zero0000s!

For about two hours a day. On the writing-table there will be a note, with the following text on it: 'I am glad if I can type zero0000s.' Note: I will need a lot of paper – FLUXpaper – so that I can work continuously for about two hours a day.

If I finish my day's work, I'll leave everything on the table, so that I can go on with it the next day, when I arrive at the gallery.

In this way the whole process of work during my staying there will be VISIBLE and AUDIBLE as well



4.20 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can type zeros*, Blackburn Museum, 1973. Courtesy of the artist.

but only for two hours a day.

I'd be glad if we could exhibit in the next SHOE

Hastings

all the results of the permanent work

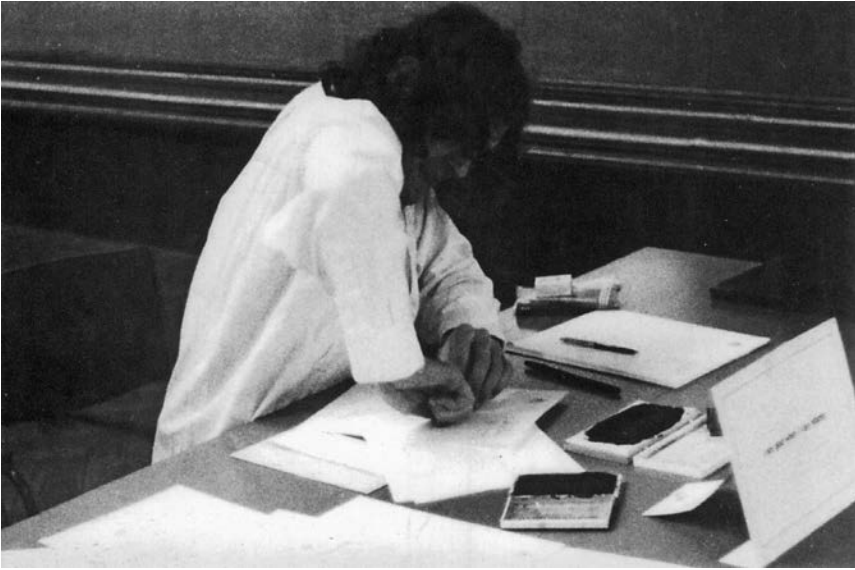
done every day.

The typing action combined three forms of artistic practice, blurring the boundaries between performance, exhibition and mail art.⁵² While one might interpret Tót's decision to devote just two hours a day to carrying out his secretarial work as a reference to the less than feverish pace of work of state employees on the rungs of the vast socialist bureaucratic apparatus, in line with the joke 'we pretend to work and they pretend to pay us', this was just one of the activities Tót had planned for the Fluxshoe. He was working to a busy schedule – in addition to typing (fig. 4.20), he intended to stare at the wall for an hour a day, and spend an hour a day stamping documents: 'I will be watching / gazing at / the wall – in the gallery. For exactly one hour a day. On my back there will be a note, with the following text on it: "I am glad

if I can watch / gaze at / the wall for an hour a day”, and ‘I will be stamping at a writing-table – in the gallery. / Only a zero! / For about one hour a day. On the writing-table there will be a note, with the following text on it: I am glad if I can stamp a zero.’⁵³ His zero-stamps were circular, with a zero in the centre and the label ‘zero-stamp by Endre Tót’. Gladly seated at a typewriter or wielding one of his rubber stamps, Tót took on the guise of an unkempt clerk, eagerly fulfilling his norm (fig. 4.21). His zeros and stamps soon filled stacks of ‘County Borough of Blackburn Recreation Committee Museums and Art Galleries’ letter-headed notepaper, with each page carefully labelled and dated. Appropriately, the pages carried a coat of arms with the Latin inscription *ARTE ET LABORE*, chiming with the solemnity of Tót’s own labour of bureaucratic love, highlighting the universality of the bureaucratic work ethic, and indicating that the art institution was also just another part of a wider bureaucratic sphere. On the one hand Tót played at being a conformist, engrossed in the bureaucratic bind; on the other he clearly appropriated the authority of the official seal for his personal ends. One of the stamps he used on his correspondence read ‘DOCUMENTS MAKE ME CALM’, as though stamping, for Tót, was a way of convincing himself that everything was in order.

If, as Benjamin Buchloh has argued, a bureaucratic impulse was conceptualism’s key feature, and Western conceptualism unwittingly represented ‘the last of the erosions (and perhaps the most effective and devastating one) to which the traditionally separate sphere of artistic production had been subjected in its perpetual efforts to emulate the regnant episteme within the paradigmatic frame proper to art itself’, Tót’s mimicry of the late socialist bureaucratic episteme was more humorous – more akin to the Fluxus spirit.⁵⁴ Tót ‘mimed the operating logic’ of late socialism. He was well aware that there was nothing to be gained from exposing the socialist state’s ambition to use artistic production as a tool of ideological control – after all, the authorities had always done little to disguise this aim. In personal terms, though, there was a good deal to be gained from playing the part of the Eastern artist.

Tót’s primary audience was undoubtedly a Western one, and for the most part his jokes were jokes for export – playing into the hands of Western visions of the East as a thoroughly bureaucratized universe. In this way Tót took advantage of the East–West dynamic as characterized by Slavoj Žižek: the mechanism according to which



4.21 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can stamp zeros*, Blackburn Museum, 1973. Courtesy of the artist.

Eastern Europe functions for the West as its Ego-Ideal (*Ich-Ideal*): the point from which the West sees itself as a likeable, idealized form, worthy of love. The real object of fascination for the West is therefore the *gaze*, namely, the supposedly naive gaze by means of which Eastern Europe stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy.⁵⁵

With his simple messages of gladness, Tót strategically conveyed that all was not well in the socialist East, in line with a joke from the GDR, cited by Žižek:

A German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by censors, he tells his friends: 'Let's establish a code: if a letter from me is written in blue ink, it is true; if it is written in red ink, it is false.' After a month, his friends get the first letter written in blue ink: 'Everything is wonderful here: stores are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, movie theatres show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair – the only thing unavailable is red ink. ...'⁵⁶

Tót's Gladnesses, likewise, remain necessarily impossible to pin down, in the absence of red ink.

The artist's espousal of what Buchloh later called conceptualism's 'restrictive definition of the artist as a cataloguing clerk', however, was more than just a way to poke fun at pen-pushing state bureaucrats, usurping their role – although this also came into it.⁵⁷ By performing his zero-typing action as part of the Fluxshoe tour, in a series of institutions in the UK, Tót also critiqued Anglo-American conceptualism's efforts to deal a final blow to the artist as expressive subject. Sol LeWitt had announced, in 1967, that the goal of the conceptual artist was 'to give viewers information' and to 'follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion, avoiding subjectivity. The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but *functions merely as a clerk* cataloguing the results of his premise.'⁵⁸ Tót, however, far from absenting himself from the conceptual project, placed himself centre stage, mocking what Buchloh called conceptual art's 'aesthetic of "indifference"'.⁵⁹ The Hungarian artist manifestly failed to offer any serious analytic propositions of his own – as he put it: 'If Kosuth was a conceptualist, then I am not one'. What interested Tót was not so much the proposition, but the performative role of the clerk. It may well be that he recognized the secret power in this position. As Roland Barthes explained, in his ironic 'report of the clerk to his master': 'You have every mastery of me, but I have every knowledge of you.'⁶⁰ Is this a double bluff, then, in which Tót used action to restage the pitfalls of conceptualism and make a critique of its premises, proving that the artist-clerk is neither humble nor innocent, but ultimately seeking self-promotion? Oscillating between affirmation and negation and, through systematic repetition, staging the critical exhaustion of both, Tót displayed his weariness with this dichotomy. By abolishing the distinction between 'underground language' and 'official language', and fusing the two into an ironic series of declarations that can be read as conformist or dissident simultaneously, he called into question not only the appropriation of art for ideological purposes, but also its potential as a vehicle for critique.

Although Tót's texts and photographs partially conform to the serial monochromy of photo-conceptualism, he destroys its aesthetic of indifference with his smile. To further complicate the veracity of his documents, he occasionally introduced the figure of his double – using two images of himself together in the same photograph. *We are so glad if we are happy* (1973–5) (fig. 4.22) shows two Tóts delightedly sharing the joke, standing on Heroes' Square in Budapest, against the looming 36-metre-high Millenary Monument. While the location invokes a discourse of heroism, the two Tóts are more like tourists than activists. There is nothing to



WE ARE SO GLAD IF WE ARE HAPPY

4.22 Endre Tót, *We are so glad if we are happy*, 1973–5. Courtesy of the artist.

suggest a discrepancy between the sentiments of one Tót and those of the other. Two identical subjects declare the same half-truth. Tót performs the ‘multiplication of faces’ entailed in maintaining a public persona in socialist conditions, demonstrating the extent to which the ‘culture of optimism’ has a levelling effect on the personality. Like the sensible subject, he tries to keep his mouth shut and takes care that what he does say cannot be misconstrued. But Tót and his double may not be what they seem, for as they do so, they are laughing.

Dostoevsky’s short story *The Double* is one of his most sinister. Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, an assistant to the chief clerk in a government office, is humiliatingly thrown out of a high-society party which he is attending uninvited. As he returns home, shaken, he encounters another man hurrying through the snow and entering his house with confident familiarity, as though it were his own. When he enters his apartment, he is stunned to find this man sitting on his bed. To his horror, he discovers that ‘the nocturnal visitor was none other than himself... what is called his double in every respect’.⁶¹ Much shaken, he arrives late at his official department the following day, only to find that a new colleague has been appointed, and is to sit at the

desk opposite him. Although the man is physically identical to him, and also his namesake, nobody in the office remarks on the coincidence. The plot thickens and Golyadkin Junior, the 'unworthy twin', shamelessly usurps his senior's identity through a series of sly manoeuvres, and appears to be getting along extremely well both at work and in society, while Yakov Petrovich's situation becomes more and more desperate. Golyadkin Senior's hopeless predicament is rendered dialogically: throughout the story his speech is characterized by a blundering inability to put his point across. It takes him so long to dispense with the preamble and formalities that necessarily precede any point he wishes to make that he never succeeds in communicating anything in time to be heard by his busy superiors as they scurry from office to office carrying stacks of important files and paperwork. Even his servant has no sympathy, and merely observes that 'Good folks live honestly, good folks live without falsity, and they never have doubles... yes... they never have doubles. God doesn't afflict honest folk.'⁶² Framed as the hallucination of a madman, Dostoevsky's story is a biting satire on bureaucracy, unbridled corruption, evil unpunished and unnoticed, and their devastating consequences for the individual. Golyadkin Senior ends by being bundled into a carriage, helped along by his double 'in his usual nasty way' by a shove from behind, and driven out of town, through an unfamiliar dark forest, from which he knows there is no hope of return.

Perhaps Tót's double, then, is like this clerk, although the pair appear to be on amicable terms. He behaves as though it were quite natural for there to be more than one of him – the two selves demonstrating the degree to which there was no authentic self that could be pinned down as being the author of his pranks. Tót's embrace of bureaucracy, and his deliberate failure to articulate a clear political message, suggest a degree of resignation – both to the political status quo, and to the artistic one. 'Yes, it was boredom that entered art ... in the sixties,' he observed, when asked by Perneckzy whether the character of his work was linked to 'the recognition of the dullness of the world'.⁶³ Boredom had also entered Central European politics in the years following 1968, when hopes for reform communism had been stifled by the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the satellite countries resigned themselves to Brezhnevite stagnation. Tót's monotonous variations on the theme of gladness and the zero capture the longevity of this stagnation and the apparent impossibility of dialogue that it implied – a hopelessness that pushed so many intellectuals into exile or at least into 'internal emigration' in the early 1970s. His cultivation of Western links, and the dialogues



I AM GLAD IF I CAN XEROX



Xeroxed in

Date 7/9/75

Serial number 60

E. Tót
by Endre Tót



4.24 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can look at the wall*, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.

he fostered in the first half of the 1970s, were initially a form of internal emigration, albeit one which would later help to facilitate his emigration proper. This psychological emigration also became the lot of many political dissidents in the period. Aware they were under police surveillance, many

survived mentally by retreating into isolated internal worlds, while remaining in the country.

In addition to continuing his postal activities and becoming involved in a number of foreign exhibitions, Tót made a series of trips to Yugoslavia, participating in the 1975 edition of the well-known ‘April Meetings’ at the Belgrade Students’ Cultural Centre – the year of the theme ‘Expanded Media’. While there he was able to ‘indulge’, for the first time, ‘in the joy of photocopying’ – documenting this new joy in a three day Xerox action in which he produced countless Xeroxes reading *I am glad if I can Xerox* (fig. 4.23). This was undoubtedly a rare opportunity for a Hungarian in the 1970s. As George Schöpflin points out, there was

no xerographic or reprographic revolution in Hungary (or anywhere in Eastern Europe for that matter). ...In every institute or equivalent institution, there is invariably a particular person who is officially responsible for duplication and the procedure for duplication ensures that copies can always be traced. The proportion allowed for wastage – a potential source of extra copies – is very small.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, artists began to develop their own samizdat culture, albeit on a smaller scale than their writer colleagues. By contrast to those using samizdat to publish banned books, however, Tót’s gladness and zero publications

4.25 Endre Tót, *I would be glad if I could write something on the other side of the wall*, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.



appropriated the media and formats of dissent, while avoiding dissident content, replacing it instead with tautological statements of opportunism. Tót's activities were therefore as much a mimicry of activism as of conformism. He did not Xerox counter-revolutionary materials, or mobilize others to take action, but neither was he Xeroxing officially authorized documents. In the end, he was genuinely celebrating the fact that he had gained access to new means of reproduction.

In May 1977, Tót was awarded a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to travel to West Berlin. However, his attempts to secure a passport were consistently frustrated, as was generally the case when intellectuals attempted to leave Hungary in this period. With the support of international contacts, a foreign media campaign was initiated on his behalf, and condemnatory articles publicizing the affair appeared in German newspapers. Within a year, the authorities gave in and Tót was called to the Ministry of the Interior to collect his passport and allowed to travel. He was banned from returning to Hungary for five years, and his apartment was confiscated by the state.⁶⁵

Shortly after arriving in Berlin, Tót produced a series of Gladness Stories that read rather like diary extracts – brief statements about his existential state, accompanied by the trademark snapshot of his grinning face. He wrote: 'In Berlin one fine, sunshiny day, I was calmly walking in the street. I wasn't thinking of anything. Suddenly everything came to my mind. I got very sad. But a little later I forgot everything. I'm glad that I forget everything.' In another of his stories, Tót confessed: 'I am glad if I can be thinking about something at last, as it often happens that I don't think about anything, I'm simply bored. So one day when I'd been lying on my DAAD-double bed for hours doing nothing, I suddenly let out a deep sigh. I began to think deeply about the way I could make a document of it for posterity.' The banality of Tót's Gladnesses plays with the state of creative crisis that became the theme of so much 1970s conceptualism, but it also reflects upon the condition of the Hungarian who has succeeded in achieving temporary respite from the relentlessness of the late socialist compromise. In addition to evoking a sense of melancholy, such Gladness texts are combined with a hint of paranoia. When Tót writes: 'I'm always glad of those days when nothing happens to me, except that I wake up in the morning and go to bed in the evening', his confession suggests the darker side of exile. In 1978–9 he made *I am glad if I can look at the wall* (fig. 4.24).⁶⁶ The photograph shows the artist facing the Berlin wall, unable to return to the East, having crossed to the West, posing



4.26 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can advertise on posters.* Street action, West Berlin, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.



4.27 Endre Tót, *Street action,* West Berlin, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.



4.28 Endre Tót, *Gladness demonstration*, Bonn, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.

as though he were about to be executed by a firing squad and contemplating eternity in the concrete before him. He contributed his own piece of graffiti to the wall: *I would be glad if I could write something on the other side of the wall* (fig. 4.25).

While on his DAAD scholarship, Tót initiated a series of one-man street actions. He commented: ‘When I lived in a dictatorial regime in the early seventies, the street actions were born in my mind. If someone had asked me why I didn’t realize these ideas I would have answered: I was afraid.’⁶⁷ Tót later admitted to the sense of political impotence and the fear of reprisals he had wrestled with in his Budapest years. Far from telling a heroic story, he presents himself as an antihero. Indeed, one might even say that he appears to be ‘glad’ that he was not a hero: ‘Fear saved me from becoming a hero. Later there was no reason to be afraid, so I realized these actions in the streets to tell the people something, but they went away without a word. Their impassivity saved me from becoming a hero.’⁶⁸ A number of the Berlin *Very Special Actions*, as Tót called them, were recorded on video.⁶⁹ Tót emerges from the underground and walks up a busy street carrying a placard with a photograph of his laughing face and the words *I am glad to be able to Carry a Placard*. The



4.29 Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can advertise on the media-screen*, Kurfürstendamm, West Berlin, 4 April 1979. Courtesy of the artist.

consternation of passers-by is captured on film. A smiling man in charge of a snack shop puts his arm around Tót in a chummy way and presents him with a free toffee apple. Later, a group of children tag along with him for a while. In another action, groups of elderly ladies in berets look on with amusement at Tót wearing a sandwich board reading *I am glad that I can advertise on posters* (fig. 4.26). He brazenly flyposts his laughing face across West Berlin, while wearing a T-shirt saying *I am glad if...* (fig. 4.27). He went on to expand his activities to include working collectively, in a series of street demonstrations which he describes as ‘directly political’. Tomáš Štrauss, having been blacklisted by the Association of Fine Artists in Slovakia, was now also living in exile in West Germany, and participated in one of Tót’s demonstrations in Bonn in which participants carried banners reading *We are glad if we can demonstrate* (fig. 4.28). He later recollected that the work had been a ‘direct political statement about freedom in the German Federal Republic’.⁷⁰ In addition to pointing out that ‘Both of those carrying the banner... were from a Russian-occupied Central East European country, where any free expression of individuality, such as a spontaneous demonstration, was strictly forbidden’, Štrauss recalls that all public demonstrations in the German Federal Republic

had to be registered with and approved by the relevant authorities a few weeks in advance: 'So the two to five people taking part in the action had to be accompanied through the streets of Bonn by a visible... police cordon that outnumbered the actual "demonstrators" by ten to twenty times. These typical paradoxes of the time were clearly brought to the fore by the art piece.'⁷¹

The artist appeared to be revelling in the proliferation of possible modes of communication available to him in the West: banners, posters, placards, letters, poems, stories, postcards, typewriters, the printing press, the photocopier, facial expressions, actions, gestures and public demonstrations. By drawing attention to these opportunities for self-promotion from the naively joyful perspective of a newcomer, Tót pointed to the quantity of agendas competing for the attention of the passer-by in a system orientated towards capitalist profit. By advertising himself – and offering nothing but his joyous message for sale – Tót's delight at his escape from socialist restrictions also entailed a critique of capitalist cynicism. His relocation to the West, while freeing him from state socialist restrictions in the cultural arena, soon pushed him into an equally ironic, but arguably less powerful, position – that of over identification with the capitalist market framework. He arranged for one of his slogans reading *I am glad if I can advertise on the media-screen* (4.29) to flash up at night amidst the adverts on a huge digitalised screen on Kurfürstendamm on Soviet Liberation day, 4 April (1979). The piece would appear to confirm Buchloh's argument concerning conceptualism's inevitable capitulation to the logic of the spectacle in capitalist conditions: 'the insistence on artistic anonymity and the demolition of authorship produces instant brand names and identifiable products', while 'the campaign to critique conventions of visibility with textual interventions, billboard signs, anonymous handouts, and pamphlets inevitably ends by following the pre-established mechanisms of advertising and marketing campaigns'.⁷² When in exile, Tót hyperbolically affirmed the apparent freedoms his passage to the West had afforded him as an artist, taking advantage of opportunities to exhibit in museum and gallery contexts, and embracing the culture of spectacle. He demonstrated that there was always work for the self-promoting artist-clerk, whatever the political situation, with the same sense of humour that had sustained him while working in Budapest.

5

Reticence

Czechoslovakia saw an increase in open statements of protest in the mid-1970s. Poet, critic and artistic director of the band Plastic People of the Universe Ivan M. Jirous distributed his 'Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival'.¹ The report elucidated the predicament and aims of the Czechoslovak cultural underground.² Jirous described how, when he and his friends had sought to meet for a New Year's Eve party and gig in the small village of Líšnice, west of Prague, they were ordered to disperse upon arrival, and threatened with force if they refused, despite having previously been granted permission to use a hall by the local council. 'It is symptomatic of our time,' he observed, 'to direct hate and suspicion against people who want nothing more than to create their own art, an art they feel compelled to express in an era that stubbornly refuses to concede that the first and foremost mission of art is to serve people who wish to live together in truth.'³ If Jirous's antipolitical 'Report' echoes Havel's commitment to 'living in truth', this is because the two were friends. Their attitudes were characteristic of the mindset of wider Czechoslovak unofficial circles.

Jirous referred to underground culture as 'a way of life, with its own special attitude'. Its hallmark was the refusal to compromise with the authorities:

It is better not to play music at all than play music that fails to spring from the performer's deepest musical convictions. Above all, it is better not to play than play according to the wishes of the establishment. ... As soon as the devil (speaking today as the spokesperson for the establishment)

proffers his first concession, and asks you to trim your hair back just a little in order to obtain permission to play, it is time to say no.

The second culture's attitude to engaging with official politics was initially straightforward: 'by relying on so-called legal means, nothing can be changed'. To become involved in the legal establishment would, he argued, only serve to confirm its validity, whereas the 'spiritual position of intellectuals and artists who consciously and critically confront the world' is always to go 'against the grain': 'anything we do is useless in creating the impression that things are as they ought to be. And indeed things are not as they ought to be.'⁴

The Helsinki Agreement of July 1975 that had accompanied the slackening of tension between the superpowers, known as *détente*, enabled oppositional activists to call on their leaders to keep to the principles to which they had recently signed up. Representatives of the 35 participating states at Helsinki had adopted a new set of principles on security in Europe, starting with sovereignty. Signatory states would 'respect each other's right freely to choose and develop its political, social, economic and cultural systems, as well as its right to determine its laws and regulations'.⁵ This contradiction of the Brezhnev Doctrine was underpinned by clauses on 'Non-intervention in internal affairs'. The Helsinki Agreement marked the high point of Cold War co-operation. For the West, it turned into a surprising success, reducing military tensions and increasing economic cooperation. Above all, the human rights guaranteed in 'Basket Three' provided an unexpected argument for Eastern European dissenters. Helsinki monitoring groups were founded by independently minded citizens in Moscow, Kiev, Tbilisi, Yerevan and Vilnius, with counterparts in Warsaw, Bucharest, Berlin and most notably in Prague. Though much persecuted by the authorities, these groups used Helsinki and its biannual monitoring, starting in Belgrade in October 1977, to gain Western publicity for breaches of the Agreement at home and to widen international support. Human rights activists started to communicate across borders.

In April 1975, Václav Havel wrote an open letter to the General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Gustav Husák, expressing scathing criticism of the moral state of a country where political rule was based on corruption, intimidation and fear. His letter, circulated to intellectuals and the international press, explained that if the present authorities no longer resorted to the same brutal forms of pressure as they had in the past (trials, torture, loss of property, deportations, executions), they now manipulated

citizens through 'existential pressure'. From the ruling caste, fearful of losing its privileges, to the intellectual, afraid of losing the right to work in his own field, to the student, worried about retaining access to higher education, to the worker ('the humblest workman's mate can be shifted to an even more lowly and worse-paid job. Even he can be cruelly punished for speaking his mind at a meeting or in the pub'), everyone had reason to be afraid, and the police – 'the hideous spider whose invisible web runs right through the whole of society' – were instrumental in sustaining this crippling level of popular fear.⁶ Normalization – or, as Havel terms it, 'consolidation' – had turned citizens into careerist hypocrites, resigned to the fact that dissimulation was the key to survival, accepting manipulation through a pernicious form of 'public bribery':

If, as a creative artist, you take part in such-and-such official functions, you will be rewarded with such-and-such genuine creative opportunities. Think what you like in private; as long as you agree in public, refrain from making difficulties, suppress your interest in truth, and silence your conscience, the doors will be open wide to you.⁷

Havel condemned the immediate and long-term consequences for Czechoslovak society of policies aimed at encouraging a primitive consumer society 'intended to turn [the citizen] into pliable material for complex manipulation', in the hope of rendering him 'incapable of realizing the increasing extent to which he has been spiritually, politically, and morally violated'. He argued that the price to be paid for consolidation was too high – nothing short of the 'brutal castration of man's humanity'.⁸ The cumulative effect, he observed, was 'the gradual erosion of all moral standards, the breakdown of all criteria of decency, and the widespread destruction of confidence in the meaning of values such as truth, adherence to principles, sincerity, altruism, dignity, and honour'.⁹ Life, in short, now appeared increasingly hopeless and meaningless, and the moral attitude of the day was one of selfish indifference: 'after the shocks of recent history, and the kind of system subsequently established in this country, people have lost all faith in the future... they succumb to apathy, to indifference towards suprapersonal values and their fellow men, to spiritual passivity and depression'.¹⁰ Meanwhile, culture – whose role, Havel argued, ought to be the promotion of social self-awareness – had been castrated by a combination of censorship and self-censorship to the point where it was characterized by what he calls an 'aesthetics of banality'

– a form of trivial, fraudulent entertainment which ‘sheds no light, offers no flash of real knowledge’.¹¹

Despite these grim observations, Havel’s letter announced the germ of a new hope for the future. Since the regime was characterized, he argued, by its commitment to entropy – the ‘order of grey monotony that stifles all individuality... order without life’ – it therefore followed that in the end it would be one against which life would inevitably prevail.¹² He pointed out that ‘every “entropic” authority, which can only suppress life if there is life to suppress...in the last resort, depends for its existence on life, whereas life in no way depends on it’. Life, he argued, always finds a way to survive the power which ravishes it, and to recuperate: ‘albeit quietly, covertly, and slowly, it nevertheless goes on’.¹³ Human dignity, he reasoned, is not so easily crushed: ‘all the fear one has endured, the dissimulation one has been forced into, all the painful and degrading buffoonery, and worst of all, perhaps, the feeling of having displayed one’s cowardice – all this settles and accumulates somewhere in the bottom of our social consciousness, quietly fermenting’. It would surface, though, when the regime’s ‘crust cracks and the lava of life rolls out’.¹⁴ He concluded his letter by saying that it was not so much an expression of his fear that life in Czechoslovakia would come to a halt, but, on the contrary, of the ‘price we are all bound to pay for the drastic suppression of history, the cruel and needless banishment of life into the underground of society’. He urged Husák to consider these matters, to consider his historic responsibility, and to ‘act accordingly’.¹⁵ Asked why he had decided to write the letter, Havel explained that, first, he believed ‘it always makes sense to tell the truth’, and, secondly, that he felt, personally, the need to transcend his ‘predicament’: ‘I got tired of always wondering how to move in this situation, and I felt the need to stir things up, to confront others for a change’.¹⁶

A series of high-profile arrests, trials and convictions of alternative musicians in the mid-1970s further galvanized the intellectual opposition. Twenty musicians were arrested and over a hundred people interrogated after a festival organized by Jirous in 1976; the organizers of an underground concert and lecture in 1975 were arrested and tried in Plzeň in July 1976; nineteen people, including all the members of the Plastic People of the Universe, were arrested in March 1976; and four young men were tried in September 1976: Jirous, the Plastics’ saxophonist Vlatislav Brabanec, Pavel Zajiček – a member of the band DG 307 – and the Protestant minister and folk singer Svatopluk Karásek.¹⁷ The judiciary found the accused guilty of

‘disrespect of society and ... contempt for fundamental moral laws’.¹⁸ Havel attended the trial, and referred to it as ‘the trial of the Czech underground’. His account of the event stressed its ‘symbolic significance’ and the spectacular degree to which the prosecutor, the defendants, and the judge each revealed themselves in a light diametrically opposed to the role they ought to have played, according to the official scenario being enacted. Far from coming across as a ‘plausible spokesman and guardian of society’s interests’, the prosecutor became, according to Havel, ‘the symbol of an inflated, narrow-minded power’; Ivan Jirous and his friends in the dock, for their part, supposed to be ‘repulsive, long-haired hooligans from the “underworld”’, instead personified ‘those forces in man that compel him to search for himself, to determine his own place in the world freely, and in his own way, not to make deals with his heart and not to cheat his conscience’. The trial became, for Havel, an ‘impassioned debate about the meaning of human existence, an urgent questioning of what one should expect from life’. He described the ‘exciting realization’ it produced ‘that there are still people among us who assume the existential responsibility for their own truth and are willing to pay a high price for it’, and, as such, provide ‘the challenge of example’. Havel observed that an ‘improvised community’ came into being as a result of the trial – ‘a community of people who were not only more considerate, communicative, and trusting towards each other, they were in a strange way democratic’.¹⁹ He argued that the emergence of a democratic community could spring from the decision to act openly and trustingly, regardless of the consequences.

Experimental art had flourished, relatively openly, in 1960s Prague. Milan Knižák had begun his experimental street actions as early as 1962, constructing Dada-inspired assemblages involving found objects such as mannequins, violins, chairs and lavatories; with the *Aktual Art* (*Aktuální umění*) group, which he headed, he moved on to design bizarre clothing and jewellery, and to co-ordinating rituals, actions and *détournements* of the everyday such as the *Walk around Prague* of 1964.²⁰ That year, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, David Tudor and Robert Rauschenberg visited Prague to perform at the Sjezdový Palac (PKOJK), following an invitation from musician Petr Kotík, who had met Cage in Vienna earlier that year.²¹ There had been an important exhibition of the Moscow Movement Group (*Dvizhenie*) and Lev Nusberg at the Galerie na Karlovo náměstí (1965), and a New Realism, Happening and Fluxus Festival at the Reduta in 1966. Although these events were often

received ambivalently by the public, they were signs of Prague's cultural openness. Knížák had been instrumental in seeking to push boundaries in these early years, and helped the network to expand further when he was appointed as 'Head of Fluxus East' by George Maciunas.²² At the Václav Špála Gallery on Národní Boulevard, Jindřich Chaloupecký played a key role in developing international links, both through his exhibition programme and through his writings.²³ He coordinated a series of important exhibitions in the years 1965–70, including a show of work by the Japanese Gutai group in 1967, and a Marcel Duchamp retrospective in 1969 – as well as offering one-man shows to several young Czech artists, such as Zorka Ságlová. Her installation *Hay, Straw* of August 1969 (fig. 5.1), an interactive proposal in which spectators produced their own arrangements of yellow straw and green alfalfa using bales provided



5.1 Zorka Ságlová, *Hay, Straw*, August 1969, Václav Špála Gallery. Photograph by Jan SágI. Courtesy of Jan SágI.

to the sound of grasshoppers and rock music was loudly condemned in the official press.²⁴ As the 'normalization' of culture progressed, Chalupecký was dismissed from his position, his writings were banned and experimental art was forced out of the official sphere. The cultural tide was changing and the artistic community had to reconstitute itself in complex ways.

