

The background is a complex, layered collage. On the left, there are vertical stripes of red, white, and blue, with a section of stars below. In the center, a dark, textured figure of a person is visible, possibly a statue or a painting, set against a dark background. Above the figure, there's a circular target-like symbol. To the right, there are more abstract shapes, including a large red vertical stripe and a blue curved shape. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-20th-century political or social commentary art.

# THIRD TEXT

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## Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism

Guest Editor  
**Reuben Fowkes**



# THIRD TEXT

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László Lakner, *Saigon (The Protest of the Buddhist Monks of Saigon)*, 1965, (detail), oil on canvas, 100 × 240 cm, courtesy artist



# Introduction

## Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism

Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes

1 See, Rudolf Bahro, 'The Alternative in Eastern Europe', *New Left Review* 1/106, November–December 1977, p 5. As the author points out, the original title 'A Contribution to the Critique of Socialism as it Actually Exists' eventually became the subtitle of a book originally published in German as *Die Alternative: zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus*, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt, Cologne, 1977.

2 Ibid, p 33

3 The articles collected in this special issue began life as a selection of conference papers given at the symposium on 'Contested Spheres: Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism' held at the Kassák Museum in Budapest in May 2016, which were subsequently expanded and refined in light of the exceptionally lively discussions it generated. The gathering itself arose from an invitation to participate in the museum's ambitious project to reassess Hungarian art of the 1960s and 1970s by bringing in

After a long search for a term that encapsulated the particular social, economic and political conditions of the Eastern Bloc during the 1970s, East German theorist Rudolf Bahro finally settled on one of the communist system's own preferred markers of self-identification. The label 'actually existing socialism' had the advantage and ironic piquancy of containing within itself the notion that a distinction could be made between the ideals of socialism and the form they took in practice in the countries of Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> The term was originally used by communist regimes in the 1960s to mark a distance between the ideological maximalism and deferred horizons of the Stalinist utopia and a more realistic assessment of achievable goals for a society functioning on socialist principles. Support for the idea that a feasible version of socialism had been realised could also be found in the successes of East European science and technology, tangible improvements in living standards, and sincere efforts to reform and modernise the system epitomised by the Czechoslovak experiment in 'socialism with a human face'. By the middle of the 1970s however the phrase 'actually existing socialism' had lost all its affirmative connotations, resonating instead as a reminder of the failures and compromises of a moribund regime based on the cynical self-preservation of a gerontocratic elite. For Bahro, after the debacle of Soviet intervention to crush the Prague Spring in 1968, the 'ideological impotence of the old forces' who 'control a church in which no one believes anymore', had become a 'matter of notoriety'.<sup>2</sup>

This special issue is an attempt to delineate the characteristic features of the art scenes of Eastern Europe during a period initially marked by the rebounding of a sense of possibility through the cultural, social and political effervescence of the 1960s and later by the dissolution of the prospects for radical change in the post-utopian twilight of the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> It is premised on the idea that artistic life in Eastern Europe was profoundly



comparative East European perspectives on a crucial chapter of national art history, and our special issue could also be instructively read in conjunction with their recent publication: Sándor Hornyik, Edit Sasvári and Hedwig Turai, eds, *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2018.

shaped by the structures, conventions and workings of the overarching system, with artists and critics compelled to negotiate the often productive contradictions of actually existing socialism. In that sense, the quotidian functioning of the socialist art system depended on the drawing up of tacit compromises and maintenance of calculated ambiguities in relations between party authorities and artists. This entailed the state moderating its political and stylistic demands, to the extent that ideological expectations of wholehearted engagement with the socialist mission were replaced by the pragmatic understanding that artists should avoid sensitive topics and aesthetic excesses in work destined for public display. On the other hand, if they were to remain in the country and further their careers, artists were obliged to find a *modus vivendi* with the existing system and its artistic economy, with refusal of all involvement in official art institutions rarely a viable option. While the tension between actual and ideal versions of socialism was vigorously tested by the neo-avant-garde, the equally telling discrepancy between the social and artistic systems of East and West was another generator of local specificity. Ultimately it was the latent and unrealised promise of actually existing socialism as much as its demonstrative failings that marked a crucial difference in the attitude of East European artists to the utopian reverberations of the countercultural movements and radical politics of the 1968 era.