Unofficial artists continued to meet and to create in alternative spaces, circulating documentation of their work internationally through alternative channels. Performance artist Petr Štembera was particularly active in this respect, carrying out his actions underground, while earning his living working in the Museum of Decorative Arts.²⁵ He performed various 'activities' to which he referred as 'passivities', and ascetic 'endurance tests' designed to push his body to its limits, derived in part from his interest in the practice of yoga. He documented these daily actions photographically and sometimes on 8mm film, as well as recording information from the radio and sending out what he called 'meteorological information' by letter to his international contacts. As of 1972, Štembera began to work with Karel Miler, who became the other key figure animating what evolved into a small but close-knit alternative scene. Miler was employed as a record-keeper at the National Gallery's collection of twentieth-century Czech art, housed in the Prague Municipal Library. Although he had initially experimented with typed conceptual pieces on paper, resembling structural explorations of language more than visual poetry (typing pairs of words such as *neither/nor [ani/ani]* to unveil their semantic structure in the space), he too moved away from language to work with his body, making the limits of his body a means to measure himself against the world through a series of experiments, documented photographically. In 1974, the two were to be joined by Jan Mlčoch (who had worked at the depository of nineteenth-century Czech painting at the Convent of St Agnes, and had known Miler since 1972).²⁶ This trio of artists, and some of their friends, would gain access to their workplaces out of hours, arrange informal gatherings to watch and discuss their actions, or locate derelict buildings on the outskirts of the city in which to hold such events. As Mlčoch later explained:

We took advantage of what was at our disposal... we never asked anyone whether we were allowed to do anything or not... If we were interested in something, we went ahead and did it. We put those few photographs along with some text into envelopes and took them to the post office. They might have been censored but they were delivered anywhere in the world. We had exhibitions in France, Germany, Japan, wherever we liked, at the strangest possible events.²⁷

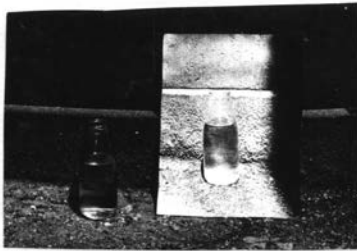
Miler and Štembera's early commitment to disseminating their documentation internationally quickly bore fruit, and by 1973 they were already being exhibited in Rio de Janeiro, Puerto Rico and Dijon, among other places. Like Tót, they overcame domestic isolation by channelling documentation of their works out into the international artistic network through the mail.

In May 1976, Mlčoch, Štembera and Miler were given a week-long exhibition at Galeria Remont in Warsaw. They took the opportunity to visit KwieKulik's Studio of Activities, Documentation and Propagation, and the Czech and Polish artists showed one another documentation of their work.²⁸ A few months later, KwieKulik were visited by another group of Czech artists – this time by the younger artist Jiří Kovanda and two friends, who visited in August and then again in October that year.²⁹ KwieKulik made a habit of sharing contacts with everyone who visited their studio, and gave Kovanda Štembera's phone number. Štembera wrote to his Polish colleagues from Prague, saying that while it was 'peculiar and extraordinary' that people from the same city should have to meet through acquaintances abroad, he saw this as 'symptomatic of our situation'.³⁰ His comment highlights the extent to which Czech unofficial artists remained domestically isolated, despite the range of international contacts they covertly established.³¹

Issues of communication and trust emerged as a focus for Kovanda in the years 1976–8. He had not trained as an artist but worked, as of 1971, as a surveyor on the construction of the Prague metro. As he explained: 'I have no artistic education, so officially I could not be an artist during the Communist regime. I had a duty to work like everyone else. So I selected jobs that were not too exhausting; above all I wanted to have time and energy for my artistic work.' He recalls being inspired by his father, who was an amateur painter, and later by a well-educated friend who had a good library and took him to the Duchamp exhibition of 1969.³² Kovanda was inspired by Surrealism, producing collages and drawings. In 1976, however, partly in response to his growing awareness of recent international trends in art, he abandoned his earlier Surrealist and pop-inspired photo-collages and began to experiment independently with textual proposals for activities, which he then carried out and documented, photographically combining the results with textual descriptions of the scenarios on sheets of A4 paper. He sought to make the text 'as concise as possible, without any emotional content, as low-key and "factual" as possible', and explains: 'I didn't write the texts out by hand, which is connected with what I was just saying: that I wanted it to be as cool, as

"VODA"

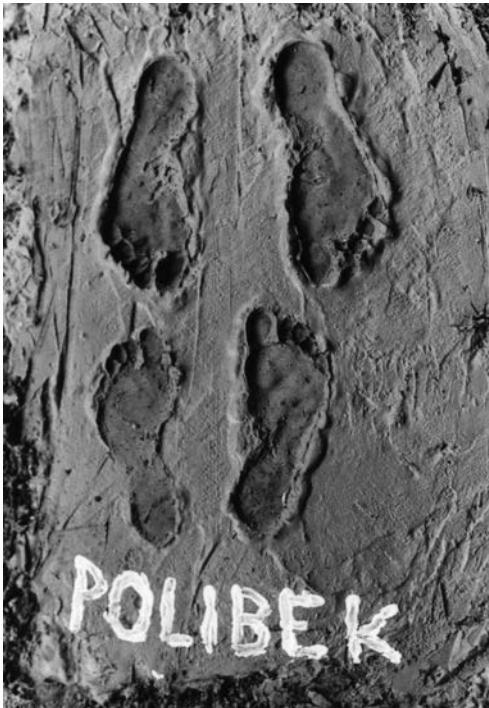
11.června 1976
Praha, Střelecký ostrov



5.2 Jiří Kovanda, *Water*, 11 June 1976. Prague, *Střelecký ostrov*. Courtesy of the artist.

impersonal as possible.³³ This strategic neutrality is characteristic of the impersonal ‘aesthetic’ of conceptual pieces of the time.

Kovanda’s earliest pieces of 1976 were classic conceptual experiments with photography, akin to those of Victor Burgin in the UK in the late 1960s. In June 1976, for instance, Kovanda wrote the following proposal for an action: ‘Photograph a specified place. Then cover this place with the resulting photograph (1:1) and photograph again. Only then...install in a prior specified place.’ The accompanying photographs recorded a series of variations on this theme – a crumbling wall, a fence, and a bottle of water. The water bottle is photographed, the photograph is propped up in a low-key way against a wall, and then set alight – thus bringing the activity full circle and leaving only the bottle once more. In *Water, 11 June 1976. Prague, Střelecký ostrov* (fig. 5.2), Kovanda’s staged a temporary heightening of reality through photography, before returning to the object itself, apparently unchanged, but now viewed differently as a result of the brief heightening of its significance. The destruction of the evidence of the experiment is an early example of Kovanda’s later characteristic interest in ephemeral propositions, and his prioritization of processes of transformation and communication over their material results.



5.3 Jiří Kovanda, *Kiss*, 11 May 1976. Prague. *Střelecký ostrov*. Collection of gb Agency. Courtesy of the artist.

Kovanda soon began to make work exploring human relationships. *Kiss*, 11 May 1976. Prague, *Střelecký ostrov* (fig. 5.3) included a sequence of photographs recording two young lovers embracing, barefoot, on the banks of the Vltava in the park on the small island on the river midway between the two halves of the city; the imprints of their feet are set in mud or cement, leaving a lasting trace of their private encounter in this public space. The photographic series includes two mug-shots of the lovers, smiling, in defiance of the photographic record that has turned them into perpetrators of an intimate transgression. The simple *Kiss* was a starting point for Kovanda's wide-ranging exploration of variations on the theme of contact in (notionally) public and private contexts.

xxx Waiting for someone to call me, 18 November 1976 (fig. 5.4) focused on the moment of tension at the interstice of isolation and the promise of contact. The piece documents the condition of waiting – the anticipation of a communicative encounter – without giving away any details as to the significance of the event itself. The photographs illustrating the event show the artist sitting at his desk and appearing to dream; his facial expression suggests that the waiting is pleasurable in itself; he waits with composure, and a certain confident self-restraint, smiling and looking into the distance in a state of anticipation of contact, and the end of the fulfilment of the artistic event – thus proposing an equation where contact = art, echoing his earlier transformation, through documentation, of the lovers' kiss into an art action. The emphasis is therefore on the idea and the creative process rather than simply on their outcome or 'art'. In this case the outcome is the least interesting part of the action recorded – for it is the one we have least insight into. What matters is that the artist expects something to happen and produces the conditions for it to happen.

Further explorations of contact over the course of 1976–7 took place in the public space of the city. Tellingly, these did not deliver the level of intimacy of the kiss. *xxx 19 November 1976. Prague, Václavské náměstí* (fig. 5.5) consists of the title and a photograph of Kovanda standing immobile on the busy square facing a flow of oncoming pedestrians, arms outstretched.³⁴ The photographer with whom he collaborated to document his actions, Pavel Tuč, shot the artist from behind, lending him a certain strategic anonymity, while focusing on the reactions of passers-by to this unexpected self-crucifixion on a street near to where Jan Palach had self-immolated in January 1969. Czech art historian Pavlína Morganová recalls:

x x x

18. listopadu 1976
Praha

Čekám až mi někdo zavolá...



5.4 Jiří Kovanda, *xxx* 18 November 1976, Prague. *Waiting for someone to call me...* Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.



5.5 Jiří Kovanda, xxx 19 November 1976. Prague, Václavské náměstí. Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

When I first saw this performance, I understood it as a symbol of resistance, a provocative gesture which in those totalitarian years could have led to being arrested. How surprised I was then to hear Jiří's explanation that he was essentially interested only in overcoming his innate shyness and [in opening] himself up to a few people [for a few minutes]. Suddenly, a gesture of resistance and voluntary sacrifice turns into a loving embrace. We should not completely believe Kovanda, however.... The fact that he chose Wenceslas Square – a place burdened with so many historical and social meanings – speaks for itself. Equally telling are the expressions on the faces of the passers-by. For me, this mix of indifference, indignation and incomprehension always represented the essence of totalitarian pettiness, which became visible only when confronted with Kovanda's artistic act.³⁵

If this was indeed an attempt by the artist to offer himself to the anonymous passers-by, their unsmiling faces would suggest that it was a failure. As the artist Vladimír Havlík recalled:

People were jeopardized by what they didn't understand at that time. They would say to themselves: 'What's going on there? Can it endanger

me? The police are going to come' ...you can see that in Kovanda's photographs as well. The people are acting as if nothing is going on. ... In the 1970s and 1980s... perhaps only one per cent of the people present ... did as little as smile.³⁶

The action may have had only a momentarily disconcerting effect on the passers-by, but it served Kovanda's purposes. He explained that many of his pieces involved pushing himself to the limits of his timidity: 'When I can't manage this, I can't do this or don't handle that, then I do it in this way. Especially during my actions, that was an impulse and a reason to perceive myself more meaningfully.'³⁷ If this was the case here, too, then in *xxx* of 1976 Kovanda was literally turning to confront head-on his concerns about making contact with the public. As he explained: 'These things arose in a state of tension or a sort of trance, because I'm a timid person... they involved behaviour that was unnatural to me.'³⁸ Kovanda often worked with his natural shyness – his Achilles heel – as a limitation to overcome and explore. Crucially, though, his personal experiments in the street also served as a litmus test of the openness of the Czechoslovak public sphere in the late 1970s – recording people's responses to unexpected encounters and then relaying them, via photography and text, to his circle of friends. In this respect, his interventions were not intended as participatory: on the contrary – the public is incorporated into his personal creative world readymade.

Although Kovanda carried out his actions in public, he did so without advertising them as artistic. He shied away from attracting more than the fleeting attention of chance passers-by – as opposed to Tót's brazenly glad embrace of the freedom of artistic self-promotion in his West Berlin street actions. He stressed that the text – that is to say the idea, rather than the photographs accompanying his written statements – remained his primary form of communication: 'The message was intended more for those who would read about them as actions. What [interested me was] that something ordinary, something normal, might happen that way.'³⁹ Vít Havránek has therefore concluded that Kovanda's works were intended not for those he encountered on the street, but for a 'secondary audience': 'Even though Kovanda included bystanders, the city and a city choir in his performances, he never turned to them directly, and the aim of his performances was not to instigate a catharsis or transformation in those who participated or were simply walking by. They were intended for a secondary, gallery-going public.'⁴⁰ Paradoxically, under the conditions of normalization there was no opportunity to contact an official gallery-going audience with this sort of work in Czechoslovakia.

Kovanda's actions thus explored the double absence of a conventional audience, both on the street and in the traditional space of the gallery, as a critique of cultural conditions and artistic isolation. As he recalls: 'A gallery public would have been ideal, but they weren't there. If normal society functioned here in the Czech Republic, [my work] would be presented in a gallery or in the press, and people would get to know about it.'⁴¹ Kovanda, though, like Štembera before him, soon found that he was able to contact a sympathetic gallery audience in neighbouring Poland.

Kovanda's first exhibition was a joint show with Pavel Tuč at the students' club of the Warsaw Polytechnic, Galeria Mospan, in November 1976. In his review of the exhibition, the young director of the gallery, Tomasz Sikorski, who had met the pair through Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, noted that the two young Czech artists were primarily interested in the problems of photography as a medium for documentation, 'taking advantage of the photographic technique solely as a means of registration and communication'.⁴² His review included a diagram detailing the relationship between the 'idea' and 'art', represented in the form of two boxes linked by an arrow labelled 'creative process'. The piece was a script for Kovanda's *Waiting for a Telephone Call*, reading 'idea: today someone will call me / creative process: I wait for the phone call / art: x (illegible) calls me', with the date and time of the action and three photographs of Kovanda sitting at a desk waiting for a phone call alongside. Sikorski suggested that the photographs 'are here not so much a document as one possible example of an illustrative arrangement, fulfilling the demands of optimal probability in relation to the a priori accepted rules. The pictorial element here turns out to be just a helpful factor in the reception of the textual record.'⁴³ Kovanda explained that sometimes several months would elapse between the drafting of the idea, and its execution and documentation. The emphasis, as Sikorski was at pains to point out, was on the idea and the creative process, rather than simply on the outcome – thus making this a conceptual piece, rather than a documented performance.⁴⁴

This was illustrated in Kovanda's *Theatre* piece, which he performed standing in front of the National Museum in Prague in November 1976. The description of the action reads: *I follow a previously written script to the letter. Gestures and movements have been selected so that passers-by will not suspect that they are watching a 'performance'. November 1976. Václavské náměstí, Prague* (fig. 5.6). The *Theatre* action pushed the boundaries of the visible, and playfully implied the impossibility of distinguishing art from life. Although Kovanda's title suggests a reference to John Cage's *Theatre Piece no. 1* from 1952, his

"DIVADLO"

listopad 1976
Praha, Václavské náměstí

Chovám se přesně podle předem napsaného scénáře.
Gesta a pohyby jsou voleny tak, aby nikdo z kolemjdoucích
netušil, že sleduje "představení".



5.6 Jiří Kovanda, 'Theatre'. Prague, Václavské náměstí. November 1976. Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

piece was closer in Spirit to Cage's 4'33", from the same year.⁴⁵ Rather than the sort of spectacle one might associate with theatre, even a theatre of the absurd, Kovanda played down the visual component of the action to the point of invisibility – blurring art and life in the manner of a Happening, but more so – for, in the absence of an initiated audience, the two merged completely. Kantor's dream of 'impossible theatre' is reconfigured, here, as 'invisible theatre'. Kovanda only incorporated 'three or four simple movements. It wasn't that important what I did, but rather the fact that it wasn't distinguishable from everyday life' – among others, 'wiping his nose', or 'grooming his hair'.⁴⁶ This re-enactment of everyday gestures as a pre-planned series entailed a sequence of movements taken out of the world, only to put them straight back in. What mattered – Kovanda reportedly added, in another interview – was the 'uselessness' of the activity.⁴⁷ The performance, like many of his others in this period, was conceived of as a way to arrive at 'a stronger perception of things'. 'Art', Kovanda observed, 'is not much more than what we can see in a common, everyday life.'⁴⁸ Kovanda explored the potential of sweeping a path in the everyday to change perception – primarily, one could argue, his own perception, then that of his chosen circle of spectators.

Asked in an interview whether he was introduced to the idea of working with the everyday through Fluxus, Kovanda replied: 'I didn't really understand Fluxus... I don't see much everyday life in Fluxus. I see more of a kind of artiness.' Unlike the Aktual Art group in the 1960s, whose events transformed everyday life into something out of the ordinary, Kovanda's actions challenged the idea that freedom must produce visible or determinable changes on the surface of life. He explained: 'I do something that can be done normally, something that happens all the time; in a way that's abnormal.'⁴⁹ He considered how to realize the infinite possibilities latent in everyday actions. The invisibility of external interest was in inverse proportion to the internal significance of the action. He explored in public but secretly, the internal dialectics of agency, by hanging around on the street. By designating such actions as crossing his legs or holding on to a railing as artistic activity, he was also working 'under cover'. What mattered was his personal decision to behave in a certain way – for himself, without incriminating others, casting them as unwitting witnesses at best. The artist made an ethical decision to accept responsibility for the limitation of his personal actions, taking on board his deliberate failure to make his intentions known to others. Complicity is shared only with the trusted friend – the photographer – standing some way

off, who might easily have been taken for a tourist photographing the imposing museum behind the artist standing nervously before it.

Kovanda's *Theatre* piece tested the possibility of determining one's own actions in the public sphere, while paradoxically limiting their range to a new point of performative inconspicuousness. If the piece was invisible to the authorities, this was at the cost of also being invisible to the public. Tomáš Pospiszyl has compared the photographic documentation of Kovanda's actions in public space to photographs taken, at this time, by the secret police in Prague:

The pictures taken by the police using hidden cameras capture the environment of the hardline Communist days of Prague of the 1970s and early 1980s. The secret agent follows an individual who cannot be visibly distinguished from the other citizens. It is only from the records that we learn that this individual, seemingly doing everyday things, is in fact committing acts against the state. Sending letters, meeting with friends in restaurants or picking up visitors from the airport are later viewed as the distribution of subversive materials, gathering for counter-revolutionary reasons or establishing contacts with foreign spies.⁵⁰

He observes that Kovanda's photographs are often from 'the same places in Prague – where people were going about their everyday business. Those passing by never even suspected that an artistic performance was being played out around them', thus pointing out that Kovanda and Tuč's covert project found a counterpart in the secret policemen's activity, although the latter were acting on behalf of the state, and the former in the name of art. So: 'Two types of hidden scenarios were thus being played out concurrently in Prague's public spaces: one led by the secret police, the other by unofficial artists. Even though they were based on completely different motivations, their photographs and accompanying texts show a number of similarities.'⁵¹ Although Kovanda's work would seem to have more in common with that of the American conceptualist Vito Acconci (whose work he was familiar with), than it does with secret police activity – nevertheless, Pospiszyl's argument helps to explain why a work like Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969) took on different meanings in the covertly policed sphere of Czechoslovak normalization. The secret police were interested in documenting all meetings among potential dissidents. Kovanda staged a series of public meetings, in order to test his limits in the public space. Tellingly, though, given the

paranoid climate of life under normalization, these attempts became borderline aggressive acts flying in the face of the fear of unsolicited contact.

Walking up and down Spálená and Vodičkova streets in the autumn of 1977, Kovanda performed a piece he called 'Contact' 3 September 1977 (fig. 5.7). As he paced quickly along the pavement, he deliberately bumped into passers-by, who doubtless wrote off these collisions, temporarily interrupting their contact-free passage through the city, as mere accidents. But Kovanda's 'chance' collisions were in fact highly physical attempts to 'contact' the public. The repetition of the game of just missing a painful clash played with the fact that the artist was walking in a different direction to the people he contacted, and that while they went about their everyday business, oblivious to the trap that had been set for them, Kovanda became the director and orchestrator of moments in their lives – choreographing the everyday. As Slovene art historian Igor Zabel pointed out: 'Even small, all but invisible interventions like Kovanda's could represent a disturbance in the order of things and thus an unidentified but clear threat to the understanding that the *status quo* was "natural".'⁵² Fleeting, direct physical contact became an outlet for the artist's frustration with being unable to reveal his identity and intentions as an artist in public, and a means for him to take revenge for this lack of recognition – a primitive compensation for his sense that communication with the public was impossible. Kovanda engineered a situation where an external agent controls what the passer-by takes to be chance events. His premeditated collisions were designed as small obstacles to the everyday ritual of everyone minding their own business.

On the same day, Kovanda made another, arguably bolder piece – one that he described as an outright 'attack' on the passer-by:⁵³ *xxx 3 September 1977. Prague, Václavské náměstí. On an escalator turning around, I look into the eyes of the person standing behind me...* (fig. 5.8). As before, the artist's direction of travel is the opposite to that of those he contacts, and those he targets have no idea what is happening. Although there is no physical contact this time, there is an attempt at a psychological connection – by looking. Kovanda faces the wrong way on the up escalator, and turns to look with a half-smile at the person coming up behind him on the steps below. It is revealing that while everyone else is facing forwards and upwards, their eyes turned towards the sunlight at the top of the stairs as they emerge from the underground, the artist ignores the normal direction of travel and seeks instead to engineer an intimate encounter with a

"KONTAKT"

3.září 1977

Praha, Spálená a Vodičkova ulice



5.7 Jiří Kovanda, 'Contact' 3 September 1977. Prague, Spálená and Vodičkova streets. Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

x x x

3.září 1977
Praha, Václavské náměstí

Na eskalátoru...otočen hledím do očí člověku,
který stojí za mnou...



5.8 Jiří Kovanda, xxx 3 September 1977. Prague, Václavské náměstí. On an escalator... I turn around and gaze straight into the eyes of the person standing behind me. Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

stranger, taking direct action to overcome the alienated monotony of city life. The Prague metro also served as a litmus test for the debilitated state of 'normalized' Czechoslovak life for Havel. In a passage from 'Stories and Totalitarianism', he advised:

Ride the escalators in the Prague subway and watch the faces of the people going in the opposite direction. This journey is a pause in the daily rat race, a sudden stoppage of life, a frozen moment that may reveal more about us than we know. Perhaps it is one of those 'moments of truth' when a person suddenly stands outside all relationships; he is in public, but alone with himself. The faces moving past are empty, strained, almost lifeless, without hope, without longing, without desire.⁵⁴

This is the same moment that Kovanda's action explores – interrupting, by turning around, the 'moment of truth' experienced by another escalator user, and forcing that person into an unexpected relationship, just at the moment when they might have occupied a liminal zone, 'outside all relationships', as Havel puts it.

If Kovanda's action on the escalator was, as he called it, a 'step made towards another person', it was a complex one.⁵⁵ By retaining control over the scenario, and recording photographically his own gaze rather than that of the person contacted, he also erased all traces of the impact of the visual exchange. As he later explained, his actions

contain a longing for contact, overcoming the barriers which surround us, but at the same time they have been set up in such a manner that true contact is impossible. ... The act of overcoming barriers is a truly violent one: it is not done by both parties, but is a unilateral activity. That means that in one second, the other person feels threatened and withdraws even more. So these performances were more about those barriers than about true contact.⁵⁶

The passers-by whom Kovanda chose to contact were not so much participants in as victims of his demonstrations. As he admits: 'It must have been unpleasant and annoying ... it was an aggression, albeit not brutal, but a conscious transgression of certain borders ... scarcely anything further could have got through to people.'⁵⁷ Here again, Kovanda was mostly interested in training himself: 'I thought I myself had to transform myself in order to be able to operate within the parameters that existed. I had to seek out normal interpersonal relationships. Normal ways of dealing with people.'⁵⁸ But there was

nothing normal in a piece like *I Hide* (September 1977). Being an unofficial artist in Prague was in many respects equivalent to being in hiding; Kovanda staged the situation by trying to hide in various places in the street – in doorways, behind bins. Any unsuspecting passer-by who happened to notice him would probably have thought either that he was playing an adolescent prank or that he was a lunatic.

In addition to the activities he carried out with Tuč, Kovanda also invited friends to meet him and watch his actions in the public space, thus introducing a further risk factor, and intensifying his drive to overcome his ‘ego’ by entering into the vulnerability of a performative scenario with an initiated audience. In *Attempted Acquaintance*. *I invited some friends to watch me trying to make friends with a girl. 19 October 1977* (fig. 5.9), he hung around on Staroměstské náměstí, looking around for someone to approach, as his friends watched him from a certain distance. He recalls: ‘I ended it after 20–30 minutes because I didn’t dare speak to anyone. I told those whom I’d invited what my intentions had been and that it simply wound up that way. I believe I’d handle it better now – when you’re older, you no longer consider your ego so terribly important.’⁵⁹ The action played once more with making contact, this time with a single passer-by, but failed. In the end, he did not have the courage to initiate a conversation with a stranger. Here ‘a close circle of acquaintances’ served as substitutes for the public, in the absence of a ‘legitimate’ audience for unofficial art of this sort.⁶⁰ The spectators’ goodwill towards the artist was tested by their agreement to attend and watch an action without knowing what they were going to witness. The trust involved on the part of both performer and spectators was an integral part of the scenario. Friendship thus served as an important framework within which to test the possibility of expanding outwards beyond a small, safe circle.

Kovanda’s reticence carried over into his actions at the various meetings with Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch and Karel Miler in which he participated in the late 1970s. As he recalls: ‘We organized performance events in different private spaces – cellars, store-rooms or empty apartments. It was only for a few invited friends, it wasn’t public.’⁶¹ Even without the challenges of performing in the street in front of an unsuspecting public, Kovanda’s actions in these alternative locations still retained a delicate sense of paranoia. That he felt compelled to proceed with caution, even among friends, was demonstrated in *xxx... I walk along carefully, very carefully, as if I were on ice that might crack at any moment, 28 October 1977* (fig. 5.10), in which he slowly made his way along a corridor,



5.9 Jiří Kovanda, *'Attempted Acquaintance'*. I invited some friends to watch me trying to make friends with a girl. 19 October 1977. Staroměstské náměstí, Prague. Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

as though trying to creep away from the small audience casually gathered to watch him. His mindful attitude towards this chosen escape route seems to have absorbed him entirely – placing the emphasis on a self-awareness and

restraint. He exhibited a similar caution and attention to the spatial boundaries of the field of action by edging slowly, eyes downcast, along the wall of a room in which people had gathered to watch in *xxx Pressing myself as close as I can to the wall, I make my way around the whole room; there are people in the middle of the room, watching...*, 26 November 1977 (fig. 5.11).

Kovanda's reticence served to challenge the conventional relationship between performer and spectator, shying away from viewers' expectations, as though trying to become one with the space, and direct attention away from himself. His strange behaviour inevitably had the opposite effect, drawing attention to his failure to merge with the environment. Like a child, he plays with the hope that if he could not see the audience, then perhaps they would not see him. In *xxx With my hands over my eyes I walk blindly into a group of people standing at the opposite end of the corridor*, 8 December 1977, he threw himself into the situation blindly, unable to see where he was going – bumping into the audience, just as he had bumped into passers-by in the street the previous year, but this time relying on the good-natured acceptance of those around him. Many of Kovanda's minimal transgressions were reticent exercises in humility. What mattered for Kovanda was the internal process – the fact of doing something – not the result: 'something is done, but in the end nothing comes out of it'.⁶² That the action was more important than the result was played out simply in Kovanda's *xxx I play marbles, always placing my hand as an obstacle between the hole and the marble...*, 19 May 1977. Here Kovanda both played the part of the actor and provided the impediment to the coming-to-fruition of his action. He explored a series of possibilities for action: 'doing something that's invisible, something completely unnecessary'.⁶³ Perhaps the clearest example of this attitude is the piece *xxx I carry some water from the river in my cupped hands and release it a few metres downriver*, 19 May 1977 (fig. 5.12).⁶⁴ The document is the only evidence that remains of the action: although there is a trace of the procedure in the world, it is visible only through the documentation.

Such activities were in some respects spiritual exercises. Kovanda explained that his actions were: 'therapeutic in a strong way. It was most important for me to do something alone, for myself and by myself'.⁶⁵ His attention to changing himself was, I think, related to his interest in the forms of Buddhist practice that were gaining currency among unofficial artists in Prague in this period. Karel Miler, who had discovered Zen through the American beatniks, introduced Kovanda to the Zen teachings that had been popularized in the West by such works as Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and in particular by the works of Japanese scholar and Zen master Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.⁶⁶

x x x

28. října 1977
Praha

...jdu opatrně, velice opatrně, jako po ledě, který
může každou chvíli prasknout.

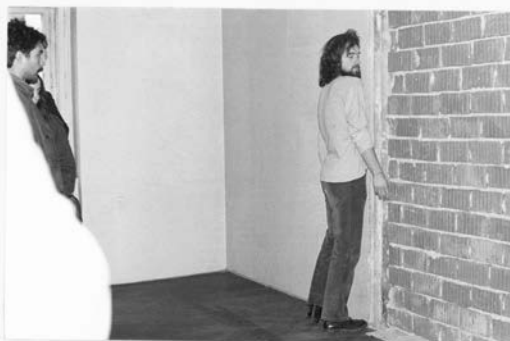


5.10 Jiří Kovanda, xxx... *I walk along carefully, very carefully, as if I were on ice that might crack at any moment.* 28 October 1977. Prague. Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

x x x

26. listopadu 1977
Hradec Králové

Co nejtěsněji přitisknut ke stěně, jdu kolem celé místnosti,
uprostřed které stojí diváci...