By the middle of the 1960s, in most East European countries the artistic authorities had lifted the ban on abstract art, partly in recognition of the fact that it was too late to stop the spread of international art trends, but even more so because they had concluded that abstract forms were not necessarily incompatible with the pursuit of a socialist agenda. The divergence of European non-figurative tendencies from the dominant outlook of American Abstract Expressionism also raised hopes that such approaches ‘might actually be compatible with socialist art’s visions of the future’.<sup>4</sup> Artistic exploration of the technological and social transformations of the 1960s, often taking the form of experiments in geometric abstraction, seriality and kinetic art, corresponded in that sense to the strategic concerns and public posturing of the ideology of socialist modernisation.<sup>5</sup> Relevant here also is the argument made in the context of an inter-regional comparison that while in the West the ‘reigning art ideology had definitively abandoned the idea of utopia’, in South America and Eastern Europe the ‘fascination with science, new technologies and cybernetics symbolized a continued commitment to building a better future through art’.<sup>6</sup> However, the extent of such correlations was tested by socialist realities, since as one Polish art critic put it, there was at the time only a narrow choice of ‘synthetic materials, the engines malfunction, the lighting crashes’, while artists were hindered by the ‘low quality’, ‘very expensive’ and ‘hardly obtainable’ electronics available in the country.<sup>7</sup> In the other words, the ambitions of artists were tempered by more mundane factors of the socialist economy.

The potential for collaboration between artists and socialist states expanded or contracted in response to changes to the institutional apparatuses of the artworld. One consequence of a thickening of bureaucratic structures in the early 1960s was that decisions over censorship, commissions and funding were often no longer undertaken directly by ministries of culture but through professionalised committees and juries. While designed to give a veneer of accountability to an ideology-driven

4 József Mélyi, ‘Abstract Boundaries: The Changing Principles of Art Policy in 1958–68’, in *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980*, *ibid.*, p 173

5 See for example, Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowski and Stanisław Welbel, eds, *Cosmos Calling! Art and Science in the Long Sixties*, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2014

6 Press release for ‘The Other Trans-Atlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1950s–1970s’, exhibition at Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 17 November 2017 to 11 February 2018, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/wystawy/linny-trans-atlantyk>, accessed 14 September 2018

7 Art critic Kazimierz Rainczak quoted in Magdalena Moskalewicz, ‘An Exercise in Participation: Op and Kinetic Art in Poland Circa 1966’, in Marta Dziewanska, Dieter Roelstraete, and Abigail Winograd, eds, *The Other Transatlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2018, p 241



decision-making process, such bodies also created a buffer or distorting filter between the party and the artworld, with the resulting lack of clarity and inconsistency in the interpretation of cultural policy blunting the instruments of ideological control. In Hungary for example the notorious '3 T's' system that distinguished between 'supported', 'tolerated' and 'forbidden' artistic practices was unevenly applied, with artists able to take advantage of the fluidity and vagueness of the three categories, as well as to 'directly and indirectly influence the composition of the jury', creating favourable conditions for mutually-beneficial negotiations between artists and representatives of the communist authorities.<sup>8</sup> In Czechoslovakia a distinction could also be made between the severity of official rhetoric during the normalisation era that reasserted the ideological purity of socialist realist art and the actual decisions made by the juries for artistic commissions. Especially significant for the socialist art economy were public commissions for architectural projects, for which a percentage of the overall investment was 'earmarked for decorating the structure with fine art'.<sup>9</sup> While the actual amount was calculated according to a sliding scale based on the size and social relevance of the construction project – ranging from 0.6 to 4.2 per cent – decisions about individual artworks were entrusted to a committee of representatives of the unions of artists and architects, with the 'opinion of the primary architect decisive' in the commissioning process.<sup>10</sup>

From the 1960s onwards, and in contrast to the direct repression of the Stalinist era, artists were exposed to subtler, largely economic and practical pressures to produce works that were aesthetically and ideologically suitable for public commissions and competitions. Dóra Maurer has for example distinguished between 'A' and 'B' versions of her artistic identity during the decade, with the latter consisting of realistic graphic works on socialist themes that were made to order for the Hungarian state in parallel to her experimental practice.<sup>11</sup> This represented a distinct advance on the situation during the early 1950s, when artists who were unable to wholeheartedly comply with the strictures of socialist realism adopted a strategy of 'double bookkeeping', which entailed producing ideological works for public display while continuing to pursue an individual practice in the privacy of the studio.<sup>12</sup> The establishment of governmental bodies tasked with making regular purchases of artworks compensated to an extent for the lack of an art market, further imbricating artists in the state-run mechanisms of the socialist art economy. The effects on artistic practice and individual careers of this peculiar non-market system of financial incentives combined with institutional positions is specifically addressed in several contributions to this special issue.