5.11 Jiří Kovanda, *xxx Pressing myself as close as I can to the wall, I make my way around the whole room; there are people in the middle of the room, watching ... November 26, 1977. Hradec králové.* Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.



5.12 Jiří Kovanda, *xxx I carry some water from the river in my cupped hands and release it a few metres downriver ... May 19, 1977. Střelecký ostrov, Prague.* Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

Practices related to Zen teachings offered a way to approach the world internally and to attempt to wield a certain degree of control from within the disempowering conditions of normalization, acting individually, on a micro-level that remained indiscernible from outside. Kovanda recalls that Štembera was also ‘doing yoga or Aikido ... it is obvious that it was useful at that time.’⁶⁷ It is enough to read the opening lines of Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism*: ‘Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom’, to see the relevance of Zen at this time.⁶⁸ The interest in Eastern philosophies among members of the Prague unofficial cultural scene provides an important context for understanding Kovanda’s minimalist approach to action, elucidating his belief that ‘it’s possible to say that even the smallest change a person undergoes effectively amounts to a change in the world’.⁶⁹

Kovanda repeatedly stressed the limited scope of his ambitions:

I’ve honestly never really had ideas about some kind of improved social situation. ... If I said something very idealistic ... it is that the improvement of the individual improves society as a whole. But that’s an overstatement. I didn’t want to mend the other, only myself. It was more important to deal with personal problems and feelings of individuals in society.⁷⁰

x x x

23.ledna 1978
Praha, Staroměstské náměstí

Dal jsem si sraz s několika přáteli...stáli jsme v hloučku
na náměstí a hovořili...náhle jsem se rozběhl, utíkal jsem
přes náměstí a zmizel v Melantrichově ulici...



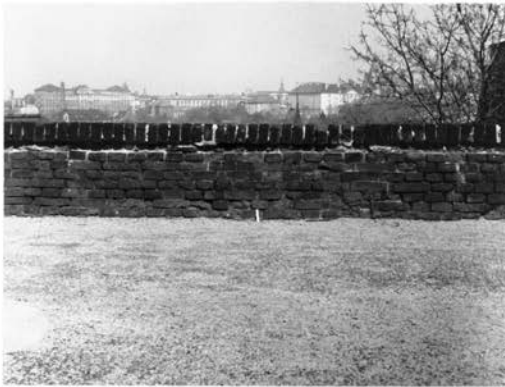
5.13 Jiří Kovanda, xxx I arranged to meet a few friends. we were standing in a small group on the square, talking...suddenly, I started running; I raced across the square and disappeared into Melantrich Street. January 23, 1978. Staroměstské náměstí, Prague. Kontakt Collection Erste Bank. Courtesy of the artist.

By 1978, Kovanda felt that he had exhausted the personal potential of the sorts of reticent actions he had been experimenting with since 1976. His withdrawal from actions was indicated when he ran away from a group of people he had arranged to meet in the main square in Prague: 'I'd always directed myself towards people in my actions, but in the last one I was running away from them.'⁷¹ He entitled the piece *xxx I arranged to meet a few friends... we were standing in a small group on the square, talking... suddenly, I started running; I raced across the square and disappeared into Melantrich Street 23 January 1978, Staroměstské náměstí, Prague* (fig. 5.13).

Kovanda no longer felt that he needed to be present in his work in person: 'my presence just died out'.⁷² Nevertheless, the following month he made one more piece, recorded in the same A4 format as the actions: *xxx I played a recording of Bob Dylan's 'I want you' from a tape player to a group of listeners gathered round, 23 February 1978*. He explained: 'I already felt then that a bodily action itself, or its presentation, did not satisfy me. I wanted to play people a song that I liked – but it was important. After it had finished playing, I switched off the record player and we left.'⁷³ The transgressive act of listening to the American song appears not to have been photographed. Documentation of the event consists of the title of the event with the word *nedokumentováno* (not-documented) typed across the page, suggesting that the absence of visual documentation might be a deliberate act of self-censorship.

According to Morganová, Kovanda was 'the first of the group around Petr Štembera to recognize, at the end of the 1970s, that body art had become exhausted'.⁷⁴ At one performance gathering in 1978, he just placed a potted plant behind a pillar, calling the piece *Installation I*. Further minimal interventions followed – the slightest of which were often on the streets of Prague, such as *Sugar Tower*, 1981 (fig. 5.14). These ephemeral sculptures echoed the pared-down quality of his earlier actions, marking his ongoing commitment to working in public space, while exploring new forms of near-invisibility. His interventions echoed Polish playwright and novelist Witold Gombrowicz's wry optimism, when he wrote that 'when one does not have what one wants, one must want what one has. ... I have had, you see, to resort more and more to very small, almost invisible pleasures, little extras. ... You've no idea how great one becomes with these little details, it's incredible how one grows.'⁷⁵ The sugar cubes stacked matter-of-factly on the pavement served, for Kovanda, as pleasurable 'little extras'. But there is a strong sense in which they also appear to have been necessary for him and designed to

VĚŽ Z CUKRU
jaro 1981
Praha, Vyšehrad



5.14 Jiří Kovanda, *Sugar Tower, Spring 1981. Vyšehrad, Prague.* Collection Neue Galerie, Graz. Courtesy of the artist.

enable him to continue to grow, in ‘personal’, creative terms, despite the fact that it remained structurally impossible for him to exist as an artist in official life. He sought myriad small ways to find a source of pleasure in limitations, and ways of acting that turned them into useful exercises in self-training. As he put it on another occasion: ‘It is not about changing external things, but about changing yourself from the inside.’⁷⁶

In late 1979, for a period of a week, Kovanda suspended a length of string at an inconvenient diagonal across the width of his room, calling the piece *White String at Home, 19–26 November 1979, Prague* (fig. 5.15). The string installation suggests a homage of sorts to Duchamp, whose 1969 exhibition had made such a strong impression on him as a young man – a variation on *Mile of String* (1942) – translated, out of necessity, into the intimacy of the private sphere, in the absence of access to an institutional space in which to intervene. By domesticating Duchamp’s gesture in this way, Kovanda proved his commitment to art’s critical potential, internalizing the challenge it could pose by experimenting with complicating his daily life and putting himself in a position of having to negotiate the inconvenience of the string for the duration of the installation. It may have been a small intervention, but it was one that took seriously the potential of artistic action to impact on daily life. As Kovanda explained:

For me, utopias have never been too important. I was more concerned with what I had at my disposal and what I could do with that. ... It is far more important for a person to make the most of what he has now, of the opportunities that present themselves, and of his limits as well... rather than dream about how great it would be if we could change this and that... sometime in the future.⁷⁷

Kovanda emphasized the limited scope of his project, saying: ‘I’ve always liked to base my work on given circumstances, with all of its inhibitions and obstacles, turning them into assets.’⁷⁸

Seeking to explain the climate of the 1970s art scene, Kovanda said: ‘I think we felt that politics was much shallower than what we were interested in, and that it shouldn’t be interpreted politically. ... Politics is simply a social function, and that is not enough for art ... in art content and perception are important ... there are more important and deeper problems than simple functioning.’⁷⁹ To clarify this, he added: ‘I don’t say that art should exclude political questions because these are present everywhere in some form. But it is not enough as a singular content.’⁸⁰ Kovanda was at pains to claim that politics could not impact on what he called ‘the personal’: ‘Communication

BÍLÝ PROVÁZEK DOMA /WHITE STRING AT HOME/

19.-26.listopadu 1979

Praha



5.15 Jiří Kovanda, *White String at Home* 19–26 November 1979, Prague. Collection Tate Modern, London. Courtesy of the artist.

and relations among people, between men and women, personal problems – politics can't really radically influence that. Well, unless your life is endangered.'⁸¹ Such an insistence that politics can't radically influence the personal sphere, however, was at odds with Havel's analysis of the state of affairs. For Havel, a distinction between public and private, or political and personal life, under 'Real Socialism', was untenable:

Public life is not as sharply distinguished from private life as it used to be... they have become two faces, two poles, or two dimensions of a single and indivisible life. Though it sometimes happens in complex and hidden ways, everything that takes place in the public sphere eventually influences and shapes the private sphere. When public life is nihilized, private life is distorted and ultimately nihilized too. Every measure taken to establish more complete control over the former has a pernicious effect on the latter.⁸²

If physical annihilation had once been the bottom line under totalitarianism, Havel argued that the threat of imprisonment had come to serve an analogous function in 1970s Czechoslovakia: 'the repressive apparatus that sends people to jail is an organic part and, indeed, the culmination of the general pressure totalitarianism exerts against life: without this extreme threat, many other threats would lose their credibility'.⁸³ He observed that totalitarian conditions in Czechoslovakia had, for decades, negated life through a sophisticated and bureaucratic network of mechanisms of control, imposed in order to stifle autonomous and self-determining activity:

The drastic curtailment of intellectual plurality makes it hard for a person to choose a way to relate to Being, to the world, and to himself. Culture and information controlled from the centre narrow the horizon against which people mature. ... The ever-present danger of being punished for any original expression compels one to move cautiously across the quicksand of one's potential. ... The network of bureaucratic limitations affects everything from one's choice of study or profession to the possibility to travel. ... The total claim of central power... creates a state of general nervousness: no one is ever sure of the ground he stands on, or what he may venture to do, and what he may not, or what may happen to him if he does... the omnipotence of the police makes people insecure... the extinction of individual responsibility in the faceless pseudo-responsibility of the system... creates a sensation of helplessness and cripples the will to live one's own life.⁸⁴

Kovanda's attention to small matters tested the possibility of building on these as a way to refuse to 'surrender'. Although he maintained that 'especially in periods of relative stability, politics was certainly not the only issue on artists' minds', he conceded that 'life was heavily controlled and influenced by the party-and-state apparatus'.⁸⁵ In so far as he was reticent about admitting the link, his position echoes that of the other artists in this book – *vis-à-vis* the political sphere (Kantor's 'disinterest' a decade earlier in Poland, or Szentjóbby's commitment to a 'parallel course' rather than direct engagement, in neighbouring Hungary). Attempting to eschew the political overdetermination of all aspects of life outlined by Havel, Kovanda sought to resist the state bureaucracy's incursion into his creative and personal life as an individual, testing, instead, the ground for establishing autonomous relations with others. While normalization certainly served as a crucial backdrop for his exploration of what he called 'normal' relationships, but so did the formation of a widening circle of 'improvised communities', among which we might number the circle of artists involved in the activities I have outlined in this chapter. One could argue, then, that the reticence Kovanda stressed (reflected, as I have shown, in both his actions and his installations) was a manifestation of his attempt to negotiate the conditions that Havel sought to understand, but also to challenge, in the same period.

Following the trial of Jirous and other underground musicians, dissident intellectuals in Czechoslovakia became increasingly outspoken. As Havel put it:

In this situation, all reserve and inner reticence seemed to lose its point; in this atmosphere, all the inevitable 'buts' seemed ridiculous, insignificant, and evasive. Everyone seemed to feel that at a time when all the chips are down, there are only two things one can do: gamble everything, or throw in the cards.⁸⁶

On 1 January 1977, acting as spokesmen for the other signatories, former diplomat and academic Jiří Hájek, together with Václav Havel and philosopher Jan Patočka, issued Charter '77, a call for civil and human rights to be respected. Welcoming the fact that the Czechoslovak authorities had signed two UN conventions on Human Rights in 1968, in addition to the Helsinki Agreement in 1975 intended to confirm these, the Chartist expressed their concern at 'how many fundamental civil rights for the time being are – unhappily – valid in our country only on paper'. They singled out 'the right to freedom of expression, guaranteed by Article 19 of the International Pact on

Civil and Political Rights published in the Codex of Laws of the CSSR / no. 120', as 'completely illusory'.⁸⁷ Freedom of expression was violated by centralized control of the media and cultural institutions; tens of thousands had been excluded from their professions during 'normalization'; young people had been denied university places because their parents' views did not accord with the official ones. Signed by 243 people, Charter '77 was a 'combination of a statement, a petition and a declaration of intent'.⁸⁸ To avoid official charges of illegality, the Chartists remained an informal organization, without membership rules or subscriptions, seeking to foster 'informal, non-bureaucratic, dynamic and open communities' and to make contact with like-minded people across European frontiers.⁸⁹ The Charter expressed openly what so many thought behind closed doors. Although police harassment, a media campaign and persecution of Chartists in their workplaces followed, to make them withdraw their signatures.⁹⁰ The events of 1977 proved that citizens were beginning to take initiatives uncontrolled by the authorities, and no longer took the *status quo* for granted. Social activity was now taking place outside the officially sanctioned realm, by-passing the 'leading role' of the Party.

6

Dialogue

In a series of occupation strikes on the Baltic coast in December 1970, workers in Gdańsk and Szczecin protested against dramatic increases in basic food prices announced two weeks before Christmas. Several were shot dead by police as they left their shipyards. The worst violence, however, was in the port of Gdynia. After a broadcast appeal from the local authorities for strikers to return to work, dozens were massacred by police with machine guns on arrival. Party Secretary Gomułka was replaced in the wake of these events, but the Party had irrevocably lost the support of most workers, and of those few intellectuals who remained in the Party after the widespread ‘anti-Zionist’ purge of 1968. As David Ost explains: ‘For many oppositionists, the events of 1968 demonstrated that the Polish “communist” party had become little more than a typical fascist party, without a hint of its original socialist programme... the opposition now felt that it had absolutely nothing in common with such a party, and there seemed little point in addressing democratic demands to it.’¹ Adam Michnik later observed that political change ‘from above’, as anticipated by Revisionists since 1956, was no longer on the cards. Marxist-Leninist doctrine was now ‘a dead creature, an empty gesture, an official ritual’, nothing more.² Even so, Revisionism had ‘popularized the ideas of truth and humanism, which were under attack in the official propaganda’, and ‘by opposing passivity and internal exile... laid the basis for independent participation in public life’, by making it clear that ‘faith in one’s ability to exert influence on the fate of society is an absolute prerequisite for political activity’.³

Writing in exile in 1971, philosopher Leszek Kołakowski regretted the passivity of many intellectuals in the wake of the massacre of workers in 1970. He attributed this to 'the fact that a large part of the Polish intelligentsia has been persuaded to believe in the complete inflexibility of the shameful system under which they live'.⁴ His 'Theses on Hope and Hopelessness' concluded that the socialist system was unreformable (its 'main function' being 'to uphold the monopolistic and uncontrolled power of the ruling apparatus', irrespective of public interest),⁵ but he also advanced theses on hope. Kołakowski explained: 'even the most innocent forms of social organization, if not subject to proper police control, can indeed transform themselves into centres of opposition'.⁶ Crucially, the inflexibility of the system depended on the 'degree to which the population is convinced of its inflexibility'. Kołakowski proposed that the 'contradictory internal tendencies' of state socialism visibly weakened its cohesion, thus making the '*idea of active resistance* exploiting contradictions in the system' a viable means for challenging a system whose ideological basis had long since collapsed, leaving in its wake only the threat of Soviet invasion and the weak promise of economic improvement.⁷ By the second half of the 1970s, other oppositional intellectuals in Poland had also come round to this view.

Gomułka's successor, Edward Gierek, sought to improve relations with society by boosting consumerism and hopes of economic prosperity. To this end, the Polish economy was opened to the West for loans and technology, with investment directed, in particular, to the coal, steel and motor industries.⁸ With the successful production of Fiats under licence, and an increased range of goods on sale, consumer expectations soared. However, exports crucial to servicing the mounting Western debt dropped sharply in the wake of the international recession following the oil price rises of 1973. By the mid-1970s, Poland's foreign debt was barely serviceable. Rather than default, the government sought the drastic solution of price increases to cut the staggering 12 per cent of GDP being spent on domestic food subsidies.⁹

On 28 June 1976, Party leaders announced sharp increases in the price of meat and staple foods, prompting spontaneous nationwide protests, despite an attempt to pre-empt and prevent them by calling up around 7,000 target people (among them the student leaders of 1968) for military service in the run up to the new 'pricing operation'.¹⁰ The Prime Minister's appearance on television later the same day, to state that the increases had merely been 'consultative' and would be withdrawn, proved to be an astonishing admission of the workers' power to veto a major item of policy by the mono-party

state.¹¹ The ensuing campaign to jail and blacklist strike leaders prompted intellectuals to form a Committee for the Defence of Workers (KOR) in September 1976, to offer medical, financial and legal help to those being persecuted for their part in the price protests, and for their families. Unlike previous groups, KOR acted openly. Its foundation was announced by the prominent writer Jerzy Andrzejewski in an 'Open Letter to the Speaker of the Parliament' and an 'Appeal to Society and to the Authorities of the Polish People's Republic'.¹² Uniquely, all KOR's public statements attached the signatories' names, professions and addresses. While this made the authors easy prey to police repression, it also gave public credibility to their statements. In calling for civic courage from others, they showed the way themselves. Partly through KOR, it became apparent to the wider public that Communist claims to subservience and obedience could be resisted. It became possible to say 'no' to demands by the state. Kołakowski's theses on the self-organization of society were thus confirmed.

As one of the founders of KOR, Jacek Kuroń, had already explained, there was a growing recognition among citizens that there was no need to wait for the advent of a more independent culture and society, or the development of a full-blown political opposition. Like Havel, Kuroń argued that engaged citizens with a sense of common purpose could reclaim the public space monopolized by the Communist Party through self-organization. He cited the parallel achievements of different groups within Polish society whose sustained resistance had succeeded in preserving some level of independence from the monopolistic state system: farmers who spontaneously de-collectivized at the end of 1956, workers whose protests had on several occasions forced concessions from the state, writers and intellectuals who had continued to fight against censorship, and the Catholic Church, which consistently resisted repressive state measures.¹³ Adam Michnik argued in 'A New Evolutionism' that the future of political life in Poland now depended on the convergence of small groups of the nonconformist intelligentsia with 'the activities of the working class'.¹⁴ Most important was to act openly. As Michnik explained: 'Given the absence of an authentic political culture or any standards of democratic collective life, the existence of an underground would only worsen these illnesses and change little. Revolutionary theories and conspiratorial practices can only serve the police, making mass hysteria and police provocation more likely.'¹⁵ He concluded that 'an unceasing struggle for reform and evolution that seeks an expansion of civil liberties and human rights is the only course East European dissidents can take'.¹⁶

The aim of KOR was to spread the refusal of state demands into society as a whole, creating positive space for activities that could no longer be controlled by the political authorities. KOR's focus was on transforming society, bypassing the state, and 'rebuilding the independent social bonds that the system tried to destroy'.¹⁷ A reconceptualization of politics was underway, in line with the realization that 'democratization might not require state transformation after all'.¹⁸ As Ost explains:

If activity that takes place within civil society alone – between individuals drawn together neither by business contract nor political necessity nor religious bond, but only by a desire to engage in social activities of their own choosing – can properly be called 'political activity', even though such activity ignores the state sphere that is normally considered the locus of politics, then it should be possible to bypass the state altogether and still effect political change.¹⁹

By this account, independent cultural activity was also a field of antipolitical political activity. This final chapter examines the activities of the artist Jerzy Bereś in the 1970s and 1980s and how he reclaimed the public space as a non-coercive sphere for initiating independent dialogue and promoting democratic values. Although he is less well known internationally than he should be, his ability to exploit loopholes in the system to provoke and stimulate dialogue at all the key turning points in this extraordinary period in Polish and Central European history was remarkable, and deserves more scholarly attention.

Bereś had studied under Poland's leading sculptor, Xavery Dunikowski, at the height of the drive to enforce Socialist Realism, and was therefore initiated, from the outset, into the absurdities of socialist cultural power politics. Dunikowski's entanglement with the authorities could be said to have reached its apogee after Stalin's death in 1953, when he became the favourite for a lavishly funded competition to design a 15-metre-high monument to Stalin to stand in front of the newly erected Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. His proposal for a massive granite sculpture was rejected along with all the others, however, and no monument was erected, as the committee unanimously found each of the proposals inadequate to the task of representing all the facets of Stalin's greatness. One member of the selection committee is recorded as recalling, though, that Dunikowski's project had made Stalin appear 'indifferent, dangerous', with his cheeks sucked in as though he

were ‘spitting, spitting on the whole world’(!)²⁰ As one might expect, given the circumstances, Bereś graduated strongly committed to artistic independence. Nevertheless, he would later characterize his thinking on the relationship between art and politics in the following terms: ‘My position is that art has precedence over politics, but... through art we can talk about everything, [including] politics.’²¹ Artistic independence, then, for Bereś, in contrast to Kantor’s artistic ‘disinterest’, did not centre on an avoidance of explicit allusions to the political. His position was that of an ‘outsider’:

I was in conflict with the art circle, having a different attitude to the matter of defining freedom. This circle, particularly in Poland, considered any engagement with or contestation of reality as entering into dependence. For this reason pure art was defined as a position of freedom. I believe that it is the opposite, this is escapism. Freedom is the right to have a voice on every issue.²²

As of 1968, Bereś began to produce individual actions, which he referred to as ‘manifestations’. Like Koller, he had swiftly rejected the conventionalized form of the Happening. As he explained in relation to his participation in Kantor’s *Panoramic Sea Happening*, ‘my appearances were a protest against this doctrinarian tendency in art’.²³ In contrast to what he perceived as the unsubstantial yield of the Happening, what interested him, he said, was ‘not the... provocation of the public, as was the case with Happenings, but rather a message, which I want to articulate in these situations’.²⁴ Bereś understood the dilemma of what he called the performer’s ‘entanglement’ in a ‘whole conglomeration of fetishization, idolization, from which there is no way out’.²⁵ He was dissatisfied with the conventional relationship that performance art and Happenings established – a relationship where performers and audiences tended to mutually objectify one another. His own aim was more idealistic: to nourish ‘a situation of partnership on the basis of subjectivity’.²⁶ If the term ‘manifestation’ conjures up perceptual, political and spiritual registers of meaning simultaneously, Bereś deliberately wove these threads together.²⁷

Prophecy 1 (fig. 6.1), Bereś’s first independent manifestation, took place at the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw on 6 January 1968. The gallery was filled with branches and logs cut from a fallen tree.²⁸ The artist appeared before the assembled public naked, with a noose of thick rope and a white piece of cloth around his neck, a red piece of cloth and two crudely moulded boards strapped around his waist, and began to construct a pyre with the wood, before taking the noose from his neck, unwrapping the pieces of red and



6.1 Jerzy Bereś, *Prophecy 1*, 6 Jan 1968, Galeria Foksal, Warszawa. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bettina Bereś.

white cloth from his body, and constructing a bow from a piece of curved wood, strung with the pieces of cloth, the colour of the Polish flag. Pulling the bowstring taut, he prepared to fire, then tied a piece of jute with the words *Prophecy 1* in place of the arrowhead. Finally, he tied the pieces of wood around his waist to the assemblage, signed one of the boards with green paint, and made handprints on the other. After the artist had extricated himself from the boards, the audience could see a mould of the contours of his body carved into the wood, physical traces bearing witness to his presence, suggesting their quasi-mystical status as relics of the event. During what the artist termed his ‘independent work-action’, a short text was repeated aloud: *The Creative Act 1*. Bereś’s statement proposed a new path for the future: ‘the authentic creative act / belongs to a new future / reality. The independent / action of a clearly defined personality / can give the guarantee of the existence / of a conscious creative act.’²⁹ The artist’s commitment to authenticity is militant and uncompromising, particularly the emphasis on the ‘clearly defined personality’. The message was, among other things, a declaration of the need to continue to struggle for Polish independence. The taut bowstring in the national colours, poised to be released, symbolized readiness – a promise for the future.

A brief description of *Prophecy 1* by Wiesław Borowski appeared in the Communist weekly *Kultura* but it was accompanied by a scathing condemnation by a leading columnist, who reported:

There was so little to see at the Happening, that in despair Mr Bereś undressed, but then there was even less to look at... according to the posters stuck up around town, the traces of the event produced by Mr Bereś can be seen between the hours of such and such, but these are nothing more than the sort of traces that call for the immediate summoning of a cleaning lady.³⁰

Thereafter, Bereś's actions were largely ignored by the press, and if they were reported it was only in order that they might be ridiculed. Documentation of his actions, when publicly presented, was frequently censored. Henryk Urbanowicz, Head of the Fine Arts Workshops (PSP) – the organization in control of the state monopoly on public art commissions, under whose aegis the Foksal functioned, censored all traces of the event. Bereś recalls that when he asked on what grounds, he received the reply: 'Things like this at a time like this – impossible! Out of the question! At a time when Dubček is coming to power, to do things like this!'³¹ Polish officials, Bereś later deduced, may already have been anticipating the crushing of the nascent Prague Spring in neighbouring Czechoslovakia.³² Bereś's mobilization of the issue of Polish independence acquired retrospectively prophetic overtones the following month, when national outrage was sparked by the authorities' closure of Kazimierz Dejmek's allegedly anti-Soviet production of the Polish romantic poet Mickiewicz's play *Forefathers' Eve* at the Great Theatre in Warsaw.

Bereś took his cue from the resulting outcry to carry out *Prophecy 2* (fig. 6.2) on 1 March, the day after the important meeting of key literary figures from the Union of Polish Writers (ZLP) on 29 February 1968 to condemn this latest act of censorship. Central Kraków was occupied by a contingent of militia, and secret police were positioned so as to cordon off the main square, thereby preventing people from laying flowers at the feet of the statue of Mickiewicz there. Since Galeria Krzysztofory was just beside the square, Bereś's manifestation was portentous in terms of both time and place. Visitors encountered a peasant's cart stacked high with wood, and Bereś dressed as he had been in Warsaw, but this time with an axe in one hand and a few dozen copies of *Kultura* in the other. The artist invited the audience to use the newspaper to light fires around the edges of the gallery



6.2 Jerzy Bereś, *Prophecy 2*, March 1968, Galeria Krzysztofory, Kraków. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski. Courtesy of Anka Ptaszkowska.

space, and to unload wood from the cart to construct a pyre. He mounted this as they did so, until he stood high up under the vaulted ceiling of the smoke-filled room, resembling what he called a 'living monument'. The audience were invited to paint the peasant cart with the traditional sky-blue housepaint used in the Polish countryside (thought to keep off flies), while the artist constructed another red and white bow, as he had done in Warsaw, tied himself to the construction, signed one of the wooden boards using a charred woodchip, and descended.

Bereś's manifestation urged visitors to come together in a ritual sacrifice – setting fire to the state cultural organ as an act of vengeance against the censorship of the cultural sphere.³³ The artist offered to sacrifice himself, in order to keep alive the prophecy of national independence he had made the previous month, inviting spectators to participate actively in building

the foundations for this prophecy to be fulfilled. The artistic manifestation served, therefore, as a collective and cathartic opportunity for people to act together at a time of national crisis. If this was a risky undertaking, Bereś was prepared, symbolically, to fan the flames of opposition to state cultural policy. On 8 March, demonstrating students would also explicitly target the press, raising the cry ‘the press lies’ and burning newspapers in public.³⁴

Bereś did not participate in the controversial, compensatory Zalesie Ball attended by the Foksal Gallery artists’ circle in the aftermath of the events of March 1968. He later explained that he spent the years 1968 and 1969 making ‘instruments for manifesting’ as it was impossible to organize manifestations.³⁵ This series of ‘objects-vehicles’ made to be installed, albeit temporarily, in public spaces, was Bereś’s way of contesting the Central European events of 1968. The most direct of these is *Carriage* (1968) (fig. 6.3). A mature tree trunk, sliced in half lengthways, serves as a makeshift stretcher with a primitive wheel at one end. A rough cross has been formed out of a rolled-up newspaper sticking out of a vertical pole, and the negative of a human form hewn out of the trunk – as though the trace of a corpse was ingrained in the wood. On the wheel, the Polish word NO (NIE) is carved out in capitals. On the concrete beneath, NIE has been painted in black at regular intervals behind the wheel, suggesting that this is an object-vehicle that prints the word of protest – NO – as one manoeuvres it. Although Bereś’s construction is far more explicit in its references to the clashes between demonstrators and militia over the course of that year than Tamás Szentjóby’s *Portable Trench for Three People*, made in Budapest the following year, both serve as powerful variations on the theme of the stretcher.

Other politically resonant propositions produced by Bereś in 1969 include: an 80-centimetre-high *Moralitymeter* (fig. 6.4), a segment of a tree with a flattened human figure carved into it, which, when rolled, repeated the action of sadistically running it over and over again; a primitive wooden assemblage with a wooden sword attached that set a series of aluminium frying-pan lids a-clatter when raised and lowered, provocatively entitled *Normalizer* (fig. 6.5); and *Altar 0 (Prophecy 3)* (fig. 6.6), a mobile wooden construction which, when operated by the spectator, causes a red and white cylinder to rise and fall, and a stone to bang into a suspended frying pan. Bereś recalls:

Following the pacification of 1968, no manifestation was possible. The terror of normalization reigned. *Prophecy 3* was made in the workshop, but the public could carry out a manifestation during the course of the



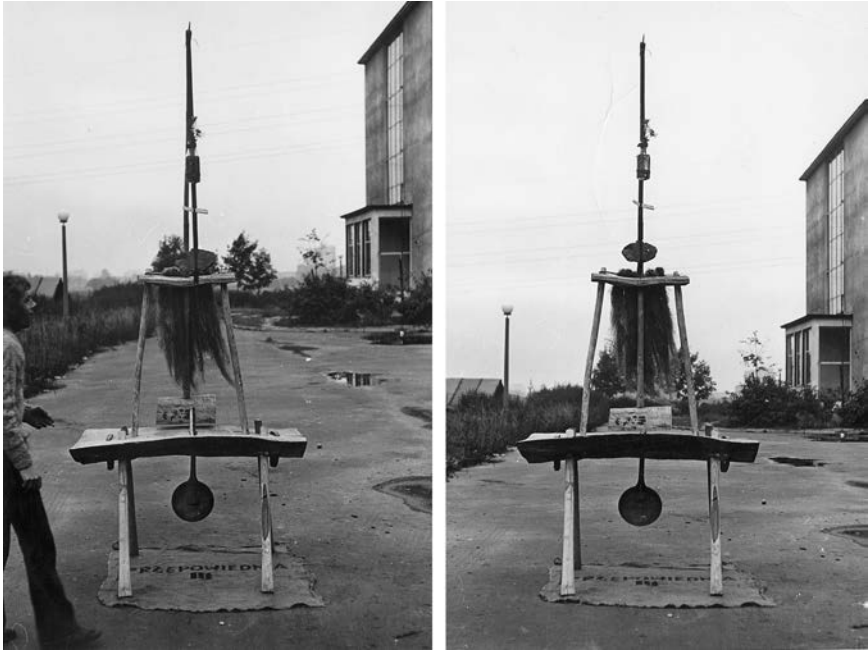
6.3 Jerzy Bereś, *Carriage*, 1968. Collection MOCAK, Kraków. Photograph by Wojciech Plewiński. Courtesy of Wojciech Plewiński and Bettina Bereś.



6.4 Jerzy Bereś, *Moralitymeter*, 1968–9.
Photographer unknown. Courtesy of
Bettina Bereś.



6.5 Jerzy Bereś, *Normalizer*, 1969.
Photograph by Erazm Ciołek. Courtesy of
Bettina Bereś and Agata Ciołek.



6.6 Jerzy Bereś, *Altar 0 (Prophecy 3)*, 1969. Collection of Centrum Sztuki Studio w Warszawie. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bettina Bereś.

exhibition by moving the sculpture.... And this aspect so annoyed the authorities that the sculpture disappeared from the exhibition in unknown circumstances and, as it turned out, was subjected to judgement at the District Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party as to whether it was anti-state, or not. It was returned to the Kszysztofory after the end of the exhibition.³⁶

The idea of a group of officials at the District Committee requisitioning the sculpture for a private debate is certainly funny, and a sign of the absurd ambivalence of the cultural policies of a country in which deploying the colours of the national flag was considered a potentially anti-state act. Bereś's sculptures from this period were for the most part exhibited, albeit often briefly, at Galeria Krzysztofory.

On 11 November 1968, Bereś marked his response to the events of that year with a maverick action at the Galeria Krzysztofory café. Sitting at a round table with a gathering of Kraków friends and a few visitors from Czechoslovakia, he performed what he called an 'anti-Happening'.³⁷ Standing up, he walked over to the next table and stripped to the waist, taking from his bag a heavy rope, a loaf of bread, a knife, paint, a brush and a newspaper.

He put the noose of the rope around his neck, and attached the other end to a nail in the wall. He then sat and sliced the loaf, painting each slice black and arranging the black-painted slices in a circle around the table, before picking up the newspaper and reading it for some time. All of a sudden, he shouted 'Enough of this!', tore the rope from around his neck, wrapped it in the newspaper, and stabbed the bundle with the knife, fixing it to the centre of the table. He then asked for a fresh flower. Someone produced a red rose, which Bereś tied to the handle of the knife.³⁸

Bread Painted Black (fig. 6.7) was Bereś's poetic response to the profound sense of impotence produced by the events of 1968. The circle of inedible bread, the noose around his neck, the hopelessness of reading the official version of events in the daily newspapers – all this served as the backdrop to his cry that he had had enough. By casting off the rope that bound him, and violently stabbing the newspaper, he sought to declare his moral outrage at the current situation. This anti-Happening resulted in what Bereś called a 'material document': the stabbed bundle with the rose and the knife, which was displayed in the café, along with some photographs of the event. It was to be among the many works and documents destroyed in summer 1969, when the Krzysztofory café exhibition was targeted by the security services.³⁹ That artists had been able to use the Krzysztofory relatively freely as their



6.7 Jerzy Bereś, *Bread Painted Black*, 1968. Photograph by Jacek Maria Stokłosa. Copyright Jacek Maria Stokłosa.



6.8 Jerzy Bereś, *Clapper*, 1970. Collection of Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi. Photograph by Wojciech Plewiński. Courtesy of Wojciech Plewiński and Bettina Bereś.

base in previous years had been to a great extent thanks to the protection of the painter Jonasz Stern, who had been a Party member since before the war and had maintained relations with some high-ranking state officials. In the anti-Semitic purges after March 1968, however, Stern lost his position at the Academy of Fine Arts, and an ‘exceptionally grim period’, as Bereś describes it, set in.⁴⁰

It was abundantly clear that ‘state orientation’ was now hopeless.⁴¹ Bereś recalls: ‘For me, the Gierek period was unbearable. Mostly because of this world of seeming freedom, while in fact it was still a totalitarian system, albeit one masked in a more refined way.’⁴² He conveyed the new hypocrisy in his provocative wooden constructions. *Clapper* (1970) (fig. 6.8) consisted of three pairs of wooden hands pointing upwards, and one pointing downwards

with what looks like a rosary wound around its fingers, all attached to a lever, so that when rotated by the spectator, the hands above produce wooden applause, while the hands beneath begin to pray. He later made a contraption entitled *Diplomatic Ping-Pong*, another clattering installation designed to be activated by the spectator – with two sets of crudely wrought bats, a fragile pole serving as a point of balance in between, and rocks and frying pans suspended beneath an impossibly narrow playing field constructed from half a thin log. The invitation to play at diplomacy is an invitation to an impossibly crude game, one in which the ball is positioned strategically out of the reach of both players, and the only outcome can be the production of environmental noise. This allusion to the hopelessness of the political situation would not have been lost on the contemporary spectator. Another installation of 1971, *Round Table* (fig. 6.9), is also remarkable for its anticipation of later political events. Produced in the aftermath of the workers' strikes of 1970–1, it consists of a small wooden table with two clenched wooden fists on sticks, chained together in such a way that when one is raised the other is lowered – producing a potentially endlessly angry wooden dialogue. The piece was both humorously absurd and prophetic in so far as the angry stand-off between the workers and the authorities would not let up until the government and Solidarity sat down to the Round Table talks in spring 1989.

In the Gierek era of burgeoning mass consumption, and in the context of the proliferation of sophisticated internationally orientated conceptual practices, Bereś's crude contraptions clearly represented an anomaly. These were backward objects designed to ignore technological advances and 'progress' in an era when these were the only remaining vestiges of official ideology, held up as the highest values in a putatively secular society. His contraptions expressly avoided resembling products, refusing to function smoothly. If there is a critical element to their construction, then, it is conveyed through deliberately humble anachronism, rather than the tongue-in-cheek irony of many of the other artistic actions I have discussed elsewhere in this book. His were objects produced precisely to be used and handled – fragile, yes, but not ephemeral: they were well-constructed, and made to last, surviving today as awkward testimony to a bygone antipolitical impulse to provoke discussion. Rather than referring to these objects for manifesting, and to his manifestations themselves, as art, Bereś referred to both as 'creative facts'.

On 16 April 1973, at the Kraków gallery of the state-run outlet with a monopoly on fine arts and antiques, DESA, Bereś performed a manifestation entitled *Transfiguration 2*.⁴³ The gallery interior, as he recalled, looked like



6.9 Jerzy Bereś, *Round Table*, 1971. Collection of Kunsthalle Würth, Künzelsau. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bettina Bereś.

a shop, with a large display window on to the street. He constructed a series of wooden tables, one in the window, the others behind, each slightly higher than the next. Each table was labelled: the first, 'Traditional Altar', the second, 'Beautiful Altar', the third, 'Celebratory Altar'. The first had a loaf of bread on it, the second a row of glasses and a bottle of red wine, the third

an elegant cake. The artist entered the room naked except for his customary wooden boards. His reasons for appearing naked were disarmingly simple: ‘the pursuit of purity ... the pursuit of sincerity ... practical necessity’ – in order to be able to apply paint to his body.⁴⁴ Facing the street, he painted black lines on his torso, dividing it, as he cut the loaf of bread into slices. At the second table, he painted green leaves on his body while pouring the wine; at the third, he painted lines dividing his face as he cut the cake. Turning around to face the gathered audience, he invited them to share the offerings he had prepared for them at the three ‘altars’.

Transfiguration 2 blurred the boundaries between the rituals of the gallery opening and those of the Catholic Church, with the artist acting as mediator between the two. The state-run commercial gallery was transformed from a space for the consumption of artistic goods into a site for the sharing of traditional spiritual nourishment, in the form of the bread and wine from the altars of tradition and beauty. The third table, with the luxurious cake, meanwhile, served to give the event a less orthodox air, making a concession to the sorts of extra-ecclesiastical rituals that follow the celebration of a sacrament – a first communion or a wedding party. The artist’s solemn and open gift of these three offerings to the assembled public presented them with a choice: would they be more hungry for traditional nourishment, for the usual gallery opening offering of wine, or for the luxury of cake? By performing the ritual of painting his body while he prepared the food and wine, Bereś also offered himself in a symbolic sacrifice to the audience – temporarily embodying the figure of Christ sharing His body and blood with the faithful. In so doing, he added an explicitly Catholic dimension to the theme of the sacrificial body of the artist, already mobilized in the *Prophecies* of 1968 and 1969.⁴⁵ His manifestation asked what the purpose of a gallery ought to be. A space for sharing spiritual nourishment provided by the artist? Or a space for the consumption of commercial goods? A gamut of phrases with powerful overtones was mobilized – from ‘this is my body’, to ‘man cannot live by bread alone’, to ‘let them eat cake!’, so resonant in the consumer-orientated ideological climate of the Gierek years. The artist offered all these possible avenues for interpretation simultaneously, setting up the scenario for a discussion of material, aesthetic and spiritual values through the form of a participatory ritual. Crucially, everything was offered freely. There was nothing to sell, and there is nothing remaining, save the crude tables; the manifestation and its results were intended for immediate consumption–participation.

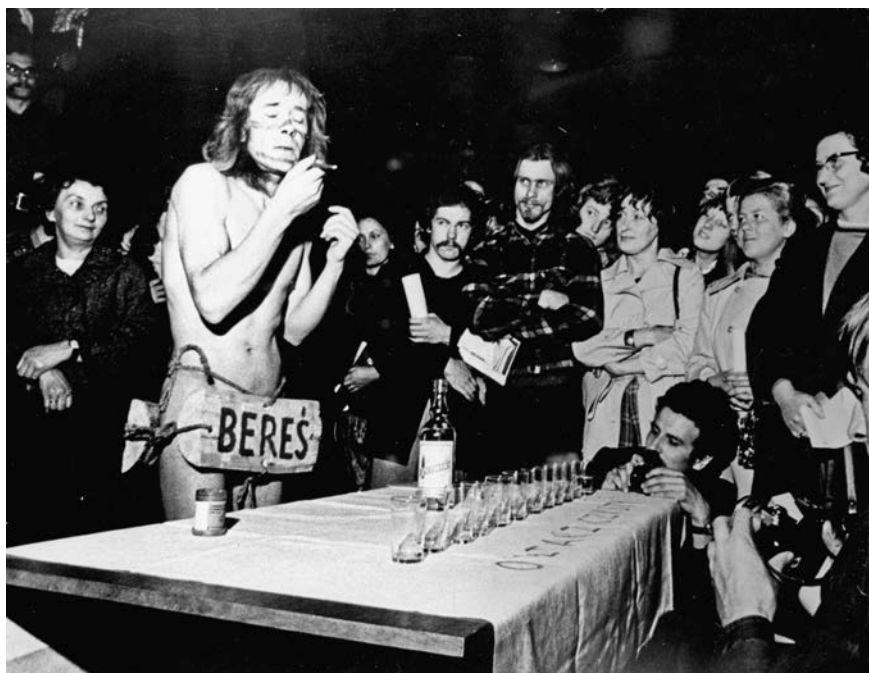
The Catholic Church and its rituals were to continue to provide one of the principal symbolic languages deployed in Bereś's public manifestations in coming decades. He was concerned with exploring performative rituals as vehicles for personal transformation. Not merely for the performer but also for the spectator/participant, whom the artist encouraged to share in the symbolic sacrifice being enacted.

While Bereś's manifestations had been for the most part confined to being viewed by gallery-going audiences in the first half of the 1970s, from 1975 he sought to include a wider public. An opportunity presented itself in the form of a state initiative. The Ministry of Culture had launched a nationwide programme of events under the rubric 'The Alliance of the World of Work with Culture and Art'. Its goals were to enable the artist 'to reach the farm-worker's environment, to familiarize himself with his work', and to facilitate 'meetings in this sphere with thinking about new artistic inspirations', to 'activate the development of cultural spaces in the villages, state farms and workplaces', among others. On 10 May 1975, factories in the Kraków area were opened for the day so that workers' families might visit, and a series of events was staged. Bereś was invited to perform at the 'opening' at the Szadkowski Metal Works in Kraków (named after the prewar communist Stanisław Szadkowski, who had been arrested and executed by the Gestapo in 1942).

Bereś proposed and carried out what he called a *Reflective Mass* (figs 6.10, 6.11). He arrived at the factory wheeling a contraption he called his 'symbolic wheelbarrow', which he parked and turned upside down to form a table. People were invited to approach this table to make use of the ink and stamping apparatus Bereś had assembled there, and print themselves a souvenir of their participation in the event. The simple stamp Bereś had prepared for them bore a picture of a face, with the word 'face' written under it. People quickly saw that they were therefore being invited to 'keep face', the Polish idiomatic phrase *zachować twarz* – to keep up their spirits, to remain of good faith, and, above all, not to give up. Having set the ball rolling in this way, Bereś approached two further tables covered in white cloth: one with the words 'beautiful altar', bearing a loaf of bread; the other with the words 'pure altar', with a bottle of vodka and a row of glasses on it. He set about slicing the loaf, painting each piece blue – the colour symbolizing freedom in his visual lexicon. As he did this he painted red lines across his body, suggesting self-flagellation, then poured out a row of glasses of vodka. The manifestation ended with an invitation to those present to have a drink and engage in discussion, bringing artist and workers together to



6.10, 6.11 Jerzy Beres, *Reflective Mass*, 10 May 1975, Szadkowski Metalworks, Kraków. Photograph by Jadwiga Rubiś. Courtesy of Bettina Beres (above). Photograph by Leszek Dziedzic. Courtesy of Bettina Beres (below).



fraternize over vodka on the factory floor. Questions opened for discussion included “What is this?” and “What does it mean?”, in this situation?”.⁴⁶ The potential political undertones of the manifestation had been carefully subsumed beneath the artist’s combined concern with aesthetic questions and religious rituals but the event was also potentially an opportunity for these to surface. The ambiguity of Bereś’s manifestation (what, after all, did the face souvenirs ‘mean’?) and the religious references were potentially critical, but there was nothing concrete that could be pinned down. It was a risky strategy, for, as Bereś recalls, under Gierek, the Polish authorities had embarked on a campaign to consolidate the ‘moral-political unity of the nation’, and art with any political overtones was ruled out.⁴⁷ On leaving the factory, Bereś remembered seeing the site was surrounded by the security services, apparently alerted in case things got out of hand. He was later informed that the event had been discussed at a high level, that Party members were reportedly ‘furious that such things were being shown to workers’, and that ‘a strong attack’ had been levelled at the Kraków authorities for allowing the event to go ahead.⁴⁸

Bereś’s appearance within the framework of such state-sponsored events, or at a state-sponsored gallery such as DESA, undoubtedly raises questions about the degree to which his activities can be classed as independent. If the goal of the opposition was to encourage people to organize themselves in such a way as to circumvent state mediation, then the manifestations cannot be categorized as ‘underground’ in the sense that those of the Czech action artists of the late 1970s, discussed in Chapter Five, might be. What is interesting about this is that the decision to work to some extent within the framework provided by the state – and to attempt to use the opportunities this afforded for reaching a wider audience – was pragmatic, if risky, and effective. If Jiří Kovanda had no opportunity to reach an audience beyond a close circle of friends, Bereś’s access to a factory full of workers, given a day off for the occasion, was an extraordinary opportunity to expand into a wider dialogue – the opposition, for its part, would also go on to find, by the 1980s, that it was impossible to avoid entering into negotiations with the state, if change was to become a real possibility. The politics of antipolitics unravelled with the formation of Solidarity in 1980. Social demands could not, in the circumstances, remain outside the realms of the political for long.

Bereś’s willingness to appear within the framework of state events was an intuition of what was to come. In the end, his desire to act publicly was stronger than his desire to remain symbolically ‘independent’. Material

independence at least, was surely unattainable while the state remained the sole employer. Nevertheless, Bereś explored the possibility of moral independence, mobilizing the language of Catholicism in unorthodox and surprising ways. By bringing the rituals of the Church into the state-run gallery and the factory, he sought to pit the values of two powerful systems against one other, inviting the audience to explore the contradictory ambitions and claims of each through the potentially neutral medium of the artistic manifestation.

Bereś's use of the terms 'Mass' and 'Altar' in the titles of his works treads a fine line between Church and State. On the one hand, there was potentially a degree of sacrilege in all this – a naked man with long hair performing inexplicable rituals involving crudely constructed altars. On the other, there was a serious overidentification with religion – one that sought precisely to activate, rather than to undermine, some of the fundamental values of the Catholic Church. Above all, Bereś would later say by way of explanation, he was seeking to challenge the ownership of language by particular groups so as to call into question how meaning is produced. A criticism of his choice of symbolically loaded terms necessarily highlighted the very questions he wanted to raise and to explore. 'One just has to have contact with authentic reality', he wrote: 'Our postwar struggle could be decoded on the principle that there exists authentic reality and artificial reality, built through propaganda, ideology'.⁴⁹ Truth, he argued, cannot be owned once and for all by any one group. Nevertheless, his identification with religious terminology was also entirely sincere – and sought to expand the spiritual beyond the confines of the individual conscience and the framework of the Church by prompting dialogue. He explained:

Of course, I used the term 'Mass' with a certain hesitation – hesitation accompanies everything I do, because I take these matters very seriously. ... Some people think that this is some sort of a dispute with the Church – not at all! After all, it was Christ who taught that this sacrifice occurs permanently, it is fulfilled all the time – referring to situations in life. In this sense anyone is in a position to enter into Christ's role who will be able to do so truly and honestly.⁵⁰

Bereś thus combined a certain reticence with faith, at a time when the moral authority of the Polish Catholic Church was rising as the moral bankruptcy of the Communist authorities became all too clear. By implying that anyone might take up Christ's position, he was extending the emancipatory potential

of the mystery of Christ's sacrifice throughout society – maintaining that the one precondition was to do so with truth and honesty.⁵¹ Sacrifice became a moral reference point to be collectively explored.

In a manifestation that he called *Monument of an Artist* (1978) (figs 6.12, 6.13), Bereś walked three kilometres from Warcino to Kępice in eastern Poland wearing two wooden boards tied around his waist. The boards read: 'Body of the artist'. He towed behind him a heavy wooden monument with a flag reading 'Spirit of the artist'.⁵² Upon arrival in the town square he burned the 'Body of the artist' boards and dressed himself in the 'Spirit of the artist' cloth before pouring vodka into glasses and inviting the audience to drink. Discarding the 'Spirit of the artist' cloth, he then dressed himself in a piece of cloth marked 'Contact of the artist with the public'. These three elements – body, spirit and contact with the public – were central to all his manifestations of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Bereś's invitation to spectators to witness his peculiar re-enactment of a certain model of artistic and religious truth was a highly effective local variation on Havel's commitment to 'living in truth' as a way to oppose the post-totalitarian condition of 'living in a lie'. A commitment to truth was also being nurtured within the writings of Havel's dissident counterparts in Poland at that time. Adam Michnik wrote, in 1976:

In searching for truth, or, to quote Leszek Kołakowski, "by living in dignity", opposition intellectuals are striving not so much for a better tomorrow as for a better today. Every act of defiance helps us build the framework of democratic socialism, which should not be merely or primarily a legal institutional structure but a real, day-to-day community of free people.⁵³

A commitment to 'behaving in the present the way one would like to be able to behave in the future; acting today as if the desired tomorrow were already a reality', was one shared by the Church's faith in the power of words and actions as a vehicle for transforming social relations, irrespective of the political risks this entailed.⁵⁴ Thus, although Christianity offered a contested model of truth, in Poland it was one that came to be associated with the struggle for 'anticipatory democracy' being waged by the Polish opposition.

Dissident circles became increasingly open to dialogue with the Church hierarchy in the second half of the 1970s. As Michnik wrote in 1976: 'The role of the Catholic Church is a crucial element in Poland's situation. The majority of Polish people feel close to the Church, and many Catholic priests have strong political influence.' He noted that the Polish episcopate's



6.12 Jerzy Bereś, *Monument of an Artist*, 25 August 1978, Kępcice. Photograph by Piotr Borącz. Courtesy of Bettina Bereś.



6.13 Jerzy Bereś, *Monument of an Artist*, 25 August 1978, Kępcice. Photograph by Piotr Borącz. Courtesy of Bettina Bereś.

programme of action had been steadily evolving in a direction that shared a great deal with the evolution of the democratic opposition. Documents issued by the Church hierarchy now made frequent reference 'to the principles of the Declaration of Human Rights; in pastoral letters, Polish bishops have been defending the right to truth and standing up for human freedom and

dignity. Most important, they have been defending the civil liberties of the working people, and particularly the right to strike and to form independent labour unions.' He concluded that 'the Catholic Church, which consistently resists pressure from the government ... has necessarily become a place where attitudes of nonconformity and dignity among the people can mingle. It is therefore a key source of encouragement for those who seek to broaden civil liberties.'⁵⁵

1977 saw the circulation of the *Black Book of Censorship in the Polish People's Republic*, detailing shocking revelations about the Polish censorship apparatus by a young censorship official who had defected to Sweden. Its widespread illegal circulation further undermined the moral legitimacy of the authorities.⁵⁶ In March, ROPCiO was founded – an independent group committed to overseeing the defence of human rights on the back of Poland's signature of the UN International Convention on Human Rights that month.⁵⁷ As economic disaster continued to loom large, and as opposition groups became increasingly organized and eloquent, the state began to seek improved relations with the Church.⁵⁸ Gierek met with Cardinal Wyszyński, and visited the Vatican. In October 1978, the first Polish Pope was elected. John Paul II's pilgrimage to Poland in 1979 (2–10 June) marked a watershed. Although his itinerary was restricted for political reasons, up to 12 million (around a third of the population) were able to see him in person, even though no days off were officially given to workers to attend his 32 sermons. He spoke of human rights, dignity and labour, talked about the necessity of seeking reconciliation and opening borders, and, at the Presidential Palace, declared that 'Peace and understanding among nations can only be built on principles of respect for the objective rights of every nation, such as the right to exist, to be free, to respect social and political subjectivity, to create its own culture and civilization.'⁵⁹ The visit was stewarded by the Church, rather than the state, whose 'displacement' under the circumstances was symptomatic of the degree to which the social had succeeded in by-passing the political in the popular imagination. The Pope's eloquent statements on human rights and geopolitics provided a strong moral message to the nation, on the eve of the emergence of Solidarity.

In summer 1980, the Polish government made its third attempt to raise basic food and commodity prices from 1960s levels. The country's external debt had risen exponentially, and debt-servicing now took up all export earnings. Domestic food subsidies, meanwhile, had risen from 19 billion zlotys in 1971 to 166 billion zlotys in 1979. Unlike 1970 and 1976, the new round of

price increases was unannounced and uneven – having been delegated to provincial Party Secretaries told to increase prices when and where they could. In addition to the price increases, introduced without prior warning, the authorities announced stiffer work norms at major enterprises. It was a toxic combination.

The authorities sought to treat the first signs of protest as mere ‘disturbances’, and dealt with them locally by paying compensatory wage increases. The plan was to resolve the ‘price question’ rapidly, without raising wider issues. However, enterprises which had settled often returned with fresh claims on hearing of more generous awards elsewhere. Although the early July strikes were sporadic – official reports referred to them merely as ‘work stoppages’ – a pattern of protest was emerging. To avoid the street massacres of 1970, protestors stayed within the workplace. Unlike June 1976, they did not call for the cancellation of the increase, but moved towards more nuanced discussion of financial compensation and economic management in general. A form of primitive dialogue was emerging between the rulers and the ruled. Tensions rose sharply in the eastern city of Lublin, including a blockage of the strategic railway line between the Soviet Union and Eastern Germany, where 470,000 Soviet troops were stationed. After negotiations with Mieczysław Jagielski, a government minister who would also perform the same role a month later in Gdańsk, a settlement was agreed which included wage compensations and fresh elections to the official trade unions. Members of the former strike committees could stand as candidates. Despite this settlement, strikes continued across the country.

Poland’s most famous strike began at the Gdańsk Shipyard on 14 August. Originally small-scale, demanding the reinstatement of a popular crane operator Anna Walentynowicz – recently sacked for political activity – and compensatory wage increases, this proved to be the birth of Solidarity. After an 18-day stoppage that brought almost the entire region into the strike movement, the inter-factory strike committee under Lech Wałęsa and the government team under Jagielski signed the Gdańsk Agreement (31 August), guaranteeing an ‘independent, self-governing trade union’ (Solidarity) and the right to strike. Similar, and to some extent more far-reaching, agreements were signed with striking workforces in Szczecin and Silesia. The ‘Solidarity period’ had begun.

Bereś variously referred to Solidarity as a ‘creative fact’, a ‘stimulator of judgement’, and as a social ‘work’ that ‘brought together millions of people’.⁶⁰ Solidarity interrupted the suspension of judgement that came with social stagnation like a successful artwork breaking through aesthetic stagnation.

He sought to make his own manifestations ‘stimulators of judgement’, in support of the spirit of solidarity sweeping through Poland. In autumn 1980, at the All Polish *Plein-Air* of Young Artists and Theorists in Świeszyno, Bereś carried out a *Political Mass* (fig. 6.14). Standing naked before the audience, he introduced the event by saying that what would follow would be neither a Happening nor a performance, but ‘an attempt to enter into the dialogue that had been shaking Poland since the strikes on the coast and the expansion of Solidarity’. He approached one end of a long strip of cloth on the floor that read ‘Political Altar’, painted his knees white, fell to his knees, and painted the letter ‘O’ on his chest, before getting up, repeating the action, and adding another letter. He continued in this fashion until he had painted the word *ofiara*, translatable as ‘offering’, ‘sacrifice’, and ‘victim’, on his body. He lit a bonfire of paper and kindling in the centre of the cloth, and painted a large red letter ‘V’ (symbolizing victory and freedom) on his body, crossing out the white word beneath. Bereś walked the remaining length of the cloth on foot, leaving red-paint footprints behind him, dressed himself in robes made of scraps of cloth, painted a blue rose on his clothes, poured out glasses of water, and offered these to the spectators. Carefully pouring water around the edges of the fire, he asked the spectators whether they would like him to extinguish it or not. They asked him not to, and everyone remained seated, watching the fire until it burned itself out, leaving the canvas with a hole in the middle. This was then affixed to the wall, and displayed for the remainder of the event as a material document. The festival was nearing an end, so government officials and administrators from the nearby towns were in attendance. Bereś recalls that ‘the official visitors were outraged and claimed that they had been offended. They raised serious objections to the organizers of the *Plein-Air*, although during the action they did not protest and calmly watched until the end.’⁶¹

The *Political Mass* was a bold action and a rare attempt at this time to clearly identify with the growing political momentum of the opposition. As he had done on previous occasions, here too Bereś combined religious and national iconography, but this time he made the political motivation of the manifestation explicit by introducing the previously taboo word – politics – into the framework of the action. Initially, he played the part of the pilgrim, gradually approaching a central point of sacrifice on his knees, as though offering himself to the nation in a symbolic act, before rising, as though from the ashes of the sacrificial fire, standing erect, and abandoning the position of supplicant. The action marked the events of 1980 as a turning point in



6.14 Jerzy Bereś, *Political Mass*, 14 September 1980, Świeszyno. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bettina Bereś.

the march towards freedom – one that resulted in a new-found dignity and promise. Although the precise nature of the sacrifice was sublimated, the developments Bereś identified with here point to the combined impact of the formation of Solidarity and the landmark visit of the Pope. Following these events, he seemed to suggest, the path forward need not involve further sacrifice, but should proceed in an open fashion. People should now have the confidence to stand up and continue to move forward, entering into politics openly, rather than cautiously approaching its altar on their knees.

Piotrowski has referred to Bereś's use of his naked body as a 'sign of authority and spiritual power, sanctioned by tradition and a metaphysical sense of history, as opposed...to the material and usurped power of the Communists', 'referring to the grand narratives of Polish culture, the romantic myth of the artist-prophet and the sense of national mission', to explore 'the national heritage as a source of authority to criticize the reality of Communism'.⁶² Bereś's body, he writes, invokes 'the mystical Christian tradition', whereby the body is sacrificed in order that the spirit might be reborn.⁶³ He is certainly right to point to Bereś's revitalization of these aspects of the Polish Romantic tradition as a basis for pursuing cultural independence. But it also seems to me that Bereś's message is more complex than such a reading would allow. Although he invokes such traditions, there is clearly a sense in which the humility of his manifestations – their 'poor' aesthetic – is at odds with the heroic vision of the artist-prophet that these traditions deployed. The artist's cultivation of anachronism, while not completely undermining the romanticism of the gesture, certainly troubles it. Bereś is a diminutive figure, and there is a shyness coupled with his determination to appear naked before the public that precludes the possibility of inscribing his manifestations into traditional, national, patriarchal discourse. The model of masculinity he embodies is almost as reticent as it is resolute in its nudity. Bereś's appearances, therefore, call into question, rather than to reaffirm, the authority of the past, while simultaneously trying to salvage something of the possibilities it prophesied for the future. His actions brought Christianity and national tradition together in new ways to search for a useable model of subjectivity and to foster a contemporary form of spiritual rebirth, drawing on past sources for inspiration.