The modernising and expanding of the canon of socialist art during the 1960s was a factor in the decision of the majority of artists to stay within the bounds of the official art system. In Hungary for example, it has been observed that 'many of the artists who worked within the state-approved concept of art also experimented with form', notably drawing on contemporary European rather than Soviet 'figurative trends' in an attempt to renew the official artistic ideology.<sup>13</sup> The extent to which the politically-subservient and aesthetically-tepid works of official artists are deserving of reconsideration and recuperation – having been sidelined for the majority of the post-communist period – is a newly contentious issue for East European art scenes.

8 Júlia Perczel, 'The Art Sphere as a Grey Zone: Techniques of Power and the Context of Artistic Practices', in *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980*, op cit, p 63

9 Jana Kořínková, 'Four Per Cent Art?', in Pavel Karous, ed, *Aliens and Herons: A Guide to Fine Art in the Public Space in the Era of Normalisation in Czechoslovakia (1968–1989)*, Arbor Vitae, Prague, 2015, p 453

10 Ibid, p 456

11 Katalin Székely, ed, *Bookmarks: Revisiting Hungarian Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, Koenig Books, London, 2018, p 66. See also: László Beke et al, *Nyomhagyás / Nyomtatás: Maurer Dóra grafikai munkássága 1955–1980* (Printing: Leaving Traces: Dóra Maurer's Graphic Oeuvre, 1955–1980), MKE – SUMUS, exhibition catalogue, Budapest, 2017

12 Gábor András, et al, *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century*, John Bakti, trans, Corvina, Budapest 1999, p 123

13 Judit Borus and Eszter Kardos, eds, *Within Frames: The Art of the Sixties in Hungary (1958–1968)*, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2017, p 38



The East European neo-avant-garde has a particular status in accounts of the period, with its distinctiveness deriving at least partly from its close but combative relationship to the art system of actually existing socialism. The enduring appeal of their dematerialised art practices was also inseparable from their precariousness, with neo-avant-garde ephemeral manifestations relying on the audacity of young artists in outwitting the authorities to establish temporary spaces for experimental activities. Conducive sites for neo-avant-garde endeavours were found in smaller galleries and non-art exhibition halls that often operated under the aegis of other bodies – from culture houses to the offices of communist youth organisations – placing them at one remove from the artistic authorities in order to delay, if not avoid, bureaucratic intervention.

The irreconcilable differences that regularly emerged in relations between the neo-avant-garde and the socialist authorities could be illustrated by the case of the Galeria pod Moną Lisą in Wrocław. Occupying a corridor space in the local International Press and Book Club, the gallery was forced to abandon its radical programme in 1971 after a dematerialised Concept Art exhibition managed to offend both modernist and Marxist critics. An ‘increasing conflict’ with the club’s managerial board led to the resignation of neo-avant-garde curator Jerzy Ludwiński, after it became apparent that the ‘gallery would no longer work in the form he had developed.’<sup>14</sup> In Hungary, the organiser of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio tried a variety of techniques to defuse the hostility of the authorities to what had become a hotbed of neo-avant-garde activity, including submitting the exhibition programme to be officially juried and even attempting ‘to evade the administrative method used against us by providing an ideological illusion of Marxist truth’.<sup>15</sup> Equally characteristic of the period of actually existing socialism was the authorities’ reliance on bureaucratic measures and quasi-legal justifications, such as imposing fines for the infringement of safety regulations, in order to close this neo-avant-garde loophole in 1973. Another scenario permitted neo-avant-garde exhibition spaces to continue to operate under supervision, functioning as a safety valve for generational discontent. Even in the more tolerant context of third-way Yugoslavia, the seeming oasis of freedom of the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade was described by an observant visiting critic as a ‘reservation which is completely closed and isolated from the culture in which it takes place’.<sup>16</sup> As several of the contributions to this special issue make clear, despite or because of a latent coalescence of utopian goals, ultimately there were limits to any rapprochement between the socialist authorities and the neo-avant-garde.