In September 1981, having carried out just one manifestation in the interim – one that had avoided overt political references, as underscored by its title: *Pure Work – Entitled Nude* – Bereś returned to political themes, this time within the framework of the XIX Meeting of Artists and Scientists in Osieki

on the Baltic coast.⁶⁴ Spectators saw a cart with a large pole bearing a sign saying 'Wheelbarrow of Freedom' parked outside a building. Bereś appeared naked from the building and announced that what he was about to do was 'neither a Happening nor a performance, but a manifestation documenting the recent history of Poland'. His brief introduction ended with the words: 'I was nine years old when the ongoing drama of the fight for the freedom of Poles began'. Taking up the primitive wheelbarrow, he began to walk around the park with it, stopping periodically to paint a date on his body in black: 1939, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1976, 1980. The dates were a form of shorthand for key moments of resistance: the struggle against the Nazis following the German invasion in 1939, the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, the events of October 1956, those of March 1968, the strikes of 1976, and the activities of Solidarity in 1980, clearly resonant for the local audience. *Wheel-Barrow of Freedom* (figs. 6.15, 6.16), as Bereś called the manifestation, produced a collision between Polish history and the schema of the Stations of the Cross, manifesting micro-politically the scars of history in a ritual designed to bear witness to their truth. Pushing the vehicle onwards, the artist demonstrated his commitment to moving history forward, to finding the next station. This marked a striking departure from his first engagement with the wheelbarrow theme in *Polish Wheelbarrow* (1966) – an immobile contraption whose wheel was positioned on a white circular line and whose mast was tied to a tree stump, making it clear that it was structurally impossible to move the vehicle except in circles. Now, in 1981, Bereś demonstrated that the time was ripe for Poland to move independently once more. To mark the end of the manifestation, he signed the flag with the words 'Wheelbarrow of Freedom', declaring his commitment to this new possibility.

Towards the end of November 1981, shortly before the imposition of martial law interrupted the tide of hope galvanized by Solidarity and the structural autonomy for society it had succeeded in wresting from the state, Bereś carried out his most public manifestation to date: the *Romantic Manifestation*. It was an idea that he had tried and failed to secure permission to realize since 1975, despite approaching a series of local authorities.⁶⁵ He began by walking into the main market square in Kraków, pushing another crooked wooden cart. Mounted on the cart were several bundles of kindling, each wrapped in pages from *Kultura*. Arriving in the square, Bereś stopped and painted the words 'Fire of Hope' in the form of a circle, and lit a fire in the centre. After pausing for a moment to look into the fire, he tied a bell in place of the bundle of kindling taken from the cart, and moved on to another spot on the square,



6.15, 6.16 Jerzy Beres, *Wheel-Barrow of Freedom*, 19 September 1981, Osieki. Photographs by Ryszard Motkowicz. Courtesy Ryszard Motkowicz and Bettina Beres.



6.17 Jerzy Bereś, *Romantic Manifestation*, 18 September 1981, Kraków. Photograph by Ryszard Bobek. Courtesy of Ryszard Bobek and Bettina Bereś.

the bell on his cart ringing, leaving a group of people standing by the fire. He stopped four more times to repeat this same sequence of actions, adding another bell to the cart each time, lighting further fires in circles with the words ‘fire of freedom’, ‘fire of dignity’, ‘fire of love’, and ‘fire of truth’ (figs 6.17, 6.18). People gathered around each fire, and stood reverently staring into the flames. Although Bereś had hoped that their trace would remain until the paint was naturally worn away by pedestrians, he found that the words had been removed by morning.⁶⁶ One observer recalls that a man with a briefcase detached himself from the spectators and, swearing violently, began to kick the romantic cart, before vanishing back into the crowd as suddenly as he had appeared when people began to react to his attack.⁶⁷ The manifestation quite literally put hope, freedom, dignity, love and truth out in the public space, and staged the conditions for their collective contemplation. The photographs testify to the large crowds attracted by the action, and provide a moving picture of the opportunity Bereś had produced for citizens of all ages to reclaim the public sphere and to participate spontaneously in a ritual designed to give hope to the people – hope that freedom was possible, that dignity was attainable, and that love and truth would prevail.

In December 1981 the hope of the past 16 months was crushed, however. The authorities broke their agreement with Solidarity and attempted



6.18 Jerzy Bereś, *Romantic Manifestation*, 18 September 1981, Kraków. Photograph by Jacek Szmuc. Courtesy of Jacek Szmuc and Bettina Bereś.

to destroy the independent union by imposing martial law.⁶⁸ This operation, which had been meticulously planned with Soviet ‘advisers’, destroyed the offices of Solidarity – the Warsaw branch was simply smashed up by riot police – and interned 6,000 of its most active members. The main loss of life was at the Wujek colliery in Silesia. Although the presiding General Jaruzelski later claimed that his action had been the ‘lesser evil’ by heading off a Soviet invasion, he omitted to mention his numerous phone calls to the Kremlin in the weeks before martial law, imploring their military assistance should his plans fail. This was a request that Soviet leaders – fully preoccupied after their December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan – turned down, which is not to say they would have stood by had Poland’s martial law failed.

For the Poles themselves, as Hanusek recalls: ‘It was an exceptionally grim time. The demonstrations of the beginning of martial law had ceased, most of the Solidarity activists in hiding had been caught. It seemed that all hopes had been buried by the military regime. Apathy and resignation ruled.’⁶⁹ Yet the experience of freedom during Solidarity’s 16 months of legality could never be forgotten. In this sense, moments of liberation cannot be reversed.

Many artists boycotted official cultural institutions in this period. The Church began to play host to exhibitions. Beres was keen to be involved in the new forum this framework provided – and recalls that the church exhibitions offered artists clear opportunities for reaching new audiences, by lending contemporary art a form of legitimacy in the eyes of churchgoers who might not previously have had much interest in it: ‘The spectators who came to the church for patriotic or religious reasons, and found an exhibition there, tended to overcome a certain reluctance, make a certain effort, to get to the art.’⁷⁰ Needless to say, the encounter between artists and church representatives was not always straightforward – and proposals were often rejected. This notwithstanding, the potential for collaboration provided a forum for artists to participate in a fresh form of dialogue, provoking debates about the intersection between aesthetic and sociopolitical problems, and how these might best be expressed.

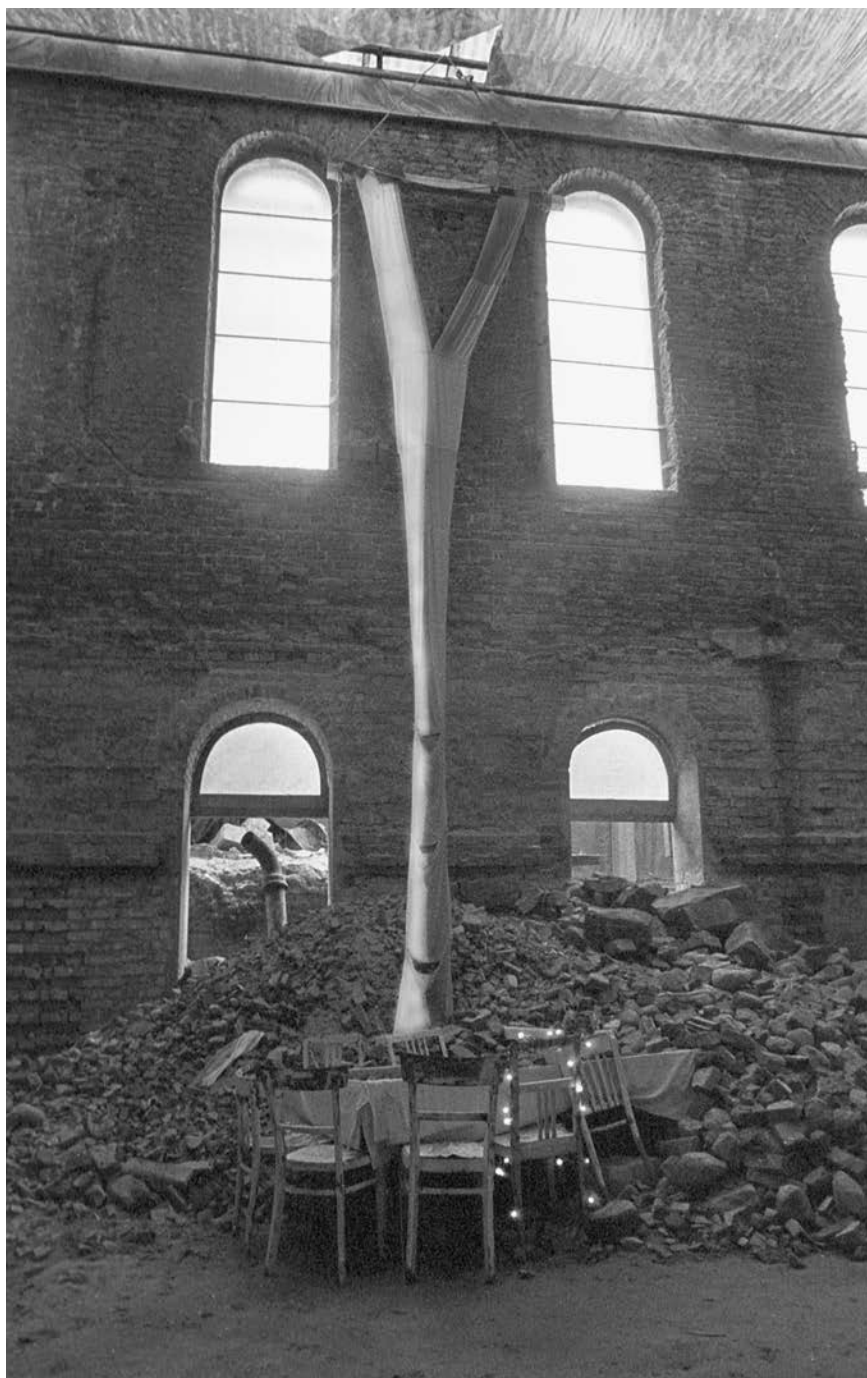
That Beres’s ethical position was by now stronger than that of the ageing Kantor became clear that year, when Kantor, presumably afraid of forfeiting his opportunities for frequent travel by refusing, publicly accepted an award for ‘exceptional cultural achievement’ from the state.⁷¹ His earlier ‘disinterest’ did not extend to standing up to the state under martial law. Some of the works Beres produced during this period are remarkably eloquent, particularly a wooden sculpture entitled *The March* (1982) (fig. 6.19) – a giant

wooden foot mounted on a wooden pole with a jute flag at the other end, becoming half flag, half foot; a demonstration condensed into an object: the foot raised as though marching. It balances on a wooden axle standing on a log, and is bound in thick chains – a captive colossus striding determinedly onwards, chained in its tracks.

In 1983, Bereś participated in the artistic symposium/exhibition *Znak Krzyża* (*the Sign of the Cross*) co-ordinated by Janusz Bogucki and Nina Smolarz, with the support of the local priest, one Wojciech Czarnowski, at Parafia Miłosierdzia Bożego (Parish of God's Mercy) on Żytnia Street in Warsaw. The church building had been ruined in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 and was in the process of being reconstructed through the initiative and collective



6.19 Jerzy Bereś, *The March*, 1982. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bettina Bereś.



6.20 Jerzy Kalina, *The Last Supper*, Church of God's Mercy, Żytnia Street, Warsaw, 1983. Photograph by Erazm Ciołek. Courtesy of the artist and Agata Ciołek.



6.21 Jerzy Bereś, *Altar of Independence*, 1982–3. Photograph by Marek Gardulski. Courtesy of Marek Gardulski and Bettina Bereś.

contributions of the local people. It had come to serve as a meeting place for the opposition in Warsaw. After a considerable period of germination, entailing lengthy discussion with artists, members of the opposition, representatives of the Church, and parishioners, this landmark collaboration between contemporary artists and the Church was timed to coincide with Pope John Paul II's second visit to Poland, in June 1983.⁷² As Dorota Jarecka has pointed out, the organizers hoped that the presence of foreign journalists at that time would dissuade the authorities from interfering.⁷³ Many of the artists involved were avant-garde artists, among them Edward Krasieński (who had conducted Kantor's 'Sea Concerto' in 1967) and the experimental artist Paweł Kwiek, who had not previously had any involvement with what came to be known as 'art beside the Church'.⁷⁴ Jerzy Kalina's *The Last Supper* (fig. 6.20) was among the most impressive large-scale installations; it consisted of long table and chairs partially submerged by a huge pile of rubble at one end of the church. A long banner of the Polish flag presided over this scene of destruction, apparently torn in the cataclysm, and thus simultaneously forming the shape of a 'V' – for victory, resembling a cross. Bereś's contributions included an *Altar of Independence* (1982–3) (fig. 6.21) – another construction in the shape of a 'V' with a banner reading 'Altar of Independence', suspended above a simple wooden cross covered in a web of thorny twigs.

Martial law officially ended in July 1983, but many independent artists continued to boycott state institutions, exhibiting in alternative student-run spaces, or within the framework of church exhibitions.⁷⁵ Although there was a partial amnesty of political prisoners, repression of Solidarity activists continued, and fresh arrests were still being made. The brutal torture and murder by the Warsaw Security Services on 19 October 1984 of the eloquent anti-communist 'Solidarity Priest' Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, who had urged his congregation to protest against martial law, provoked national outrage and grief. Although those responsible were convicted of murder and imprisoned, they were later released as part of another amnesty. Popiełuszko's corpse was retrieved after a few weeks from a reservoir, where it had been dumped, and his funeral in November was attended by a quarter of a million people.

In a lecture delivered the following month, Bereś sought to initiate dialogue about the nature of martyrdom. Opening his *Lecture: Dispute on the Highest Values, Part 1*, at Galeria BWA in Lublin by entering the room naked, carrying a copy of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) in one hand and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) in the other, he announced that he wanted to share some of his thoughts with the audience.⁷⁶

He discussed the need to assess different sorts of values, distinguishing basic values such as food and shelter from what he called 'higher', interdependent values such as justice, love, truth, dignity and forgiveness. He cautioned that while such values tended to serve as the basis for the foundation of religions and ideologies, they could also become an ethical straitjacket, stifling creativity and resulting in 'total stagnation'. The value of freedom could go beyond this and into the realm of what he called the 'highest values', such as language, faith and art. These, he admitted, might not be as necessary for life as basic values, but they could become 'inalienable' for groups of people under certain circumstances. He then turned to analyse these values in relation to two models of subjectivity outlined by Kierkegaard: that of the *tragic hero*, and that of the *knight of faith*.

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* explores the dilemma faced by Abraham when asked to sacrifice his only son, and thereby to abandon all hope in God's promise that 'through his seed all races of the world would be blessed'.⁷⁷ Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac, believing that he was sacrificing all hope: only someone whom Kierkegaard calls a 'knight of infinite resignation' could agree to enter into such a paradox. It was this infinite resignation to faith that was rewarded by God, in sparing Isaac. Kierkegaard argues: 'Spiritually speaking, everything is possible, but in the world of the finite there is much which is not possible. This impossible, however, the knight makes possible by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by waiving his claim to it.'⁷⁸ He concludes: 'A purely human courage is required to renounce the whole of the temporal to gain the eternal... a paradoxical and humble courage is required to grasp the whole of the temporal by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith.'⁷⁹ It is this faith that Beres compares to that of the Polish situation – thereby prophesying that the resignation of the nation may prove to have been the absurd precondition for its resurrection. His message, then, is one of faith – it is not the tragic heroes who sacrifice themselves for the greater good who will ultimately lead Poland to freedom, but those who are prepared to linger in fear and despair, but continue to believe. The tragic hero, whom Kierkegaard called 'the beloved son of ethics',⁸⁰ sacrifices himself for the people, who identify with him and accept him. He therefore becomes the people. The knight of faith, meanwhile, exemplified by Abraham, enters into a paradox, unable to decide whether he is someone of the highest faith, or simply a murderer. Although, in the event, Isaac lives, Abraham remains caught in a bind – from which he suffers in isolation. While he has an advantage over the tragic hero is that he remains himself and retains his

authentic personality, he lingers in fear, despair and poverty. Beres brought these two models of subjectivity to bear on Polish history, which, he said, was full of tragic heroes who had sacrificed themselves for others. After the war, though, he argued, the Polish people had decided to forget about their heroes, and accepted that they had to sacrifice them, just as Abraham had been prepared to sacrifice Isaac. These heroes and their history remained alive, leaving the Polish people in the same paradoxical situation as the knight of faith. 'nevertheless we are ourselves, and the world has to understand that we will be neither the heroes of socialism nor of capitalism. We have become free not because we are free from fear, despair and poverty, but because we linger in fear, despair and poverty.' As he spoke, he painted a red and white cross on his body.

In the same year, 1984, Havel wrote in 'Six Asides about Culture': 'I have read somewhere that martyrdom does better in a totalitarian system than thought.'⁸¹ He then objected: 'Something in me rebels against the claim that history has condemned us to the unenviable role of mere unthinking experts in suffering, poor relations of those in the "free world" who do not have to suffer and have time to think.'⁸² He contends that sacrifice should be understood as the 'consequence of a thought, its proof, or conversely, its moving force.'⁸³ In the same way, Beres's performative dialogue with sacrifice sought to excavate a more critical approach to Polish history. It was a question that would continue to preoccupy him in coming years. When, in 1986, he delivered Part 2 of the *Lecture: Dispute on the Highest Values*, in addition to painting a red and white cross on his back, the artist painted a question mark on his torso, provocatively completing it with a red and white dot on his penis. As before, he drew on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*; this time, though, he argued that 'neither the *tragic hero*, dissolved in generality, nor the lonely *knight of faith*, lingering in paradox, is capable of entering into a debate over values'. Tragic heroism, he argued, precludes the possibility of dialogue, because it annihilates subjectivity: the tragic hero objectifies himself; those who follow him objectify themselves by surrendering their subjectivity to an ideal. The 'pure subjectivity' of the knight of faith was thus, he proposed, a blind alley leading to individualism, 'existentialist solitude', and a dangerous propensity for the formation of groups so fixated on their own history and ideals that any attempt to forge external dialogue necessarily led to conflict: 'the nationalist, ideological and religious wars that have marked the history of mankind'. The *knight of faith*, for his part, is 'a loner, lingering in paradox, fixated on the trembling of his subject. He is unable to enter into contact with

anyone at all.' And yet, Bereś saw in the story of Abraham the possibility for hope in the form of Isaac's initiation of dialogue. By asking his father where they would find the lamb for the sacrifice, he prompted the hitherto silent Abraham, engrossed in his own troubles, to address God. Bereś observed that Isaac was the one who provoked a dialogue about responsibility and the meaning of sacrifice, resulting in the extraordinary turn of events that prompted God to intervene, and prevent the accomplishment of the sacrifice He had demanded.⁸⁴

Embodying a deflated model of the romantic artist-prophet, Bereś sought to call into question rather than to reinforce this model. He proposed a model of the subject as one who opens dialogue and prompts a re-evaluation of core values rather than continuing along a martyrological path to nationalism. Above all, he wanted to caution his spectators about the dangers of the 'fetishization of the nation', issuing this warning: 'The tragedy begins in the situation when a given nation considers itself to be the chosen nation. And I would like to warn my nation, that is to say the Poles, us, against making of ourselves a chosen nation. ... This is the source of nationalism.'⁸⁵ His approach was in line with that of key oppositional intellectuals of his time, who had also mined their national history for precedents while remaining aware of the dangers of nationalism. In his essay 'Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors' (1973), Adam Michnik offered a careful analysis of the lessons of the prewar national hero Józef Piłsudski's attempt to 'train Poles in the spirit of independence'. He asked: 'Would there have been a Poland without those socialist romantics who raised their hands against the colossus (which later turned out to have legs of clay)? Would the Poles have won independence had it not been for those who continuously talked about the need for independence?' Yet Michnik was at pains to emphasize: 'Piłsudski was not a nationalist. He did not think it proper or healthy to organize a national consciousness around the hatred of other nations', but 'saw Poland as the motherland of many nations, a commonwealth of many cultures; he wanted it to be a state in which not only Poles but also Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Jews could live in solidarity.'⁸⁶ For all his commitment to national independence, Bereś, too, sought to avoid conceiving of this in nationalist terms, declaring that an 'anti-nationalistic, non-ideological, non-religious national personality is... besides language, faith, [and] art, the highest value.'⁸⁷

The election of Gorbachev to the position of General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985 was to transform the context in which Solidarity, and other peaceful movements of civilian resistance, could operate. With the advent

of what became known in the West as Gorbachev's 'New Thinking', Moscow encouraged East European leaders to reach new accommodations with their own societies, without the threat of Soviet intervention. Most held back and resisted change, but Jaruzelski understood the new opportunities. His growing impatience with the PZPR resembles that of Gorbachev with the CPSU. Both came to realize that, far from exercising leadership, the Communist establishments had become a major barrier to political change. Political changes hitherto unthinkable could now be contemplated, although Gorbachev did not anticipate the dramatic outcome of the transformations that he himself had helped to bring about.

Endings

Soviet politics had altered dramatically by the late 1980s. Instead of a gerontocracy, the Kremlin now had a dynamic new leadership seeking to end the Brezhnev era of stagnation. In private diaries, Gorbachev's close adviser Anatoly Chernyaev records the leader's growing frustration with the inherited ideology and the lack of pertinence of concepts such as 'Leninism' to the modern world.¹ Gorbachev used his enormous prestige overseas – much greater than at home – to pioneer new notions of intra-bloc relations on the continent, such as the 'common European home'. His new vision of international relations, both in Europe and in the wider world, would have been utterly discredited by any further Soviet invasion, and he moved behind the scenes to rescind the Brezhnev Doctrine and privately push East European parties towards power-sharing.

Gorbachev made a major visit to Poland (11–16 July 1988), and sought to speed up a reform process that had thus far been 'very slow'.² Bilateral talks with Jaruzelski could not have been more different from those with previous Soviet leaders. Rather than asserting superiority, the Russian leader sought common ground and a new dialogue with the Polish nation, stating that there 'is no substitute for dialogue with the nation, as a method of public opinion research'. He referred to 'socialist renewal' in Poland and Soviet *perestroika* as twins.³ Moscow continued to back the Jaruzelski leadership. Asked by a Solidarity intermediary before the Round Table: 'What are the limits to the changes the Soviets are willing to accept in Poland?', Jaruzelski replied: 'I don't know myself. Let's discover them together.'⁴ Unbeknown to him, Soviet leaders

had already made their decision on this score. As Mark Kramer has discovered, an agreement had been signed by both top Party and military figures which precluded military intervention even if a Communist government collapsed.⁵

Seven years after banning Solidarity and interning its leaders and advisers, the same Polish generals invited them to a Round Table (February–April 1989) on the future of Communist power. Few observers had anticipated the historical compromise by which the Communists abandoned their attempt to ‘govern permanently against the determined opposition of their compatriots’.⁶ The idea of inviting the ‘adversary’ to a Round Table shocked many in the Communist Party’s ranks, whose revolt was quelled only by the ruling team’s threat to resign. As Adam Michnik explains, the Communist authorities did not ‘benevolently cede their power to the opposition the moment democracy became possible’.⁷ On the contrary, they came to the Round Table with a strong hand, expecting to co-opt the opposition, but were swept away soon afterwards by an electoral avalanche which no one had anticipated. The Polish Round Table concluded on 5 April 1989 with an agreement to hold partly free elections as soon as possible, with fully free ones in four years’ time. Solidarity’s stunning victory in the 4 June ballot – the same day as the massacre in Tiananmen Square – was rapidly endorsed by the Soviet media. A somewhat shocked Polish Party leadership, convening the next day, concluded that nothing could be done to reverse the electorate’s decision.⁸ During tense and at times ruptured negotiations over the following weeks, Polish politicians sketched out a post-Communist framework. Solidarity then formed the world’s first post-Communist government.

Other East European leaders now began to sense new opportunities to align politics more closely with the wishes of their populations. In Hungary, Kádár’s policy of reconciliation had ended political exclusion, and for most of the 1970s and 1980s there were no political prisoners. But when it became clear that Kádár was unwilling to enact more radical changes, his colleagues deposed him. Reform Communists openly courted support from outside the Party. In January 1989, they published a report on the 1956 insurrection. Rejecting the official line that it had been a ‘counter-revolution’, they declared 1956 a legitimate popular uprising. Traditionalists awaited a reproof from Moscow for this major revision of Party history, but none came. Instead, Moscow supported broadening the political support for the ruling party. Gorbachev told the Hungarian leader Károly Grósz that the purpose of political reform was ‘the safeguarding of socialism’.⁹ But socialism itself was becoming an elastic concept.

When the Soviet Union acquiesced in the fall of the Berlin Wall, it became apparent worldwide that the Brezhnev Doctrine was dead. As the East German regime crumbled within a matter of weeks, with no sign of Soviet disapproval, changes were triggered across the region. On 21 August 1989, the twenty-first anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion, some 10,000 people took to the streets of Prague to chant ‘Long Live Poland and Hungary’ and ‘Long Live Dubček’.¹⁰ The Communist Party in Czechoslovakia was still controlled by those installed by force in 1968–9, who had never sought reconciliation with the people. In the late autumn, further mass demonstrations were attacked by the police, leaving hundreds injured. Following this, 12 opposition groups formed the Civic Forum, on Václav Havel’s initiative. Vast crowds flocked daily to Wenceslas Square, where Havel spoke, as did student and opposition leaders, including Dubček. After three weeks of ferment, the ruling Communist Party resigned and power passed to a largely non-Communist government, with Havel as President.

Kantor only just lived to see a democratic Poland, and the day a playwright became president in Central Europe, dying in 1990.

Koller continued to espouse his dual identity as a being between heaven and earth, in line with his philosophy of universal doubt, co-operating closely with the younger generation of artists in Bratislava. He died in 2007.

Szentjóby returned to Budapest in 1991. As Emese Kürti has pointed out, his commitment to ‘being forbidden’ of the 1970s was a form of ‘global opposition, which cannot be limited to the period and scope of the three T’s’.¹¹ His film *Centaur*, recently restored and hailed by the international art world, is a case in point: far from being merely of historical interest, its critique of labour clearly still applies to the experience of today’s global workforce. He remains committed to what he calls the ‘parallel track, i.e., survival in a non-work world’.¹² Szentjóby continues to pursue a project he launched just before leaving Hungary in 1975 – the Subsistence-Level-Standard-Project – pushing for a universal minimum living wage to be paid to all those either unable or unwilling to work as wage-labourers, to be taken from the military budget.¹³ He has been instrumental in preserving the history of the Hungarian underground, gathering quantities of rare material from his generation to produce a Portable Intelligence Increase Museum of late socialist art in Hungary, besides running a number of parallel organizations, among them the ‘International Parallel Union of Telecommunications’ and the ‘Neo-Socialist. Realist. Global Counter-Arthist.ory-Falsifiers Front’.

Tót has remained in Cologne since 1980, when he moved there. He has continued to work with many of the same themes that preoccupied him in the 1970s, while partially returning to painting. When I asked him whether the altered political situation after 1989 had changed the meaning of his work, he observed that, since ‘transition’, his actions had become ‘not political, but philosophical’.¹⁴ Their antipolitical value, however, is increasingly clear in Hungary today. Tót and a number of his former colleagues in Hungary, accompanied by many younger friends, marched through the streets of Budapest together carrying placards in 2012 (fig. 7.1). This new iteration of the demonstrations of the late 1970s remains as deliberately reticent, on the one hand, and as conceptually powerful, on the other, now, as it was then.

Re-enacting a selection of 1970s Czech actions in 2009 in order to test to what extent public space has been transformed since Communism, the Czech artist Barbora Klímová asked Kovanda how he thought ‘transition’ had altered the conditions for artistic action. He replied that passers-by nowadays tended to respond to artists differently: ‘Then, people responded sheepishly, they didn’t want to have anything to do with it at any cost, be it in a positive or a negative sense. I think they’d react more openly these days – in a more hostile way.’¹⁵ In 2006, he playfully revisited his 1970s strategy of anonymity in an installation at the Stockholm gallery Index entitled *Mole-Hills*.¹⁶ A



7.1 Endre Tót, *Zero Demonstration*, Budapest, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

series of piles of fresh earth appeared on the immaculate lawn, suggesting that while the underground's eruptions on to the surface were now more visible than they had been before, this did not have to result in the harmonious integration of the artist with the landscape. The widespread enthusiasm for Kovanda's earlier actions in international art institutions today, and re-enactments such as those arranged in 2007 at Tate Modern in London, in which Kovanda rode the escalators backwards and kissed passers-by through a glass pane,¹⁷ while they continue to raise important questions about the relationship between artist and audience, now also do so in relation to the ongoing problem of the institutionalization of action-based and conceptual art.

Bereś, for his part, was swift and direct in his response to the Polish Round Table of 1989. Standing on a pyre beside a wooden bow and arrow with a red and white bowstring, just as he had during *Prophecy 2* in March 1968, he wrote the words *spełnie się* – 'it is being fulfilled' – on his upper body, marked a full stop on his penis, and invited the audience to open a discussion.¹⁸ The opportunity for dialogue for which he had hoped for so long seemed to have arrived. In an open letter published in the press during the presidential campaign of 1990, he said:

My entire experience of life and art has proved to me that it is impossible to tell the hard truth in a smooth way. One can repeat banalities smoothly. The hard truth has to be hammered out. ... With an axe, one cannot achieve a smooth surface, but it is very effective when changing the shape of a resistant material. In the transition from the PRL to the Third Republic we do not find ourselves at the stage of smoothing the surface, but at the stage of accomplishing fundamental changes.¹⁹

In 2006 he re-enacted his *Romantic Manifestation* in central Kraków, lighting fires and inviting a new audience to dialogue. When I visited him in 2007, he was working on a sculpture called *Altar of Democracy*. It consisted of a harness with long reins. These, he told me, were not so much for steering the contraption, as I imagined, but were intended to enable one to whip it along faster. Although I cannot say how he would have assessed the global progress of democracy when he died in 2012, like all the artists in this book, he remained as committed to art as a vehicle for testing the limits of social freedom as he did to the importance of approaching politics with reticence.

Notes

All translations into English in the text are my own unless another translator is specified.

acknowledgements

1. Extracts from Chapter 1 have appeared as: 'Emancipation and Daydreams: Kantor's Happenings', in Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius (ed.), *An Impossible Journey: The Art and Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor* (London: Black Dog Publishers, 2010) and 'Excursions in Communist Reality: Tadeusz Kantor's Impossible Happenings', *Object: Graduate Research and Reviews in the History of Art and Visual Culture*, no. 8 (London: University College London, 2005/2006), pp. 45–65. A few quotes from Chapter 2 became a visual essay: 'S.O.S. Socialist Occupation of the Subject', in Łukasz Ronduda, Alex Farquharson and Barbara Piwowarska (eds), *Star City. The Future under Communism* (Warsaw: MAMMAL Foundation; Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary; Vienna: Tranzit.at, 2011), pp. 70–80. Part of Chapter 3 was published as 'Affirmation and Irony in Endre Tót's Actions of the 1970s', in Liniara Dovydaityte (ed.), *Art History & Criticism 3, Art and Politics: Case-Studies from Eastern Europe* (Kaunas, Lithuania: Vytautas Magnus University, 2007), pp. 136–44. A short extract from Chapter 5 became: 'Jiří Kovanda's Collisions', in Margaret Iversen (ed.), *Chance. Documents of Contemporary Art Series* (London: Whitechapel Gallery/Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 147–9, and the following publications relate to Chapter 6: 'Understanding Jerzy Beres's Manifestations' and 'Jerzy Beres's Radical Expansion of the Readymade Event', in *Jerzy Beres: Sztuka zgina życie / Art Bends Life*, exh. cat. (Kraków: Bunkier Sztuki, 2007),

pp. 23–31, 35–53; ‘Attacking Objectification: Jerzy Beres in Dialogue with Marcel Duchamp’, in Mel Jordon and Malcolm Miles (eds), *Art Theory and Post-Socialism* (Bristol, UK and Portland, USA: Intellect Books, 2008), pp. 21–31.

introduction

1. Epigraph: trans. E. Kohák, in Jan Vladislav (ed.), *Václav Havel. Living in Truth. Twenty-two essays published on the occasion of the award of the Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel* (London and Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 175.
2. Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Stanford and Washington: Stanford University Press, 2006).
3. In 1987, a member of the Gorbachev team was asked the difference between Soviet *perestroika* and the Prague Spring. He replied: ‘Nineteen years’.
4. Jacek Kuroń, ‘Polityka i opozycja w Polsce’, *Aneks* (London), November 1974.
5. See Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2003).
6. David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Antipolitics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 2.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
8. Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2003), pp. 324–5.
9. Ost, *Solidarity*, pp. 1–2.
10. György Konrád, *Antipolitics. An Essay*, trans. Richard E. Allen (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 74.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 123–6.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
13. Ivan M. Jirous, ‘A Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival’ (samizdat 1975), trans. Eric Dluhosch, in Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszył (eds), *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 62, 64–5.

14. Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence', pp. 192–4.
15. Václav Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism' (1987), in Paul Wilson (ed.), *Václav Havel: Open Letters. Selected Prose 1965–1990* (London and Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 328.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 331–2.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 344–6.
18. This crucial observation was originally expressed in Havel's famous examination of the nature of post-totalitarian power, 'The Power of the Powerless' (1978), trans. P. Wilson, in Vladislav (ed.), *Václav Havel*, p. 40.
19. Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism', p. 329.
20. Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence', pp. 165–7.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 166–7.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
25. Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence', p. 181.

1 disinterest

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), trans. Justin O'Brian (London and New York: Penguin, 1975 [2005 edition]), pp. 4–5.
2. The underground theatre's first play was an avant-garde reworking of Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna*, a Polish classic suffused with national myth.
3. Michał Kobiąłka, *Further on, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 44.
4. See Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, 'Paris from Behind the Iron Curtain', in Sarah Wilson (ed.), *Paris Capital of the Arts 1900–1986* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), pp. 250–61.
5. The Second Exhibition of Modern Art would not be held until the 'thaw', in 1957, at the Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw. See Józef Chrobak and Marek Świca (eds), *I Wystawa sztuki Nowoczesnej. Pięćdziesiąt lat później*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Starmach Gallery, 1998).
6. See Timothy O. Benson, 'Exchange and Transformation: The Internationalization of the Avant-Garde(s) in Central Europe', in Timothy O. Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation* (Los Angeles, CA: LACMA/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 34–81.

7. Włodzimierz Sokorski, 'Kryteria Realizmu Socjalistycznego', *Przegląd Artystyczny*, no. 1–2 (1950), p. 6.
8. See Wojciech Włodarczyk, *Socrealizm. Sztuka Polska w latach 1950–1954*, (Paris: Libella, 1986); or, for a summary, Wojciech Włodarczyk, 'Socrealistyczny epizod. Warszawa 1933–Moskwa 1958', available at http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-tresc/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/socrealistyczny-epizod-warszawa-1933-moskwa-1958.
9. Krystyna Kersten, 'Preface' to Robert Kupiecki, *Natchnienie milionów. Kult Józefa Stalina w Polsce, 1945–1956* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1993), p. 6.
10. Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
11. Their fates went unrecorded until Khrushchev agreed to investigate both victims and survivors in 1956.
12. Piotr Osęka, *Rytuały stalinizmu. Oficjalne święta i uroczystości rocznicowe w Polsce, 1944–1956* (Warsaw: Trio, 2007), p. 42
13. Tadeusz Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować, złapać in flagranti' (Kantor interviewed by Wiesław Borowski), in *Tadeusz Kantor* (Kraków: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1982), p. 42.
14. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 34.
15. Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', in *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959 [1992 Phoenix Edition]), p. 25. This trajectory from Action Painting towards action in the wider environment had also been articulated the year before, by Allan Kaprow, in 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock', *Art News*, Vol. LVII, no. 6 (October 1958).
16. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 163.
17. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', pp. 55–6.
18. The group then moved to Warsaw in the years 1938–9.
19. See Jerzy Lau, *Teatr Artystów 'Cricot'* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967).
20. Tadeusz Kantor, in *Die Familie aus Wielopole*, dir. Michael Kluth (Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 1980), 45 min.

21. Tadeusz Kantor, 'Theatre Happening' (1967), trans. Michal Kobialka, in Michal Kobialka (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor. A Journey through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944–1990* (Berkeley, CA/London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 86.
22. For an account of the reception of Dada in Poland, see Andrzej Turowski, 'Dada Contexts in Poland', in G. Janecek and T. Omuka (eds), *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe and Japan*, Vol. IV of *Crisis in the Arts: The History of Dada* (London/New York: Prentice Hall International, 1998).
23. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 'Manifesto (Festo-Mani)' (originally published as 'Litmus Paper: The Latest Artistic Novelty – Pureblagism Papierek lakmusowy', Zakopane, 1921), trans. Klara Kemp-Welch, in Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (eds), *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930* (Los Angeles, CA: LACMA/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 340–44.
24. Ibid.
25. See Uta Schorlemmer (ed.), *Sztuka jest przestępstwem. Tadeusz Kantor a Niemcy i Szwajcaria* (Kraków: Cricoteka/Nuremberg: Verlag für moderner Kunst, 2007). Kantor prized, above all, Duchamp's introduction to art of 'readymade reality' and 'elements of life'. Kantor, 'The Theatre of Death' (1975), trans. M. Kobialka, in Kobialka (ed.), *A Journey*, p. 108.
26. Kantor, 'Milano Lessons. Lesson 12, Before the End of the Twentieth Century' (1986), trans. M. Kobialka, in Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (eds), *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 114.
27. Tadeusz Kantor speaking at Foksal Gallery, Warsaw, June 1974, in M. Jurkiewicz, J. Mytkowska and A. Przywara (eds), *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum Galerii Foksal* (Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, 1998), p. 300.
28. Kantor, 'Milano Lessons', pp. 106–13.
29. Kantor, 'Theatre Happening', p. 85.
30. Kantor, 'The Impossible Theatre, 1969–73', trans. M. Kobialka, in Kobialka (ed.), *A Journey*, p. 90.
31. See Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', *Artforum*, no. 12 (1974).
32. See Anna Baranowa, "'Linia podziału" Tadeusza Kantora – wielość interpretacji', *Dekada Literacka* no. 6 (220) (2006), footnote 25.

33. Anthony Kemp-Welch, 'Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" and Polish Politics: The Spring of 1956', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 48 (2) (March 1996), pp. 181–206.
34. Pawel Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*, trans. Maya Latynski (Cold War International History Project Series) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press/Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2009).
35. David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Antipolitics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 44.
36. Zbigniew Herbert, 'Cricot 2', *Twórczość* 7 (1957), p. 160, cited in Kobialka, *Further on*, p. 57.
37. Kantor, 'The Autonomous Theatre' (1956–63), in Kobialka, *A Journey*, p. 44.
38. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) (New York and London: Pelican Books, 1980), pp. 21–2.
39. See Susan Reid, 'The Exhibition "Art of Socialist Countries", Moscow 1958–1959, and the Contemporary Style of Painting', in Susan Reid and David Crowley (eds), *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000).
40. See Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), pp. 68–70.
41. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 18.
42. In his 1944 production of Stanisław Wyspiański's *Return of Odysseus*, the hero returned from a metaphoric Troy to a room destroyed by war. Kantor's stage set included 'A rust-eaten GUN BARREL resting, not on wheels, but on a / TRESTLE smeared with mud and cement, / DEBRIS, / EARTH, / ... instead of / a palace interior, / marble, / columns ...'. The reality of the experience of war was allowed to speak through these poor remains. (Kantor, 'Reality of the Lowest Rank' (1980), trans. M. Kobialka, in Kobialka (ed.), *A Journey*, p. 120).
43. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 18.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
45. Kantor, 'Teatr "i"', in Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor. Pisma: Metamorfozy – Teksty o Latach 1938–1974* (Kraków: Cricoteka, 2000), p. 465; Kantor, 'Idea podróży (teatr "i")' (1969), in Jurkiewicz et al. (eds), *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 334.
46. Kantor, 'Teatr Niemożliwy', in Pleśniarowicz (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor. Pisma: Metamorfozy*, p. 597.

47. Kantor, 'Realność najniższej rangi (notatki)' (1961), in Jurkiewicz et al. (eds), *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, pp. 324–5.
48. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 40.
49. Ibid.
50. Kobialka, *A Journey*, p. xix.
51. Kantor, 'Reflection' (1985), trans. M. Kobialka, in Kobialka, *A Journey*, p. 154.
52. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 18.
53. Ibid., p. 40.
54. See Jarosław Suchan, 'Happening as a Readymade', in Jarosław Suchan (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor: Niemożliwe / Impossible*, trans. Jadwiga Piątkowska and Maciej Gogoczowski, bilingual exh. cat. (Kraków: Bunkier Stuki, 2000), p. 93.
55. Kantor experimented with flinging string at the canvas in an attempt to allow the agency of the objects to take over. See Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 18.
56. Ibid., p. 18.
57. Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, *List otwarty do partii* (Paris: Instytut literacki, 1966).
58. Kantor, 'Idea wystawy na pocztce', in Pleśniarowicz (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor. Pisma: Metamorfozy*, p. 342.
59. Kantor, 'Poczta. 1965', in *ibid.*, p. 343.
60. Ibid.
61. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 17.
62. Kantor, 'Od kolażu do ambalażu' (1962), in Jurkiewicz et al. (eds), *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 318.
63. Ibid.
64. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 111.
65. Kantor, 'Teatr Wydażeń. A propos "Kurki wodnej"' (1967), in Pleśniarowicz (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor. Pisma: Metamorfozy*, pp. 416–17.
66. Kaprow, 'Pinpointing Happenings', *Art News*, October 1967, in Jeff Kelly (ed.), *Allan Kaprow: Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley, CA/London: University of California Press, 1993 [2003 expanded edition]).
67. Kantor, 'Przedmiot opanować', p. 17.
68. Kantor, 'The Impossible Theatre, 1969–73', trans. M. Kobialka, in Kobialka, *A Journey*, p. 90.
69. Kantor, 'Milano Lessons', p. 118.
70. See Suchan, 'Happening as a Readymade', pp. 67–120.

71. See Murawska-Muthesius, 'Paris from Behind the Iron Curtain', pp. 250–60.
72. Kantor, 'The Impossible Theatre, 1969–73', p. 90.
73. Kantor was to continue to pursue this idea until its fruition in what he called the Impossible Theatre, in 1973, which aimed for '*the integration of a / great multitude of / suggestions / so structured that they create in the audience / the impression of / the impossibility of / grasping / and interpreting the whole*' (Kantor, 'The Impossible Theatre', pp. 100–1).
74. Wiesław Borowski, 'On i Ona', in Jurkiewicz et al. *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 429.
75. See, for example, the recent chapter by Justyna Michalik, 'A Happening According to Tadeusz Kantor', in *Tadeusz Kantor: Painting. Theatre*, exh. cat. (Vilnius: Nacionalinė dailės galerija, 2012), pp. 89–107. The piece offers a chronological narrative of the Happenings without referring to a wider sociopolitical or cultural field.
76. Kantor, 'Cricotage', in Pleśniarowicz (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor. Pisma: Metamorfozy*, pp. 363–8.
77. Kantor was doubtless aware that shaving foam had been a central feature of Salvador Dalí's Happenings of 1962–3, which also included wrapping women in ropes and then unwrapping them.
78. Kantor, 'Cricotage', pp. 363–8.
79. *Ibid.*, pp. 363–8.
80. *Kantor ist Da: Der Polnischer Regisseur, Maler, und Verpackungskünstler* (A film from the series: 'Der Künstler und seine Welt'), dir. Dietrich Mahlow (Nuremberg: Saarländischer Rundfunk, 1968), 48 min.
81. Borowski, "Cricotage".
82. Anka Ptaszkowska, 'Każdy powinien coś stracić, Anka Ptaszkowska interviewed by Dorota Jarecka', *Wysokie Obcasy* supplement of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, no. 32 (433), (11 August 2007), p. 11.
83. Author's interview with Wiesław Borowski, Warsaw, April 2004.
84. Wiesław Borowski, "Cricotage" Tadeusza Kantora', *Kierunki*, XII (1965).
85. 18 December 1965 at 22 Rynek Główny.
86. Marek Rostworowski, cited in Anna Baranowa, "Linia podziału" Tadeusza Kantora – wielość interpretacji', *Dekada Literacka* no. 6 (220), 2006.
87. Marek Rostworowski, 'Byłem fanem Kantora. Z dr Markiem Rostworowskim rozmawiają Anna i Zbigniew Baranowie', *Rzeczpospolita* weekly supplement *Plus – Minus* no. 36 (9–10 September 1995), p. 12.

88. Kantor, 'Linia Podziału', in Pleśniarowicz, *Tadeusz Kantor. Pisma: Metamorfozy*, p. 371.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid.
93. Baranowa, "Linia podziału".
94. Maciej Gutowski, *O Paniach, Panach i zdarzeniach* (Warsaw: Pavo, 1998), pp. 128–9.
95. Baranowa cites the following document from the IPN archive: 'Sprawozdania dekadowe, miesięczne, roczne', IPN Kr 056/1, vol. 30, p. 178. Baranowa, "Linia podziału".
96. Baranowa, "Linia podziału".
97. Ibid.
98. See 'Chronologia wypadków poprzedzających', in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 88.
99. Henry Galy-Carles, 'L'evenement', in *ibid.*, pp. 92–3.
100. 'Rozmowa z Tadeuszem Kantorem', in Borowski, *Tadeusz Kantor*, p. 97.
101. Kantor, 'Partytura', 1967, in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 88.
102. Author's interview with Wiesław Borowski, Warsaw, April 2004.
103. Edward Krasieński, 'A Happening is a Work of Art and not a Brawl. Edward Krasieński interviewed by Magdalena Kardasz', trans. J. Piątkowska and M. Głogoczowski, in Suchan, *Tadeusz Kantor: Niemożliwe*, p. 242.
104. Hanna Ptaszkowska, 'Happening w polsce'. Part 2, *Współczesność*, no. 10 (1969), p. 8.
105. Borowski, 'On i ona', p. 434.
106. Krasieński, 'A Happening is a Work of Art ...', p. 242.
107. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
108. Bakhtin cited in A. Renfrew, 'The Carnival without Laughter', in C. Adlam, R. Falconer, V. Makhlin and A. Renfrew (eds), *Face to Face: Bakhtin in Russia and in the West* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 188.
109. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 5–6.
110. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 34.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
112. *Ibid.*, cited in Renfrew, 'The Carnival without Laughter', p. 189.

113. Kantor, 'Rozważania', in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 163.
114. Kantor, 'Koncert Morski – Partytura', in *ibid.*, p. 132.
115. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
116. Author's conversations with Wiesław Borowski (Warsaw April 2004) and Tamás Szentjóby (Budapest, June 2011).
117. Jerzy Beres, 'W poszukiwaniu wolności. Z Jerzym Beresiem rozmawia Paweł Łubowski', *Arteon* 7 (2001), p. 23.
118. Kantor, *Partytura Panoramicznego Happeningu Morskiego*, quoted in Jerzy Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości Jerzego Beresia, 1954–1994', in Aleksandra Węcka (ed.), *Zwidy – Wyrocznie – Ołtarze – Wyzwania*, exh. cat. (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe, 1995), p. 98. Beres and Kantor were to fall out in 1969, when Kantor invited Beres to participate in a Happening based on Witkiewicz's *The Water Hen*. Beres was opposed to the spectacular nature of 'Happenings' after his participation in the *Panoramic Sea Happening* of 1967 and asked if he could make a manifestation of his own either before or after the production, but recalls that Kantor refused. Although Beres compromised, and played the part of a soldier in the production, travelling with the *Cricot 2* theatre on their first foreign tour, to Italy, he later noted that his presence was only 'physical'. See Beres, 'Moje kontakty z Tadeuszem Kantorem i grupą Krakowską w latach sześćdziesiątych', in Beres, *Wstyd: między podmiotem a przedmiotem* (Kraków: Otwarta Pracownia, 2002), pp. 121–3.
119. Kantor, *Partytura panoramicznego happeningu morskiego*, quoted in Jerzy Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości Jerzego Beresia, 1954–1994', in Węcka (ed.), *Zwidy*, 98.
120. Kantor, 'Tratwa medusy', in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 149.
121. See Borowski's untitled comments on the *Panoramic Sea Happening*, in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 165.
122. Amended translation. Suchan, 'Happening as a Readymade', p.93.
123. Suchan, 'Happening as a Readymade', pp. 89–96.
124. Kantor in the soundtrack of an unreleased film by A. Sapija, cited in Suchan, 'Happening as a Readymade', p. 104.
125. See *Maria Pinińska-Beres 1931–1999*, exh. cat. (Kraków: Bunkier Sztuki, 1999).

126. Maria Pinińska-Bereś, 'Katalog performances, realizacji bezinteresownych. Performances Catalogue, Free Realizations', in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś 1931–1999*, p. 91.
127. Ibid.
128. Kantor, 'Barbujaż erotyczny', in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, 152–3.
129. Ptazkowska, 'Happening w polsce', p. 8.
130. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', *Art International* 12:2 (February 1968).
131. Borowski, 1967, untitled comments in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, pp. 164–5.
132. Author's interview with Tamas St. Auby, Budapest, June 2011.
133. Grzegorz Sołtysiak and Józef Stępień (eds), *Marzec '68. Między tragedią a podłością* (Warsaw: Profi, 1998), pp. 11–14.
134. Adam Michnik later reflected on the period 1965–8: 'Those years were interesting because a few friends and I managed to function as a legal opposition within a system that didn't admit the existence of a legal opposition.' See Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives*, trans. Jane Cave (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 36. The Warsaw students, nicknamed 'the commandos', debated and argued at the 'Club of Seekers after Contradictions', sang songs by Russian dissidents Galich and Okudzhava, and interrupted meetings of their teachers, raising embarrassing issues such as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, or the Katyń massacres. Kuroń and Modzelewski, who had by now served their prison sentences and been released (only to be rearrested soon afterwards), were role models for the youthful rebels.
135. Dariusz Stola, *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce 1967–1968* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2000).
136. Antoni Dudek and Tomasz Marszałkowski, *Walki uliczne w PRL, 1956–1989* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Geo, 1999), p. 166.
137. Ost, *Solidarity*, p. 51.
138. Kantor and Maria Stangret's letter to Anka Ptazkowska, dated 17 April 1989, in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 368.
139. Unfortunately, reproduction of stills from the film is not permitted.
140. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 39, cited in Michal Kobialka, *Further on*, p. xiv.
141. Kantor, 'O sztuce (O Marzeniu)', cited in Kobialka, *Further on*, p. 53.

142. Kantor, 'The Theatre of Death' (1975), in Kobialka (ed.), *A Journey*, p. 110.
143. Kantor, 'Ambalaż ludzki' (1962), in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 333.
144. Kantor, 'Lekcja anatomii wedle Rembrandta', in Pleśniarowicz, *Tadeusz Kantor. Pisma: Metamorfozy*, pp. 390–2.
145. See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 106.
146. John Berger, 'Che Guevara: The Moral Factor', *The Urban Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (September 1975), pp. 202–8.
147. Kantor, 'Milano Lessons', p. 105.
148. Ptaszkowska, 'Každy powinien coś stracić', p. 10.
149. Kantor, 'Ulisses' (1944), in Zofia Gołubiew (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor. Malarstwo i rzeźba* (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe, 1991), p. 54.
150. Kantor, 'MANIFESTO', cited in 'Tadeusz Kantor 1915–1990', *Obieg* 1 (21), 1991, p. 3.
151. Luiza Nader, 'Bal w Zalesiu: inne przestrzenie', *Obieg* (18 August 2006).
152. Ptaszkowska, 'Každy powinien coś stracić', p. 6.
153. Ibid.
154. Ibid., p. 10.
155. Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), p. 82.
156. Andrzej Turowski, 'Polska Ideoza', in *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku* (Warsaw, 1987), p. 36, cited in Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, p. 90.
157. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, p. 90.
158. Ibid., p. 87.
159. Anda Rottenberg, 'Art in Poland 1949–1999: Stones That Cry', in Achim Hochdörfer (ed.), *Aspects / Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 1999), p. 201.
160. Author's interview with Wiesław Borowski, Warsaw, April 2004. Artistic exchange among the countries of the former Soviet 'bloc' is the subject of my next book, *Networking the Bloc: International Relations and Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1989*. See www.networkingthebloc.org.
161. For a study of the links between Polish and North American conceptual artists, see Jerzy Kierkuc-Bieliński, *Confinement and Illusions of Freedom: The Dialogue between Polish and American Conceptual Art 1970–1981* (London: The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2006), PhD thesis.

162. Author's interview with Wiesław Borowski, Warsaw, April 2004.
163. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
164. Kantor cited in Borowski, 'On i ona', p. 437; Kantor, 'MANIFESTO', *Obieg* 1 (21) (1991), p. 3.
165. Václav Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence' (1985), trans. E. Kohák, in Vladislav (ed.), *Václav Havel. Living in Truth*, p. 195.
166. Kantor, 'The Impossible Theatre, 1969–73', trans. M. Kobialka, in Kobialka (ed.), *A Journey*, pp. 93–4.
167. Kantor, 'MANIFESTO', p. 3.
168. Kantor speaking at Foksal Gallery, Warsaw, June 1974, in Jurkiewicz et al., *Tadeusz Kantor z archiwum*, p. 294.

2 doubt

1. Koller's unprocessed inheritance, Slovak National Gallery Archive, Bratislava, cited in Petra Hanáková, 'Cultural Trace J.K.', in Petra Hanáková and Aurel Hrabušický, *Július Koller Science Fiction Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2010), p. 32.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Václav Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence' (1985), trans. E. Kohák, in Vladislav (ed.), *Václav Havel. Living in Truth*, p. 175.
4. Július Koller, 'Retrospective Cultural Situation (UFO). 1994', handwritten transcript of lecture presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, reproduced in Hanáková and Hrabušický, *Július Koller Science Fiction Retrospective*, p. 328 (amended translation).
5. Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence', p. 175.
6. See Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, pp. 59–65.
7. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 183–330.
8. Adam Michnik, 'A New Evolutionism' (1976), in Michnik, *Letters from Prison and other Essays*, trans. Maya Latynski (Berkeley, LA and London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 138.
9. Koller, 'Retrospective Cultural Situation (UFO). 1994', p. 328 (amended translation).
10. Mikuláš Galanda (1895–1938), a pioneer of Slovak modernism, whose melancholic graphic works, paintings and illustrations combined aspects of Expressionism and Cubism. I am grateful to Katarina Mullerová for her clarifications concerning the gallery.

11. After the modernist painter Cyprián Majerník (1909–45), whose exhibition was held at the gallery in October 1957.
12. He had enrolled as a student at the Academy in 1959.
13. ‘Ordinary Bratislava inhabitants, “catching” Vienna television broadcasting without any problem, were far better off than inhabitants of other socialist states or towns’. (Hanáková, ‘Cultural Trace J.K.’, p. 34.)
14. Aurel Hrabušický, *Július Koller. Sondy*, Slovak /English bilingual exh. cat. (Bratislava: Galeria Sucasneho Umenia Slovenskej Narodnej Galerie, 1991), n.p. (amended translation).
15. Author’s conversation with Zuzana Bartošová, Bratislava, 23 June 2012.
16. Tomáš Štrauss, ‘On the question of the transformation of the “Art Work” to the “Art Action”’, *Výtvarný život* 12/4 (1967).
17. A survey of articles on international topics from the mid-1960s in *Výtvarný Život*, the Review of the Union of Slovak Artists and of the Union of Slovak Architects (published in Bratislava as of 1955), gives an indication of the range of foreign developments erratically reported in the cultural press of the times. Issue 10/7, 1965, contained a report on Brassäi, and extracts from Kahnweiler’s ‘Conversations with Picasso’; 10/8, 1965, ‘Four days with Anthony Calder’; 11/1, 1966, a translation of an interview with Wols; 11/2, 1966, a report from the Paris Biennale of Young Artists; 11/5, 1966, writings by Tadeusz Kantor, relating to his painting and theatre; 11/9, 1966, a review of the Venice Biennale; 11/10, 1966, a report from the AICA Congress in Czechoslovakia; 12/3, 1967, an interview with Francis Bacon; 12/4, 1967, a report on conventional graphic art in the USSR, and an article on Constantin Brancusi; 12/5, 1967, Mieczysław Porębski reporting on ‘Timely problems of Polish artists’; 12/9, 1967, articles on the Russian avant-garde, in particular Tatlin; 13/1, 1968, an article on Malevich (containing only reproductions of his figurative work) entitled ‘Kazimir Malevich’s contribution to the development of art’, and an interview with Roy Lichtenstein; 13/4, 1968, brief comments on Documenta in Kassel by Christo and Pierre Restany; 13/6, 1968, photographs from the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw; 13/8, 1968, issued the month of the invasion, notably contained no foreign features; 14/4, 1969, a conversation with Claes Oldenburg (torn out of the copy in the Slovak National Gallery archive); after which there was silence on the international front, with the exception of reports on graphic arts from Eastern bloc countries, until issue 14/8, 1969, which includes a conversation with Lucio Fontana;

- 14/9, 1969, an extraordinary report by Péter Sinkovits on ‘The Young Hungarian Avant-Garde’; 15/5, 1970, an article on Lunacharsky and Lenin; 15/7, 1970, Romanian graphic art; 16/6, 1971, a short article on Cuban poster art; 17/4, 1972, news of the activities of the Guerrilla Art Action Group and a call for Solidarity with Angela Davis.
18. Milan Knižák, ‘Proč právě tak. Text nepronosené přednášky o happeningu’, *Výtvarná práce* 8/24–25 (1965).
 19. Koller, ‘Vývoj mojej výtvarnej práce v atmosphere doby’. Manuscript, 1969. From the unprocessed legacy of J.K. held at the AVA archive, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, cited in Hanáková and Hrabušický, *Július Koller Science Fiction Retrospective*, p. 98.
 20. Koller, ‘Retrospective Cultural Situation (UFO). 1994’, p. 324.
 21. The Galéria Mladých on Mostová ul. See Radislav Matuščík, ... *Predtým. 1964–1971. Prekročenie hraníc*, ed. Katarína Rusnáková (Žilina: Považská galéria v Žilinie, 1994), p. 27.
 22. Hanáková, ‘Cultural Trace J.K.’, p. 34.
 23. Koller, cited in *Výtvarný život* 34/9 (1989), p. 41.
 24. Koller, ‘Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist’, in Kathrin Rhomberg and Roman Ondák (eds), *Július Koller: Univerzálna Futurologické Operácie*, exh. cat. Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, trilingual German/English/Slovak, trans. Fouad Asfour, Stefan Barmann et al., (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004), p. 147.
 25. Author’s interview with Kveta Fulierová, Bratislava, 24 September 2009.
 26. Koller, ‘From an Anti-Happening Question Mark to the New Seriousness of the Wavy Line’, in Aurel Hrabušický (ed.), *Július Koller*, exh. cat. (Bratislava: SOGA, 1999), p. 45 (translator not named).
 27. Koller, ‘From an Anti-Happening Question Mark’, p. 45.
 28. Hrabušický, *Július Koller. Sondy*, n.p.
 29. Július Koller, ‘Z autorských programov a akcií’, *Výtvarný život*, 15/8 (1970), p. 40.
 30. Hrabušický, ‘An introduction to the work of Július Koller’, in Hanáková and Hrabušický, *Július Koller Science Fiction Retrospective*, exh. cat., p. 149.
 31. As though to prove the point, *HAPPSOC II* was scheduled for the period between Christmas and New Year the following year.
 32. Manifest ‘Happsoc’, trans. Eric Dluhosch, in Hoptman and Pospiszyl (eds), *Primary Documents*, p. 87.