Neo-avant-garde artists were also regularly targeted by the secret police, who kept them under surveillance, periodically hauled them in for interrogation, and also spread an atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty by infiltrating their close circles. As discussed by contributors to this special issue, the role of police agents and informers in the artworlds of actually existing socialism was profoundly contradictory, many aspects of which remain elusive. The reports filed by agents appear at first sight to offer referenceable accounts of neo-avant-garde activities, but due to their ‘often mutually misleading, manipulated or distorted’ descriptions, the information they contain is primarily of value in reconstructing relations between artists and the security apparatuses rather than the ‘precise reconstruction of events’.<sup>17</sup> Art professionals who after the fall

14 Piotr Lisowski, ‘Performative Mythology: Curating Strategy of Jerzy Ludwiński’, in Piotr Lisowski, ed, *Jerzy Ludwiński: Wypełniając puste pola / Filling the Blanks*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Toruń, 2011, p 20

15 György Galántai, ‘Chapel Studio of György Galántai Balatonboglár, 1970–1973 (the Pre-Story of Artpool)’, in György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, Artpool, Budapest, 2013, p 32

16 Achille Bonito Oliva quoted in Miško Šuvaković, ‘Students’ Cultural Centers as Reservations’, in Prelom Kolektiv, eds, *The Case of Belgrade’s Students’ Cultural Centre*, Prelom Kolektiv, Belgrade, 2008, p 85

17 Kata Krasznahorkai, ‘Surveilling the Public Sphere: The First Hungarian Happening in Secret Agents’ Reports’, in Katalin Kseh-Varga and Adam Czirá, *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, Routledge, New York, 2018, p 134

of communism were exposed as police informers may also have acted from a variety of motives that preclude straightforward ethical judgements: they may have had little choice in practice over whether or not to co-operate with the secret police and often attempted to shield their fellow artists from the authorities, such as by giving partial information to their handlers.

One of the specific traits of the artworlds of actually existing socialism was the system's openness to, and support for, programmes of public artistic education. Originating in the campaigns of the early 1950s to expose the working masses to the motivational effect of socialist realist art, measures to introduce art to popular audiences subsequently adapted to changing artistic tastes and social conditions. As early as 1957, at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, members of the EXAT 51 group Ivan Picelj and Vjenceslav Richter were involved in organising the first 'Didactic Exhibition: Abstract Art', an educational show that travelled to fifteen cities across Yugoslavia designed to introduce the history and practices of abstract art to the public.<sup>18</sup> In Hungary during the 1970s, painter Imre Bak also for example used his position at the Népművelési Intézet (National Institute of Popular Culture) to organise talks and exhibitions at small venues across the country to educate people about the latest developments in the visual arts.<sup>19</sup> The field of amateur art served on the one hand as a source of income for neo-avant-garde artists through teaching classes and organising summer camps for a broad spectrum of art enthusiasts, while at the same time offering up secluded and unobtrusive settings to engage in experimental projects. Radical educational ideas circulating internationally in the 1960s and 1970s often took on a specific form in Eastern Europe, where such experiments were shaped in interaction with socialist traditions of giving industrial workers creative outlets through programmes held in factory houses of culture.<sup>20</sup>

The decline of the traditional communist role-model of the industrial worker during the 1960s and 1970s reflected technological changes to production processes and the diversifying of economic priorities from iron and steel to the chemical industry and consumer goods. It also brought changes to artistic engagements with industry, which in the 1950s were 'limited to compositions of workers and themes from working life', while in the following period artists 'recognised the amazing opportunities in terms of materials and technology' accessible on factory sites.<sup>21</sup> Correspondingly, from 1974 the Lenin Steel Works of the socialist new town of Dunaújváros in Hungary was host to annual symposia of metal sculpture, the tangible results of which were displayed in an outdoor park on a nearby island on the River Danube. Indicative of the mechanisms of the socialist art economy was that participants, who were either directly invited or selected through an application process, would spend up to six weeks on site, had their food, accommodation and all costs covered, and also received an artist fee.<sup>22</sup> In Poland, where such meetings were widespread, the newly built Puławy Nitrogen Plant was the site chosen for the 1st Symposium of Artists and Scientists in 1966, which broached the theme of 'Art in the Changing World'. Summer meetings at Łazy near Osieki were the occasion for neo-avant-garde actions and interventions that in the 1970s took on a more critical tone towards the goals of socialist modernity. This was accompanied by

18 See, Fokus Grupa and Jasna Jakšić, eds, *Didactic Exhibition*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 2016