33. Koller, source not given, cited in Hrabušický, 'An introduction to the work of Július Koller', p. 148.
34. Koller, 'Z autorských programov a akcií', *Výtvarný život*, 15/8 (1970), p. 40. This short text lists ten anti-Happenings from the years 1965 to 1969, each accompanied by a short description.
35. Koller, 'From an Anti-Happening Question Mark', p. 45.
36. Hrabušický (ed.), *Július Koller* exh. cat. (Bratislava: SOGA, 1999), pp. 8–9 (translator not named; author's amended translation).
37. Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Roman Ondák', in Rhomberg and Ondák (eds), *Július Koller: Univerzálné Futurologické Operácie*, p. 137.
38. Ibid.
39. Daniel Grúň, 'Borders and Infinity: Questioning Utopian Imagery of Slovakian Neo-Avant-garde in the 1960s and 1970s', conference paper delivered at conference on *The Legacy of 1968*, Kraków, April 2008.
40. Kieran Williams, 'Civil Resistance in Czechoslovakia: From Soviet Invasion to "Velvet Revolution", 1968–89', in Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (eds), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 110–12.
41. Adam Roberts in Philip Windsor and Adam Roberts, *Czechoslovakia 1968: Reform, Repression and Resistance* (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, 1969).
42. It was officially acknowledged that the relaxed Prague Spring rules on foreign travel had left around 50,000 citizens abroad at the time of the invasion, but not admitted how many did not return. See Williams, 'Civil Resistance in Czechoslovakia', pp. 110–26.
43. Vladimír V. Kusin, *From Dubček to Charter 77: A Study of 'Normalization' in Czechoslovakia, 1968–1978* (Edinburgh: Q Press, 1978).
44. Hrabušický, *Július Koller. Sondy*, n.p.
45. Ibid., p. 81.
46. The exhibition was held at the House of Arts. See *Danuvius 1968. Medzinárodné biennále mladých výtvarníkov*, exh. cat. (Bratislava: Dom Umenia, 1968).
47. Alex Mlynárčik, 'Aux participants de la Biennale internationale des jeunes artistes DANUVIUS68, à tous les artistes et théoriciens progressistes!', letter dated 22 August 1968, signed by Erik Dietman, Alex Mlynárčik and other artists and critics. Reproduced in Pierre Restany, *Ailleurs. Alex Mlynárčik*

- (Paris: Galerie Lara Vincy/Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 1994), p. 67. There was no need or even opportunity to boycott the next edition of the biennale, as it was cancelled with the onset of cultural normalization in the Slovak federation.
48. Pierre Restany, writing in *Combat*, reproduced in *Výtvarný život*, 14/2 (1969), p. 87.
 49. Interestingly, in view of Havel's discussion of the term 'reticence', sketched out in my introduction, the same word crops up several times in the English summary, in reviews by authors of very different inclinations. The first reviewer notes what he calls 'A certain reticence of our artists... towards cool, geometrical abstraction, op-art, kinetic expression and the like'. Václav Zykmond, 'The Exhibition Danuvius 68 in Bratislava', *Výtvarný život*, 14/ 2 (1969), p. 85. Another reviewer, Ivan Jirous, who had recently graduated in Art History from Charles University in Prague, praised in particular an environment by Ivan Štepan – a series of cylinders covered in aluminium foil which reportedly went down very well with younger visitors. He wrote that 'there was a spontaneous gathering of visitors joyfully discovering the reality hitherto so reticently accepted in our country, i.e. that art must not inevitably be connected with meditation and that it could be something more simple and joyful: an object of play'. Ivan Jirous, 'Listý', *Výtvarný život*, 14/2 (1969), p. 86.
 50. Jürgen Weichardt, *Výtvarný život*, 14/2 (1969), p. 87.
 51. Matušík, ... *Predtým*, p. 67.
 52. Koller, 'Retrospective Cultural Situation (UFO). 1994', p. 328.
 53. Koller, *Up and Down (The Cultural Situation)*, 1994–96, handwritten text in Hrabušický (ed.), *Július Koller*, p. 49. See also: Tomáš Štrauss, 'Three Model Situations of Contemporary Art Actions', in *Works and Words*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: De Appel, 1979), pp. 70–73.
 54. Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist', p. 147.
 55. Koller, 'Retrospective Cultural Situation (UFO). 1994', p. 327.
 56. Koller, quoted in Hrabušický, *Július Koller. Soudy*, n.p.
 57. *Ibid.* The title of the piece contrasts tellingly with that of the series of photographs of graffiti at the Sorbonne taken by Mlynářčík on his visit in Paris in May 1968, entitled *Sorbonne – Museum of Modern Art (Permanent Manifestations)*. Mlynářčík had also made recorded examples of graffiti praising Dubček and democracy and demanding an end to Soviet

- occupation once back in Bratislava, calling it *Homages to Truth (Permanent Manifestations)*.
58. Koller, 'Retrospective Cultural Situation (UFO). 1994', p. 328.
 59. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, p. 819.
 60. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, p. 82.
 61. Precedents include Maciunas's *Flux Ping-Pong* in 1965; see 'Fluxus Vaudeville TouRnamEnt', *Fluxus Newspaper*, no. 6 (July 1965).
 62. Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Roman Ondák', p. 138.
 63. See Marián Mudroch and Dezider Tóth (eds), *1. Otvorený Ateliér 1970 Bratislava*, exh. cat. (Bratislava: SCCAN, 2000).
 64. Zuzana Bartošová, *Napriek Totalite. Neoficiálna slovenská scéna sedemdesiatych a osemdesiatych rokov 20. Storočia* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2011), p. 40.
 65. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
 66. *Za socialistické umenie. Materiály zo zjazdov umeleckých zväzov (máj–november 1972)* (Bratislava: Slovenský Spisovateľ, 1974), p. 221.
 67. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
 68. *Ibid.*, pp. 219–29.
 69. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
 70. Bartošová, *Napriek Totalite*, p. 42.
 71. Letter dated 28 October 1972, Koller's unprocessed inheritance, AVA archive, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.
 72. Petra Hanáková points out that Koller also wrote art-historical texts on amateur painting for catalogues published by the ObKaSS (District Cultural and Social Centre) and for ZUČ (Art Hobbies Activities).
 73. Koller cited in Hanáková, 'Cultural Trace J.K.', p. 45.
 74. Koller's unprocessed inheritance in the Slovak National Gallery Archive, Bratislava; cited in *ibid.*, p. 46.
 75. Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist', p. 145.
 76. *Ibid.*
 77. Koller, letter to Tomáš Štrauss, July 1978, in Tomáš Štrauss, *Slovenský variant moderny* (Bratislava: Pallas, 1992), p. 156.
 78. Koller, 'UFO Manifesto' quoted in Georg Schöllhammer, 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement: Július Koller's Erratic Work on the Re-Conception of Aesthetic Space since 1960', in Rhombert and Ondák (eds), *Július Koller: Univerzálna Futurologické Operácie*, p. 128.
 79. Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Roman Ondák', p. 136.

80. See also Łukasz Ronduda, Alex Farquharson and Barbara Piwowska (eds), *Star City. The Future Under Communism*, exh. cat. (Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary; Vienna: Tranzit.at, 2011).
81. Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (New York: Putnam, 1968).
82. Fulierová recalls that Koller took great pleasure in pursuing these one-sided mail exchanges with Western partners, and was always thrilled when he received a letter back. He once wrote to a gallery called ‘Koller’ in Switzerland, recommending that they should co-operate with him. Although Koller never became a member of the international mail art network as such, his absurdist form of soliciting flew in the face of censorship, overcame political obstacles and compensated for the impossibility of travelling or exhibiting internationally through official channels, just as mail art did. Key publications on East European participation in the mail art network include Géza Perneckzy (ed.), *Mail Art. Osteuropa Mail Art im Internationalen Netzwerk: Kongress Dokumentation: Drei Tage Rund um alternative Kommunikation*, exh. cat. (Budapest: Műcsarnok, 1998); Kornelia Röder, *Topologie und Funktionsweise des Netzwerk der Mail Art. Seine spezifische Bedeutung für Osteuropa von 1960 bis 1989* (Bremen: Salon Verlag, 2008).
83. Koller, ‘Conversation between Július Koller and Roman Ondák’, p. 138.
84. Tadeusz Konwicki, *The Polish Complex*, trans. Richard Lowrie (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998) [first published in Polish as *Komplex Polski*, 1977], pp. 4–5.
85. Ibid.
86. Koller, ‘Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist’, p. 146.
87. Ibid., p. 144.
88. Ibid., p. 146.
89. Fulierová recounts that it was not always easy to live with a UFO-naut. When it suited him, he would say: ‘I am not Július Koller, I am a UFO-naut’. He had, she explains, not one face, two faces or three faces, but a hundred faces, and he chose which he wanted. Author’s interview with Kveta Fulierová, Bratislava, 24 September 2009.
90. Harald Szeemann’s title of a section of *Documenta 5*, Kassel, 1972. Szeemann in an interview with Dobrila Denegri, available at <http://www.artluk.com/main.php?idnum=16>.

91. Jan Verwoert, Obituary, 'Július Koller 1939–2007', *Frieze. Contemporary Art and Culture*, Issue III, November–December 2007, p. 36.
92. Koller interviewed by Jan Budaj, *3SD*, Samizdat, 1981, in Zora Rusinova, *Action Art 1965–1989* (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001).
93. Kveta Fulierová, 'I lived with a UFO-naut', in Hanáková and Hrabušický, *Július Koller Science Fiction Retrospective*, p. 82.
94. Koller, 'Universálna Fyzikálna Organizácia' (1976), from Koller's unprocessed inheritance, AVA archive Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, cited in Hrabušický, 'An introduction to the work of Július Koller', p. 162 (amended translation).
95. Koller, 'From an Anti-Happening Question Mark', p. 45.
96. Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist', p. 147.
97. Ibid.
98. Author's interview with Kveta Fulierová, Bratislava, 24 September 2009.
99. Koller, quoted in Hrabušický: *Július Koller. Soudy*, n.p.
100. 'Probes' was the title given to the important exhibition of Koller's work organized in Bratislava in 1991. Hrabušický, *Július Koller. Soudy*, n.p.
101. Koller's proposal for *Universal Question – Olympics (UFO)* at the Galerie Poupol in Cologne.
102. Hanáková, 'Cultural Trace J.K.', p. 4. (amended translation).
103. Manuscript dated 1968 from Koller's unprocessed inheritance, Slovak National Gallery Archive, cited in Hrabušický: 'An introduction to the work of Július Koller', p. 161. (amended translation).
104. Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Roman Ondák', p. 141.
105. Author's interview with Kveta Fulierová, Bratislava, September 2009.
106. Hrabušický, 'An introduction to the work of Július Koller', p. 161.
107. Koller, text-card of 1977, from box 3 of the unprocessed inheritance, cited in Hanáková: 'Cultural Trace J.K.', p. 42 (amended translation).
108. Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence', p. 194.

3 dissent

1. Sándor Petőfi (1823–c.1849), revolutionary poet and national hero of the Revolution of 1848, thought to have been killed by the Russian Imperial Army.
2. Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956* (London: Allison & Busby, 1976), p. 39.

3. Rajk was the home-grown rival of Rákosi; he was arrested in 1949, and in a show trial he produced a coerced confession to being a Titoist and a Western spy. He was sentenced to death and executed.
4. Anthony Kemp-Welch, 'Dethroning Stalin: Poland 1956 and its Legacy', *Europe-Asia Studies* (Special Issue on *1956 and Its Legacy*), Vol. 58(8) (December 2006), pp. 1261-1284.
5. Mark Kramer, 'The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33(2), p. 178.
6. John P. C. Matthews, *Majales: The Abortive Student Revolt in Czechoslovakia in 1956*, Working Paper no. 24 (Washington: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center of Scholars, 1998).
7. Kramer, 'The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises', p. 193.
8. Csaba Békés, 'East Central Europe, 1953–1956', in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 1, *Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 351.
9. György Konrád, *A Guest in My Own Country*, trans. Jim Tucker (New York: Other Press, 2002), p. 218.
10. János Frank, 'Forty years of the Műcsarnok. 1950–1990', available at www.mucsarnok.hu/new_site/dl/mucsarnok_konyv_angol.rtf.
11. Ibid.
12. See Lóránd Hegyi, *Korniss Dezső* (Budapest: Képzőművészeti, 1982).
13. Frank, 'Forty years of the Műcsarnok'.
14. Ibid.
15. This had been so since a resolution taken in July 1958. See Péter György, 'Hungarian Marginal Art in the Late Period of State Socialism', in Ales Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, CA/London: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 204–5 n. 7.
16. György Galántai, 'How Art Could Begin As Life. Supplement to the Boglár Story'. Published in Hungarian in Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári (eds), *Törvénytelen avantgárd. Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme 1970–1973 [Illegal Avant-garde, the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio of György Galántai 1970–1973]* (Artpool–Balassi, Budapest, 2003), pp. 43–90. (English translation by Krisztina Sarkady-Hart.)
17. See Katalin Aknai and Orsolya Merhán, 'A fiatal képzőművészek stúdiójának története', in Hans Knoll (ed.), *A második nyikvánosság. XX*

- Századi Magyar művészet* (Budapest: Enciklopédia Kiadó, 2000), pp. 200–28.
18. Péter Sinkovits, 'Chronology', in László Beke, Lóránd Hegyi and Péter Sinkovits (eds), *IPARTERV 68–80: Kiállítás Az Iparterv Disztermében / IPARTERV 68–80: Exhibition in the meeting hall of IPARTERV* (Budapest: IPARTERV, 1980), p. 7.
 19. Frank, 'Forty years of the Műcsarnok'.
 20. Tamás Szentjóby, email, 10 August 2012.
 21. Gábor Altorjay, email, 13 August 2012.
 22. Jakob Böhme (c.1575–1624) – German Christian mystic, theologian, Lutheran, author of *Aurora*. Szentjóby, Letter to Harry Ruhé, (Geneva, 1 March 1977), in Harry Ruhé, *Fluxus: The most Radical and Experimental Art Movement of the Sixties* (Amsterdam: 'A', 1979), n.p.
 23. Tamás St. Auby, 'Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László in conversation with Tamás St. Auby' (first published in *Gallery Nova Newspapers* no. 19/20, 2009, pp. 37–71), reproduced in Zsuzsa László and Tamás St. Turba (eds), *Happening Budapest H 1966. Az Ebéd (In Memoriam Batu Kán /The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan)* (Budapest: tranzit.hu, 2011), p. 54.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
 25. Tamás St. Auby in conversation with Tibor Kovácsy, "Let the Saint Automaton Work", Interview with Tamás St. Auby', trans. Csaba Polony, *Left Curve* no. 35, 2011.
 26. Szentjóby, Letter to Harry Ruhé
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. Tamás St. Auby, 'Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László in conversation with Tamás St. Auby', p. 55.
 29. Szentjóby, Letter to Harry Ruhé.
 30. Gábor Altorjay, 'The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan). The Recollection of Gábor Altorjay' (originally published as an appendix to Ottó Tolnai, 'Néhány megjegyzés Bori Imre A legújabb magyar líráról című írásához', *Új Symposion*, no. 34, 1968, pp. 12–13), reproduced in László and St. Turba (eds), *Happening Budapest H 1966*, p. 42.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 32. Szentjóby, Letter to Harry Ruhé.
 33. Wolf Vostell and Jürgen Becker, *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme* (Hamburg: Rowohlt-Verlag, 1965).
 34. Tamás Szentjóby, 'On the Happening (excerpts)' (1966–68), in László and St. Turba (eds), *Happening Budapest H 1966*, p. 49.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
36. Tamás St. Auby, ‘Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László in conversation with Tamás St. Auby’, p. 53.
37. Tamás St. Auby in conversation with Tibor Kovácsy, “‘Let the Saint Automaton Work’”, Interview with Tamás St. Auby’.
38. Szentjóbó, ‘On the Happening (excerpts)’, p. 47.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
40. Szentjóbó, Letter to Harry Ruhé.
41. Gábor Altorjay, ‘Life, Material, Happening’ (1966) (originally published in *Magyar Műhely*, no. 128–129, 2004, pp. 15–16), reproduced in in László and St. Turba (eds), *Happening Budapest H 1966*, p. 50.
42. Ministry of Interior Folder no. V-156455 (‘Schwitters’) dated 11 May 1968.
The original documents have been scanned and are now available online at <http://www.c3.hu/collection/tilos/docs.html>. All citations are taken from the English translation produced as part of the project Parallel Chronologies, trans. Zsófia Rudnay, available online at http://exhibition-history.blog.hu/1968/05/11/police_report.
43. Gábor Altorjay, email, 13 August 2012.
44. Altorjay had met Kantor in 1966 in Kraków. He recalls that Kantor was ‘pleased to hear of our Happening’. They met again in Nuremberg, in 1968, after Altorjay had left Hungary permanently, and he recalls that he introduced Kantor to Wolf Vostell, with whom he was working at that time. He notes that Kantor appeared very nervous about the meeting, and was concerned about spies. Altorjay, email, 13 August 2012.
45. Conversation with Szentjóbó, Budapest, November 2011.
46. Gábor Altorjay, email, 13 August 2012.
47. Éva Forgács, ‘Does Democracy Grow under Pressure? Strategies of the Hungarian Neo-avant-garde throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s’, *Centropa*, Vol. VIII/1 (January 2008), pp. 36–48.
48. Tamás St. Auby, in Maja and Reuben Fowkes, *Revolution I Love You/1968 in Art, Politics and Philosophy* (Manchester: MIRIAD Manchester Metropolitan University/ Thessaloniki: CACT/ Budapest: Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts, 2008), p. 160.
49. Szentjóbó, email, 11 August 2012.
50. The piece thus combined what are traditionally regarded as the three elements in the alchemical triad corresponding with body, soul and spirit, although, here again, the artist claims that no allegory was intended.

51. Szentjóby, email, 11 August 2012.
52. Szentjóby, email, 13 August 2012.
53. Ibid.
54. Péter Sinkovits, *IPARTERV I*, cited in Beke, Hegyi and Sinkovits (eds), *IPARTERV 68–80*.
55. Lajos Németh, cited in *ibid.*
56. Tamás Szentjóby, ‘Distance. Action with Tape Recorder’, reproduced in Dóra Hegyi, Sándor Hornyik and Zsuzsa László, *Parallel Chronologies. ‘Other’ Revolutionary Traditions. How Art Becomes Public. An Exhibition in Newspaper Format* (Budapest: Tranzit Hungary Benefit Association, 2011), p. 21.
57. Ibid.
58. Szentjóby, email, 13 August 2012.
59. He adds: ‘most of whom have since scattered around the world, or committed suicide, or been the victims of accidents’. György Konrád, foreword to Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism*, trans. Katalin and Stephen Landesmann (London: I.B.Tauris, 1988) [*L’artiste d’État* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1983); Hungarian samizdat *A Cenzura Esztetikája*, 1986,)], p. xii.
60. Galántai was to emerge as a central figure in the early 1970s by finding a space for unofficial artistic events to take place, as I discuss later in this chapter. Galántai: ‘How Art Could Begin As Life’, n.p.
61. 14–17 December 1970.
62. Galántai, ‘How Art Could Begin As Life’, n.p.
63. For full documentation of events at the Chapel Studio, see Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári (eds), *Törvénytelen avantgárd*.
64. Galántai, ‘How Art Could Begin As Life’, n.p.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Gyula Pauer and Tamás Szentjóby, ‘Call for Direct Week dated 18 June 1972’, reproduced in Hegyi, Hornyik and László, *Parallel Chronologies*, p. 30.
68. Galántai, ‘How Art Could Begin As Life’, n.p.
69. Ibid.
70. Seale had been co-founder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence in 1966, and was charged with conspiracy and incitement to riot in Chicago in 1968, as one of the so-called ‘Chicago 8’. He was released in 1972.

71. Tamás Szentjóbby, ‘autocensorship = compromise = precious little’, *Jelenlét. Szógetető*. Literary and Arts journal of ELTE BTK, 1989/1–2 (14–15), p. 270, cited in Emese Kürti, “‘To Disorient the Troops’: Tamás St. Auby’s exhibition in Karlsruhe”, trans. Daniel Sipos. *Exindex*, October 2010. Available at <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=en&page=3&cid=773>.
72. Béla Hap, ‘Soft-spoken Hungarian Underground Manifesto’. *Expresszió*, 1972, cited in Galántai, ‘How Art Could Begin As Life’, n.p.
73. ‘Interview with László Beke’, originally printed in Klaniczay and Sasvári (eds), *Törvénytelen avantgárd*, p. 141, reproduced and translated in Hegyi, Hornyik and László, *Parallel Chronologies*, p. 33.
74. ‘Interview with Gyula Pauer’, 1998, originally printed in Klaniczay and Sasvári (eds), *Törvénytelen avantgárd*, p. 142, reproduced and translated in Hegyi, Hornyik and László, *Parallel Chronologies*, p. 33.
75. ‘Interview with Tamás St. Auby’, 1998, originally printed in Klaniczay and Sasvári (eds), *Törvénytelen avantgárd*, p. 151, reproduced and translated in Hegyi, Hornyik and László, *Parallel Chronologies*, p. 34.
76. Galántai, ‘How Art Could Begin As Life’, n.p.
77. Haraszti had been accused of Maoism and placed under ‘police control’ in 1968, although he was initially allowed to resume his studies. In May 1970, several months after his poem ‘Che’s Errors’ was attacked in the official press, he was arrested and imprisoned for three days – the maximum period allowed without initiating proceedings. The police completed a document ‘under paragraph 60 of the Penal Code, which allows the police to state that a person has committed a certain offence even though they have not been put on trial for it’, which was passed on to employers, but was inaccessible to the ‘culprit’. As a result Haraszti was denied his degree by the University, although he had completed his studies. Haraszti and fellow poet György Dalos were placed under police control again for six months in July 1970, and wrote a letter of protest. Some months later, in February 1971, they were arrested and sentenced to 25 days’ imprisonment. They went on hunger strike but were force-fed, and the case attracted widespread protest among Hungarian intellectuals. *Piece-Rates* was first published as *Stüchlohn* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1975), translated into English by Michael Wright, and published as *A Worker in a Worker’s State. Piece-Rates in Hungary* (Harmondsworth: Penguin/*New Left Review*, 1977).
78. Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker’s State*, p. 58; p. 48: pp. 45–9.
79. Michael Wright, ‘About the Author’, in *ibid.*, p. 17.

80. *Centaur (Kentaur)* was banned before its standardization in 1975. The 16 mm master-copy was discovered in 1983, however, and digitally restored in 2009 (in a project co-ordinated by the Ludwig Museum and ACAX [Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange], with the financial assistance of the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation [MMK] and tranzit.hu). Szentjóby had previously collaborated with the studio in 1969, acting in what has subsequently become one of the cult films of this period, Dezső Magyar's *Agitátorok [The Agitators (1969/71, 78 min.)]*. The film combined intense political dialogues with original newsreel footage to explore the 1919 Hungarian Revolution from the perspective of a group of young agitators in the Communist faction of the Hungarian Socialist Party, determined to turn against their Social Democrat coalition partners. The screenplay, by Magyar and Gábor Bódy, raised complex questions about revolutionary morality and its ambiguities, relating as closely to postwar Hungarian history as it did to the events of 1919, and was banned and shelved well into the 1980s. Szentjóby played the part of Szentesi, a disillusioned member of the group. He voiced dissatisfaction with the degree to which the agitators were out of touch with workers' needs and interests, pointing out that workers would always be dissatisfied so long as they could see that officials were living better in the Soviet House, and that functionaries continued to sit passively behind their desks. The trouble is, he argues, that 'the people are not liberated in their minds'. His criticisms provoke a split among the agitators, whose core members conclude that his attitude is counter-revolutionary. Szentesi is presented as an anarchist drifter. Having fallen into bourgeois 'counter-revolutionary' circles (in search of alcohol under prohibition) he presents himself as a representative of the 'useless people's party' and delivers a deadpan speech inviting people to vote for him, stating his opposition to the programme of compulsory 'usefulness' proposed by the agitators. Midway through the film, he is shot dead by his former comrades while marching alongside a counter-revolutionary street demonstration. The film demonstrated that revolutionary struggle can ultimately perceive the world only in binary terms, with critical floaters of Szentesi's sort inevitably falling into the enemy camp. His death thus appears as a warning to 'fellow travellers' that there is no room, in times of revolution, for internal dissent. Szentjóby believes that Magyar and Gábor Bódy deliberately chose him to play this role, as

it conformed to some extent to this official perception of his real-life position, and in taking the role he took responsibility for confirming this.

81. Tamás St. Auby in conversation with Tibor Kovácsy, “Let the Saint Automaton Work”.
82. Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 367, 263, 269–70.
83. Iván Szelényi, ‘Preface’, in György Konrád and Iván Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power: A Sociological Study of the Role of the Intelligentsia in Socialism*, trans. Andrew Arato and Richard E. Allen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), p. xiv. See also William F. Robinson, ‘A New Blow Against Hungarian Nonconformists’, 6 November 1974, available at <http://files.osa.ceu.hu/holdings/300/8/3/text/35-5-287.shtml>.
84. Szelényi, ‘Preface’, in Konrád and Szelényi: *The Intellectuals on the Road*, p. xiv.
85. Konrád, *A Guest in My Own Country*, p. 265.
86. Szelényi, ‘Preface’, in Konrád and Szelényi: *The Intellectuals on the Road*, p. xv.
87. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
88. ‘Excerpts from FIKA – Interview with Tamás St. Auby’, reproduced and translated in Hegyi, Hornyik and László, *Parallel Chronologies*, p. 41.
89. When a representative of the Communist Youth League (the Club was under the auspices of KISZ) sought to censor one of the pictures Szentjóbý wanted to include, he recalls: ‘I handed over to him the psychedelic recipe: “150–1=0”. It was efficient: the KISZ did not dare to risk a scandal. A banned exhibition would have had a far greater influence on the general atmosphere than the exhibition itself. And it is common knowledge that scandal is the true non-art-art’. ‘Excerpts from FIKA – Interview with Tamás St. Auby’, reproduced and translated in Hegyi, Hornyik and László, *Parallel Chronologies*, p. 43.
90. Tamás St. Auby in conversation with Tibor Kovácsy, “Let the Saint Automaton Work”. After a period spent travelling in Europe he settled in Geneva, moving back to Budapest after the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

4 humour

1. Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1992 [first published as *Žert*, 1967]), pp. 32–4.
2. Konrád, *A Guest in My Own Country*, p. 206.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 119–20.
4. Péter Sinkovits, ‘The Quest for a Modern Idiom: Informel to Pop Art’, in Andrea Bordács, József Kollár and Péter Sinkovits, *Endre Tót* (Budapest: Új Művészet Kiadó, 2003), p. 60.
5. Judit Szabadi, ‘The Gesture as the Artist’s Self-Awakening’, in *Tót Endre: semmi sem semmi: retrospektív 1965–1995 / Endre Tót: nothing ain’t nothing: retrospective 1965–1995*, exh. cat. (Budapest: Múcsarnok, 1995), p. 10.
6. See Timothy O. Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation* (Los Angeles, CA: LACMA/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (eds), *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930* (Los Angeles, CA: LACMA/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
7. Beke, Hegyi and Péter Sinkovits (eds), *IPARTERV 68–80*.
8. Endre Tót, ‘I am glad if...’, z Endre Tótem rozmawia Marta Smolińska’, *Magazyn O.pl. Polski Portal Kulutry*, p. 1, available at: <http://magazyn.o.pl/2011/endre-tot-i-am-glad-if-i-can-marta-smolinska/>.
9. The first of these was published by the International Artists Corporation in Oldenburg, by Klaus Groh, in 1972, and was entitled *Incomplete Informations (Verbal and Visual)*. Scores of others followed, over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s, with a wide range of independent publishers in Europe, as well as others in samizdat. For a full list see Endre Tót and Nóra Lukács (eds), *Tót Endre. Very Special Joys*, exh. cat. (Budapest: MODEM, 2012), pp. 381–2.
10. Jean-Marc Poinot, ‘La Communication à distance et l’objet esthétique’ (1971), available online at <http://www.archives.biennaledeparis.org/fr/1971/tex/poinot.htm>. See also Jean-Marc Poinot, *Mail Art. Communication à distance* (Paris: Cedic, 1971).
11. Tót cited in *Tót Endre: semmi sem semmi*, p. 32.
12. Author’s interview with Tót, Cologne, 6 January 2006.
13. László Beke, ‘Hungarian Performance – Before and After Tibor Hajas’, in Richard Martel (ed.), *Art Action 1958–1998* (Quebec: Éditions Intervention, 2001), p. 228.

14. Géza Perneczky, ‘“Long Live the Culture Bungler!” The Mail Art Movement in Hungary’, in Guy Schraenen (ed.), *Mail Art. Osteuropa Mail Art im Internationalen Netzwerk: Kongress Dokumentation: Drei Tage Rund um alternative Kommunikation*, exh. cat. (Schwerin: Staatliches Museum/Budapest: Múcsarnok, 1998), p. 44.
15. Author’s interview with Tót, Cologne, 6 January 2006.
16. Although the photographs were presumably taken by friends, Tót refuses to disclose their identity, insisting that as these were his actions, the identity of the photographer is irrelevant.
17. György Konrád, ‘Foreword’, in Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison*, p. xiv.
18. Václav Havel, ‘The Power of the Powerless’ (1978), in Vladislav (ed.), *Václav Havel. Living in Truth*, pp. 41–3.
19. Author’s interview with Tót, Cologne, 6 January 2006.
20. Tót, ‘I am glad if...’, p. 1.
21. *Egy lépés / One step*, 1972, 16mm, black & white, 2.5 mins.
22. See George Schöpflin (ed.), *Censorship and Political Communication in Eastern Europe: A Collection of Documents* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), pp. 142–6.
23. Author’s interview with Tót, Cologne, 6 January 2006.
24. Tomáš Štrauss, ‘Endre Tót als Aktionkünstler’, in *Tót Endre: semmi sem semmi*, pp. 19–20.
25. Lóránd Hegyi, ‘Central Europe as a Hypothesis and a Way of Life’, in Achim Hochdörfer (ed.), *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 1999), p. 28.
26. Author’s interview with Tót, Cologne, 6 January 2006.
27. Tót quoted in Géza Perneczky, ‘Endre Tót and the Mental Monochromy’, in *Tót Endre: semmi sem semmi*, p. 32.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. J. Coulson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 45.
30. Gyula Pauer, ‘Pseudo’ Manifesto, 1970.
31. The statue had been a gift to the DDR from the Soviet authorities.
32. Author’s interview with Miklós Haraszti, Budapest, November 2003.
33. László Beke and Urs Graf, ‘Junge Kunst in Ungarn’, *Werk*, 59, no. 10 (1972), p. 592. The piece was also exhibited in the exhibition *Szövegek/Texts*, at György Galántai’s Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár, 19–25 August 1973.

34. László Beke, 'The Strange Afterlife of Socialist Realism', in Péter György and Hedvig Turai (eds), *Art and Society in the Age of Stalin* (Budapest: Corvina Books, 1992), p. 122.
35. Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, p. 10.
36. Beke, 'Hungarian Performance – Before and After Tibor Hajas', p. 228.
37. In another variation on the theme, the camera shows us a close-up of the hole, with only the lower part of Tót's face visible. We still see his insolent smile, but his identity is concealed behind what remains of the paper.
38. Andrea Bordács, 'The Joys of a Rain-Maker: Endre Tót's retrospective exhibition *Nothing ain't Nothing*', *Új Művészet* 6/10 (October 1995), p. 77.
39. He participated in the 1974 International Triennial of Drawing in Wrocław, and showed at the Galeria Akumulatory 2 in Poznań in 1975, an important hub for international artists networking in this period.
40. Endre Tót, *TÓT Questions by TÓT* (Berlin: Edition Hundertmark, 1974).
41. The limited edition underground international magazine ran for eight issues in total (1972–6).
42. Dóra Maurer, 'Sumus. Data with Subjective Commentary', in Dóra Maurer (ed.), *Parallel Oeuvres. Maurer. Gáyor*, exh. cat. (Győr: Városi Művészeti Múzeum, 2001), p. 139. See also Zanna Gilbert, 'Something Unnameable in Common: Translocal at the Beau Geste Press', in Klara Kemp-Welch and Cristina Freire (eds), *Artists' Networks in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Special Section, *Art Margins* 2, (June 2012).
43. Maurer, 'Sumus. Data with Subjective Commentary', p. 134.
44. László Beke and Dóra Maurer (eds), *Hungarian Schmuck* (Devon: Beau Geste Press, 1972).
45. See Ken Friedman and Mike Weaver (eds), *Fluxshoe*, exh. cat. (Devon: Beau Geste Press, 1972); Simon Anderson, 'Fluxus, Fluxion, Flux-shoe: 1970s', in Ken Friedman (ed.), *The Fluxus Reader* (West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998).
46. Falmouth (23–31 October 1972), Exeter (13 November–2 December 1972), Croydon (15–26 January 1973), Oxford (10–25 February 1973), Nottingham (6–19 June 1973), Blackburn (6–21 July 1973) and Hastings (17–24 August 1973).
47. David Mayor, 'Something about the FluxShoe' (for the Southern Arts Association Bulletin), December 1972, typescript from Tate Gallery Archive, David Mayor Collection 815.2.2.6.6., pp. 1–4.
48. George Brecht, 'Something about Fluxus' (May 1964), cited in Mayor, 'Something about the FluxShoe', p. 4.

49. Mayor, 'Something about the FluxShoe', p. 5.
50. Maciunas, cited in *ibid.*, p. 5.
51. Mayor, *ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
52. László Beke, 'Węgierskie aspekty performance', in Grzegorz Dziamski, Henryk Gajewski and Jan Wojciechowski (eds), *Performance* (Warsaw: Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984), p. 129.
53. When Budapest manufacturers refused to produce his rubber designs, Tót had his first stamp made in Zurich. Author's interview with Tót, Cologne, 6 January 2006.
54. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55 (winter 1990), pp. 105–43.
55. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 200.
56. Slavoj Žižek, 'What Lies Beneath', commentary in the *Review* section of the *Guardian*, 1 May 2004.
57. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969', p. 140.
58. See also Sol LeWitt, 'Serial Project #1, 1966', *Aspen Magazine*, nos. 5–6 (1967), n.p.
59. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969', p. 121.
60. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 229.
61. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Double*, trans. Constance Garnett (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1997) p. 38.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
63. Perneczky, 'Endre Tót and the Mental Monochromy', p. 29.
64. Schöpfli (ed.), *Censorship and Political Communication*, pp. 144–5.
65. Tót: 'I am Glad if...', p. 2
66. Published in Endre Tót, *½ Dozen Berliner Gladness Postcards* (Berlin: DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm, 1979).
67. Tót, cited in Bordács and others, *Endre Tót*, p. 119.
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Endre Tót, Very Special Actions 1973–2004* (CD-Rom) (Cologne: Radical Egal, Verlag IL, ASA-European, 2005).
70. Author's interview with Tót, Cologne, 6 January, 2006.
71. Štrauss, 'Endre Tót als Aktionkünstler', p. 20.
72. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969', p. 140.

5 reticence

1. The rock band, founded in September 1968 by four Prague teenagers, among them the 17-year-old Milan Hlavsa, refused to change its English name after the authorities made it illegal to sing English-language lyrics in the early 1970s, and lost the right to perform in public.
2. Normalization entailed the restoration of censorship, political purges of cultural associations, and vigorous monitoring of cultural life by the Státní Bezpečnost – the State Security.
3. Ivan M. Jirous, ‘A Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival’ (samizdat 1975), trans. Eric Dluhosch, in Hoptman and Pospiszyl (eds), *Primary Documents*, pp. 57–8.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–5.
5. *Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Final Act* (Helsinki: Government of the Republic of Finland, 1975). Available online at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/peace/docs/finact75.htm>.
6. Václav Havel, ‘Dear Dr Husák’ (1975), in Václav Havel, *Open Letters. Selected Prose 1965–1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (London and Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1991), pp. 53–4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
16. Václav Havel, ‘“It Always Makes Sense to Tell the Truth”. An Interview with Jiří Lederer’ (29 April 1975), trans. Paul Wilson, in Havel, *Open Letters. Selected Prose 1965–1990*, p. 85.
17. Although it became known as the ‘Trial of the Plastic People’ over the years, as Jonathan Bolton has argued, this was not strictly speaking true; only one of the defendants was a member of the band. See Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent. Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 115–18.

18. Harold Gordon Skilling, *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 8–12.
19. Havel, 'The Trial' (October 1976), trans. Paul Wilson, in Havel, *Open Letters. Selected Prose 1965–1990*, pp. 102–8.
20. See Milan Knižák, *Akce po kterých zbyla aleson nějaká dokumentace 1962–1995* (Prague: Gallery, 2000).
21. Jaroslav Šťastný, 'John Cage's Visit to Prague in 1964', in Vít Havránek, *Akce slovo pohyb prostor. Experimenty v umění šedesátých let /Action word movement space. Experimental art of the sixties* (Prague: City Gallery, 1999), p. 438.
22. See Milan Knižák, 'Die A-Gemeinschaft 1963–1971/A-Community 1963–1971', in Petra Stegmann, *Fluxus East. Fluxus-Netzwerke in Mitteleuropa / Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007), pp. 77–95.
23. See, among others, Jindřich Chalupecký, *Umění dnes* (Prague: Nakl. československých výtvarných umělců, 1966).
24. Ságlová was the sister of artistic director of the Plastic People of the Universe Ivan Jirous, and continued to make installations until 1972, when she abandoned this line of activity after an extended period of police harassment. Over the course of the previous few years, she had made a number of iconic *pièces de résistance* drawing on local stories of personal and collective acts of civil resistance, blurring the boundaries between the poetic and political, and demonstrating the power of oral history to produce models of active subjectivity. *Homage to Gustav Oberman* (Bransoudov, near Humpolec, March 1970) referenced the legend of a shoemaker from Humpolec (said to be a site of pagan mysteries) who had protested against the German occupation during World War 2 by spitting fire on the hillside. His bravery was commemorated by Ságlová and her friends by setting alight plastic bags full of gasoline-soaked jute in a snowstorm. *Laying Napkins near Sudoměř* (May 1970) was a commemoration of female heroism, referring to the legend of Hussite women spreading napkins on a battlefield to trip up advancing Crusaders' horses. Ságlová's last action, before abandoning this form of artistic activity and turning to painting and tapestry, was entitled *Homage to Fafejta* (October 1972), an installation of inflated condoms in an abandoned stronghold, referring to the story of a Prague pharmacist who made it his personal mission to promote their use. See Milan Knižák (ed.), *Zorka Ságlová*, exh. cat. (Prague: National Gallery, 2006).

25. Štembera had shifted away from painting to performance art in around 1970. He later claimed that a short trip to the Paris *salon* in May 1968 had been central to prompting this new direction, as while he was there, with no money even for food, his desperate situation had caused him to use his body as his working material.
26. Mlčoch began to make performance pieces in 1974. These were documented photographically by Vladimír Ambros, a colleague from the Prints and Drawings Department of the National Gallery. When Mlčoch later went on to work in the archive of the Odeon publishing house, this provided another venue for their meetings. See Jan Mlčoch, 'Remembering the 1970s – Notes' (January 2008), in Edith Jeřábková (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda* (Ústí nad Labem: Fakulta umění a design Univerzity Jana Evangelisty Purkyně v Ústí nad Labem, 2010), p. 15.
27. Mlčoch in Barbora Klímová, *Replaced – Brno – 2006*, exh. cat. (Brno: author's edition, 2006).
28. For more on KwieKulik and the studio see my essay 'Art Documentation and Bureaucratic Life: The "Case" of the Studio of Documentation, Activities and Propagation' in Łukasz Ronduda and Georg Schoellhammer (eds), *Kwiekulik* (Vienna: JPR Ringier, 2013).
29. Kovanda recalls his first contact with Polish artists as follows: 'I was walking around Galeria Repassage by chance and I met Paweł Freisler ... , he was my first step to Polish artists.' Email from Kovanda to author, September 2012.
30. Petr Štembera, Letter to KwieKulik (he addresses it 'Dear Contextualists'), dated 15 November 1976, Prague. PDDiU Archive, Warsaw.
31. As of 1977, when Kovanda was employed as curator of the Depository of the Modern Art Collection at the National Gallery in the Municipal Library in Prague.
32. Jiří Kovanda and Tobi Maier, '10 Questions to Jiří Kovanda in August 2009', in Tobi Maier and Antonia Lotz (eds), *The First Three Years of Ludlow 38* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2009), p. 153 (amended translation).
33. Jiří Kovanda, 'Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn't need a studio. Hans-Ulrich Obrist talks with Jiří Kovanda', in Vít Havránek (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda. Actions and Installations 2005–1976* (Zurich: Tranzit, 2006), p. 107.
34. Kovanda's pose recalls that later adopted by Koller and the child in *Flying Cultural Situation* (1982). In a recent interview the younger artist admitted that in the 1970s, when he became aware of the Slovak artist's work, it had

- seemed to him to be ‘almost embarrassing. UFO – ‘Universal Futurological Orientation’. Was he crazy? What was he on about? ... I don’t know why, but Koller was absolutely incomprehensible to me at that time. Today, our approaches might seem similar, but at the time they were completely different.’ Jiří Kovanda, ‘Interview’ by Ján Mančuška, *Frieze* (March 2008), p. 147.
35. Pavlína Morganová, untitled text in Jeřábková (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda*, p. 23 (amended translation). See also Pavlína Morganová, *Akční Umění* (Olomouc: Votobia, 1998), p. 124.
 36. Klímová, *Replaced*, p. 64.
 37. Kovanda, ‘Vyjít s tím, co je’, *Umělec* 3 (2004), pp. 10–16 (translated from Czech as ‘Get along with what we have’, translator not named), available at <http://www.divus.cz/umelec/en/pages/umelec.php?id=367&roc=2004&cis=3#clanek> (amended translation).
 38. Kovanda, ‘Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn’t need a studio’, p. 107.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
 40. Vít Havránek, ‘Jiří Kovanda. The Faint Breeze of the Everyday’, *Flash Art* (November–December 2007), p. 81.
 41. Kovanda, ‘Vyjít s tím, co je’ (amended translation).
 42. The Club was run by Tomasz Sikorski, at that time a second-year student at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, at the instigation of the artist Paweł Freisler, between 16 January 1976 and 11 December 1978, when it was closed on the pretext of refurbishment. During the course of its second year the exhibition space was on the ground floor of the building; it then moved to the basement. See Tomasz Sikorski, Galeria ‘Mospan’, available at http://www.tomaszsikorski.net/tekst_oryg/Galeria%20MOSPAN%20i%20P.O.Box%2017.pdf; Tomasz Sikorski, ‘22 Nov.–10 Dec. 1976. Galeria “Mospan”’, *Linia* 2 (1977), p. 11.
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. His explanations tell us as much about his ambitions for the profile of the alternative gallery that he was running, dedicated to conceptual and action-based ephemeral works, in the landscape of the network of alternative spaces in the second half of the 1970s, as they do about Kovanda’s own priorities.
 45. Cage’s participants were Merce Cunningham, Charles Olson, Robert Rauschenberg, M.C. Richards and David Tudor.
 46. Kovanda, ‘Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn’t need a studio’, p. 106.

47. Guillaume Leingre, 'Jiří Kovanda: I Want You', *Particules*, #18 (March/April 2007), p. 2.
48. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
49. Kovanda, 'Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn't need a studio', p. 107.
50. Tomáš Pospiszyl, 'Étude', *Manifesta Journal. Around Curatorial Practices* #13. Special Issue, ed. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Virginie Bobin, pp. 51–3.
51. Ibid.
52. Igor Zabel, 'Conversation III: Ordinarity is Invisible. Text by Vít Havránek with e-mailed commentary by Paweł Polit and Igor Zabel', in Havránek (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda. Actions and Installations*, p. 117.
53. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
54. Václav Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism' (April 1987) [first published in the underground cultural journal *Jednou Nohu (Revolver Review)* and, in English, in *Index on Censorship* (3 March 1988)], in Havel, *Open Letters. Selected Prose 1965–1990*, trans. Paul Wilson, p. 348.
55. Kovanda, 'Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn't need a studio', p. 107.
56. Kovanda in conversation with Boris Ondreička, 'Future Questions and Answers', unpublished interview in Edith Jeřábková (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda*, p. 202.
57. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
58. Ibid.
59. Klímová, *Replaced – Brno – 2006*, p. 32.
60. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
61. Kovanda and Maier, '10 Questions to Jiří Kovanda in August 2009', p. 154.
62. 'Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn't need a studio', p. 107.
63. Ibid.
64. The Brno-based artists Vladimír Ambroz and Sony Halas carried out a similar action in the early 1970s. Ambroz describes 'bringing warm air from Marian Palla's studio to our own. His place was heated while my place was freezing. So we carried air in big plastic bags from Kotlárska street to Jana Uhra. We did it for the pleasure of it.' Ambroz in Klímová, *Replaced – Brno – 2006*, p. 15.
65. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).

66. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* were first published in London by Luzac in 1927, but quickly went out of print. They were republished in 1949 (New York: Grove Press).
67. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
68. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider and Company [undated]), p. 13. Roland Barthes also read Suzuki's *Essais sur le bouddhisme Zen* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1972) in the summer of 1977 (see Roland Barthes, *The Neutral. Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier, text established by Thomas Clerc under the direction of Eric Marty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) (*Le Neutre*, Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2002), p. 219, footnote 34. Barthes' lectures on *Neutral*, delivered at the Collège de France in 1977–8, outlined a theory of the *Neutral* elaborated in relation to Buddhist teachings, as 'a manner – a free manner – to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time' (p. 8). He called for the 'suspension ... of orders, laws, summons, arrogances, terrorism, puttings on notice, the will-to-possess / – then, by way of deepening, refusal of pure discourse of opposition. Suspension of narcissism: no longer to be afraid of images ... : to dissolve one's own image (a wish that borders on the negatively mystical discourse, or Zen, or Tao)' (p. 12). The Taoism of Lao-Tzu served as an important point of reference for Barthes in this period, and he writes that the sage 'confronts difficult complications only in their easy details and addresses great problems only in their faint beginnings' (Lao-Tzu, quoted in Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 155). Although it is beyond the scope of this project, a comparative study of the delayed reception of Zen and Daoism in Western leftist and Eastern dissident circles would certainly yield interesting insights into shared thinking, beyond the binary logic of the Cold War.
69. Klímová, *Replaced – Brno – 2006*, p. 32.
70. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
71. Kovanda, 'Interview' by Ján Mančuška, *Frieze* (March 2008), p. 146.
72. *Ibid.*
73. Kovanda in 'Karel Srp / Jiří Kovanda', *Jazz*, no. 26 (1980), p. 57.
74. Pavlína Morganová, untitled text in Jeřábková (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda*, p. 23. Štembera, Miler and Mlčoch went on carrying out actions for a few more years, but also abandoned these forms of activity in around 1980. Mlčoch later explained: 'we never felt like full-time artists for life. We never chose

- this role. ... The sort of work we were doing at that time started to become academic very fast.' Mlčoch in Klímová, *Replaced – Brno – 2006*, p. 23.
75. Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*, cited in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1984), p. xxiv. De Certeau offers this passage as an example of the sorts of 'tactics' that he sets out to contrast with what he calls the 'strategies' deployed by the state to control citizens.
 76. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
 77. Kovanda, 'Conversation 1: I always felt that I didn't need a studio', p. 109.
 78. Klímová, *Replaced – Brno – 2006*, p. 33.
 79. Kovanda, 'Interview' by Ján Mančuška, p. 147.
 80. Ibid.
 81. Kovanda, 'Vyjít s tím, co je' (amended translation).
 82. Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism', in *Open Letters. Selected Prose 1965–1990*, p. 338.
 83. Ibid., p. 339.
 84. Ibid., p. 345.
 85. Zabel, 'Conversation III: Ordinarity is Invisible. Text by Vít Havránek with e-mailed commentary by Paweł Polit and Igor Zabel', in Havránek (ed.), *Jiří Kovanda*, p. 117.
 86. Havel, 'The Trial', p. 108.
 87. 'Declaration of Charter '77', 1 January 1977. Available online at http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration_of_charter_77.pdf.
 88. Vladimír V. Kusin, *From Dubček to Charter 77. A Study of 'Normalization' in Czechoslovakia 1968–1978* (Edinburgh: Q Press, 1978), p. 304.
 89. In particular with Western activists interested in fostering détente. See Gordon Skilling, *Samizdat and Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
 90. Jan Patočka (1907–77) died after two months of sustained interrogation. Kusin, *From Dubček to Charter 77*, p. 381.

6 dialogue

1. Ost, *Solidarity*, p. 52.
2. Michnik, 'A New Evolutionism', in *Letters from Prison and other Essays*, p. 146.
3. Ibid., p. 137.

4. Leszek Kołakowski, 'Hope and Hopelessness', *Survey* (London) 17/3, (Summer 1971), p. 37.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 41.
7. Ost, *Solidarity*, pp. 62–3.
8. See Włodzimierz Brus in Alec Nove (ed.), *The East European Economies in the 1970s* (London: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1982), p. 123.
9. Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Poland under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 201–2.
10. Ibid., pp. 206–7.
11. Food prices remained frozen at 1960s rates by huge subsidies. The government tried to tackle this by introducing, unannounced, a tiered system of pricing, giving better cuts of meat to 'commercial' shops, which sold for higher prices or Western currency. When the next round of price increases was introduced, from 1 July 1980, they triggered the strike action that became the basis for 'Solidarity'.
12. Jan-Józef Lipski, *KOR. A History of the Workers' Defense Committee in Poland, 1976–1981* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
13. The pioneering account is Adam Michnik, *Kościół-lewica-dialog* (Paris: Instytut literacki, 1977), trans. David Ost as *The Church and the Left* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
14. Michnik, 'A New Evolutionism', p. 147.
15. Ibid., p. 142.
16. Ibid.
17. Ost, *Solidarity*, p. 57.
18. Ibid., p. 65.
19. Ibid.
20. Henryk Urbanowicz, cited in 'Pietnastometrowy Stalin', *Nowe Państwo*, no. 3 (2003). See also Jerzy Bereś, *Wstyd: między podmiotem a przedmiotem* (Kraków: Otwarta Pracownia, 2002), p. 229.
21. Bereś, "Jestem za otwarciem dialogu" – z Jerzym Bereśiem rozmawiają Ł. Guzek i W. Bosak, *Tumult*, no. 6 (1990), p. 41.
22. Bereś, 'W poszukiwaniu wolności. Z Jerzym Bereśiem rozmawia Paweł Łubowski', *ARTEon*, no. 7 (2001), p. 25.
23. Bereś, 'Fakt twórczy. Pojęcie dzieła Cz. I' (1978), in Bereś, *Wstyd*, pp. 17–18.
24. Ibid.

25. Jerzy Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości Jerzego Bereśia 1954–1994. Część II: Manifestacje', in Aleksandra Węcka (ed.), *Zwidy – Wyrocznie – Ołtarze – Wyzwania*, exh. cat. (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe, 1995), p. 147.
26. Bereś, 'Jestem za otwarciem dialogu', p. 47.
27. Fluxus artists had previously used this word in 'Flux-manifestations', although they had neither attempted nor intended anything like the sustained investigation of its multiple dimensions, and it is unlikely that it was by way of Fluxus that Bereś came to the term.
28. See Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', pp. 98–9.
29. Bereś, 'Akt twórczy I', (1968), in Bereś, *Wstyd*, p. 9.
30. The critic wrote consistently scathing reviews under the pseudonym 'Hamilton'. See 'W 2500 lat po Hipokratesie (Perswazje)', *Kultura*, no. 5 (1968), p. 12.
31. Bereś, 'Sztuka wysokich napięć. Z Jerzym Bereśiem rozmawia Łukasz Guzek', in Suchan (ed.), *Tadeusz Kantor, Niemożliwe*, p. 192.
32. Bereś recalled: 'We were all racking our brains: "what Dubček?"', Bereś, 'W poszukiwaniu wolności', p. 25.
33. Over the years that followed, other periodicals such as *Sztuka* (Art), *Polityka* (Politics) and *Rzeczywistość* (Reality) would all find their way into Bereś's fires.
34. Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', p. 100.
35. Bereś, 'Fakt twórczy. Pojęcie dzieła Cz. I', p. 19.
36. Bereś, Author's commentary, manuscript 1995, in Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', p. 70.
37. Bereś, 'Fakt twórczy. Pojęcie dzieła Cz. I', p. 19.
38. Ibid.
39. Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', p. 100.
40. Bereś manuscript dated 1995, cited in *ibid.*
41. Ost, *Solidarity*, p. 33.
42. Bereś quoted in Hanusek, "'Manifestacja Romantyczna" Jerzego Bereśia', *ARTeon*, no. 7 (2006), p. 31.
43. This was the second in a series of works with this title: *Transfiguracja 1*, Centre for the Arts in Södertälje, 6 October 1972; *Transfiguracja 2*, Galeria Desa, Kraków, 16 April 1973; *Transfiguracja 3*, BWA, Lublin, 2 May 1973.
44. Bereś, 'Nie jestem rzeźbiarzem', *Odra*, no. 11 (1978), p. 51.
45. Bereś first tested out the schema in *Transfiguration 1* at the Centre for the Arts in Södertälje, Sweden, 6 October 1972. The artist recalled that things did not go as planned: 'It was my naivety that I counted on the audience

- joining in by at least symbolically consuming the bread. The Swedes, keeping themselves at a distance, didn't even come up to the table. The message itself, though, was received in earnest, with surprise that art can be taken seriously.' Bereś, manuscript 1994, cited in Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', p. 101.
46. Agata Szmalerc, 'Jerzy Bereś – Naga Prawda', *Sztuka*, no. 4–5 (1991), pp. 5–7.
 47. Bereś cited in Hanusek, "Manifestacja Romantyczna", p. 31.
 48. Bereś, 'W poszukiwaniu wolności', p. 25.
 49. Bereś, *Wstyd*, pp. 46–7.
 50. Bereś cited in Krystyna Czerni, 'Wiara (w sztukę) czyni cuda, czyli liturgia twórczości według Jerzego Bereśia', *Znak*, no. 7, Kraków (1993), p. 66.
 51. One of Bereś's wooden sculptures of 1968–9 had been entitled *Maximilian Kolbe* (1969). It paid homage to the Polish Franciscan friar who volunteered to die in place of a stranger in Auschwitz in 1941. In 1982 Kolbe was canonized by John Paul II, who referred to him as 'the Patron Saint of our difficult century'.
 52. Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', pp. 120–1.
 53. Michnik, 'A New Evolutionism', p. 148.
 54. Ost, *Solidarity*, p. 68.
 55. Michnik, 'A New Evolutionism', p. 145.
 56. Tomasz Strzyżewski, *Czarna Księga Cenzury PRL* (London: Aneks, 1977).
 57. Kemp-Welch, *Poland under Communism*, pp. 225–6.
 58. *Ibid.*, pp. 227–8.
 59. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 229.
 60. Bereś, 'Dzieło stymulatorem osądu' (1981), in Bereś, *Wstyd*, p. 43.
 61. Bereś manuscript dated 1994, in Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', p. 129.
 62. Piotr Piotrowski, 'Male Artist's Body: National Identity vs. Identity Politics', in Hoptman and Pospiszyl (eds), *Primary Documents*, p. 233.
 63. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
 64. 10 September 1981. See Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', p. 131.
 65. Kraków, Wrocław and Zielona Góra. See *ibid.*, pp. 134–5.
 66. The artist was surprised to find that the same thing happened when he repeated the action in November 2000. This time the words jarred with the advertising and tourist paraphernalia that have taken over the main square under capitalism. As Hanusek has observed, 'Romanticism' was still out of kilter with its surroundings. Hanusek, "Manifestacja Romantyczna", p. 32.

67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., p. 31.
69. Ibid.
70. Bereś, 'Jestem za otwarciem dialogu', p. 43.
71. See Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, p. 92.
72. Bogucki was awarded a discretionary prize of \$100 by the anonymous committee of the cultural branch of Solidarity. Bereś was awarded the same prize in 1987, for his sculptural work.
73. The exhibition lasted from 14 to 30 June 1983; the Pope's visit took place from 16 to 23 June. Adam Michnik, *Takie czasy, rzecz o kompromisie*, London: Aneks, 1985, p. 116, cited in Dorota Jarecka, 'Janusz Bogucki, polski Szeeman?', *Odrzucone dziedzictwo. O sztuce polskiej lat 80*, papers from a conference at Warsaw, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, 2012, available online at http://www.artmuseum.pl/wydarzenie.php?id=rejected_heritage_jarecka.
74. Jerzy Kalina, 'Przeciw złu i przemocy. Fragmenty rozmowy z Anną Szywnelską', Warsaw, November 2006. Reproduced at <http://www.artin.gda.pl/text/text-pl-29.php>.
75. Over the course of the years that followed, Bereś continued to stage manifestations designed to produce a sense of solidarity among spectators, and to encourage them to think about what he called the 'highest' values. In 1985, at the opening of the exhibition *Niebo Nowe, Ziemia Nowa?* (New Heaven, New Earth?), organized by Marek Rostworowski at the church on Żytnia, he lit fires to hope, freedom, dignity, love and truth, just as he had in 1981, with the variation that on this occasion he used copies of the weekly *Polityka*, rather than *Kultura*, as kindling. See Marek Rostworowski et al., *Niebo nowe, ziemia nowa?*, exh. cat. (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza MEDIUM, 1987).
76. Bereś, 'Wykład: Spór o wartości najwyższe' (January 1984, Lublin), in Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', pp. 138–9.
77. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941 [1979 edition]), p. 32.
78. Ibid., p. 54.
79. Ibid., p. 59.
80. Ibid., p. 122.
81. Havel, 'Six Asides about Culture' (1984), trans. E. Kohák, in Vladislav (ed.), *Václav Havel. Living in Truth*, pp. 125–6.
82. Ibid.

83. Ibid. Havel's paradigm of the Czech martyr is the philosopher Jan Patočka. Patočka's *Heretical Essays* were also a starting point for Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death* ('Donner la mort', in *L'éthique du don. Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don* [Paris: Transition, 1992]), trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
84. Bereś, 'Wykład: Spór o wartości najwyższe' II Część (20 March 1986, Lublin), in Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', pp. 140–1.
85. Hanusek, 'Katalog twórczości', p. 147.
86. Adam Michnik, 'Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors', in Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, pp. 207–9.
87. Bereś, 'Wykład: Spór o wartości najwyższe', p. 59.

endings

1. Anatoly Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym: Po dnevnikovym zapisyam* (Moscow: Izdatel'skaya gruppa "Progress" "Kul'tura", 1993).
2. Vadim A. Medvedev, *Razpad. Kak on nazreval v 'mirovoi systeme sotsializma'*, (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1994), pp. 82–8.
3. Ibid., pp. 108–11.
4. Jacques Levesque, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 113.
5. Mark Kramer, 'The Demise of the Soviet Bloc', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 63/9 (November 2011), pp. 1554–9.
6. Zbigniew A. Pełczyński, *Poland: The Road from Communism. Special R. B. McCallum Lecture*, 29 May 1982 (Pembroke College, Oxford, 1983), pp. 30–1.
7. Adam Michnik, 'Neither Conspiracy nor Benevolence: The Miracle of the Polish Round Table', *Gazeta Wyborcza* (30 June 1999, English edition).
8. Stanisław Perzkowski (ed.), *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego i Sekretariatu KC. Ostatni rok władzy 1988–1989* (London: Aneks, 1994), pp. 390–8.
9. 'Memorandum of Conversation', Moscow, 23–24 March 1989, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 12/13 (Winter 2001), p. 78.
10. Jacques Levesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', in Melvin Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 3, *Endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 324–47.

11. Emese Kürti, “To Disorient the Troops”. Tamás St. Auby’s exhibition in Karlsruhe, Part 1’, trans. Daniel Sipos, *Exindex* (October 2010), available at <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=en&page=3&id=773> (amended translation).
12. Tamás St. Auby in conversation with Tibor Kovácsy, “Let the Saint Automaton Work”
13. See the presentation ‘Make a Chair! (Hommage à George Brecht)’, 6 June 1975, Club of Young Artists, Budapest, reproduced and translated in Hegyi, Hornyik and László, *Parallel Chronologies*, pp. 41–3.
14. Author’s interview with Endre Tót in Cologne, 6 January 2006.
15. Barbora Klímová, *Replaced – Brno – 2006*, exh. cat. (Brno: author’s edition, 2006), p. 32.
16. Index, Stockholm, 2006.
17. 10 March 2007 as part of a series of events titled ‘Actions and Interruptions’: <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateshots/episode.jsp?item=9481>.
18. First Presentation of Living Monument. Prophecy 2, Cieszyn University Gallery, 6 April 1989.
19. Bereś, ‘Do czego służy siekiera’, *Czas Krakowski*, 21 November 1990, p. 11, cited in Krystyna Czerni, ‘Wiara (w sztukę) czyni cuda, czyli liturgia twórczości według Jerzego Beresia’, *Znak*, no. 7, Kraków (1993), p. 64.

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