19 See, Flóra Barkóczi, 'Creative (Dis)Courses: The Forms, Methods and Locations of Alternative Art Pedagogy in Hungary', in *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980*, op cit, pp 95–109

20 See, Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László, eds, *Creativity Exercises – Spaces of Emancipatory Pedagogies*, tranzit.hu, Budapest, 2015

21 Tibor Wehner, 'Iron, Steel and Sculpture', in *International Steel Sculpture Workshop and Symposium Dunaújváros 1974–1993*, Dunaferri Art, Dunaújváros, 1996, p 35

22 See the history page of the website of the International Steel Sculptor Workshop and Sculpture Park in Dunaújváros, <http://steelsculpture.art/en/history/>, accessed 14 September 2018.



more conceptual engagements with scientific knowledge and the rejection of the 'traditional model of an artist and artistic output' in favour of the notions of 'process and idea'.<sup>23</sup>

Another thread linking East European artworlds and the goals of the socialist state was the agenda of solidarity with the 'Third World' expressed through the principles and programme of socialist internationalism. Although most closely associated with the 1960s and 1970s, precursors have been identified in artistic exchanges of the Stalinist era that were framed in terms of expressing support for decolonial struggles in which the Soviet Union had strategic interests, such as the Korean War. Polish socialist realist painter Aleksander Kobzdej was for example amongst those artists who in the 1950s had the opportunity to travel to East Asia to observe the revolutionary strivings of Chinese and Vietnamese workers and peasants.<sup>24</sup> The founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Yugoslavia in 1961 as an international coalition that refused to comply with the ideological division of the world into two opposing camps was an indicator of a new geopolitical orientation. Correspondences could also be observed in the domain of culture, with for instance the organisation of several editions of New Tendencies exhibitions in Zagreb during the decade that challenged geographical hierarchies through their openness to art practices and critical positions from West and East European, as well as South American contexts.<sup>25</sup> Within the Soviet Bloc, sympathy for anti-imperialist campaigns arose both in the sphere of official art and within the circles of the neo-avant-garde, with for example both mainstream and younger experimental artists participating in an exhibition of 'Artists Against Fascism' held at the Hungarian National Gallery in 1965. International protests over the mistreatment of civil rights activists in the United States in the early 1970s held a quixotic appeal for the neo-avant-garde, due to the parallels with repressive state methods closer to home and the evident hypocrisy of official Eastern Bloc campaigns on such issues. Attention to the transversal flows of socialist internationalism, as exemplified also in this special issue, offers a countervailing perspective to the assumed primacy of a binary division of the international artworld during the Cold War.

The frustration of trying to mark a clear division between the spheres of official and unofficial art is the starting point for Tomáš Pospiszył's article on the career of Czech sculptor Olbram Zoubek entitled 'Artists in the Service of the Public'. His attentive analysis locates the artist's position within the changing artistic economy and value system of the Czechoslovak artworld, before, during and after the normalisation era. Tomasz Załuski also delves into the embeddedness of artists within the socialist art economy, although in this case examining the stance of an artist duo who took it upon themselves to critically reflect on the failings of the internal mechanisms of the Polish artworld. His text on 'KwieKulik and the Political Economy of the Potboiler' charts their campaign to expose the inequities of a system in which artists were obliged to execute works in the manner of craftspeople in order to survive in an artworld monopolised by state commissions. He also analyses the telling ways in which such objects featured in and were the subject of their critical art practice. In her article 'Exhibition as Diplomatic Tool: in Search for Artist Solidarity', Zsuzsa László deals with one of the most enigmatic aspects of the history of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, namely its

23 Luiza Nader, 'Towards Criticism of the Visual: the 8th Meeting of Artists and Theoreticians of Art in Osieki', in Ryszard Ziarkiewicz, ed, *Avant-garde in Plein-air: Osieki and Łazy 1963–1981*, Museum of Koszalin, Koszalin, Poland, 2008, p 89

24 Andrzej Szczerski, 'Global Socialist Realism: The Representation of Non-European Cultures in Polish Art of the 1950s', in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski, eds, *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)*, Series: Leipzig Studies on the History and Culture of East-Central Europe, Central European Press (CEU), Budapest, 2016

25 Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)*, Leonardo Book Series, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016

highly ambivalent engagement with the officially-endorsed cause of international protests against American imperialism. The complexity of their collective and individual positions is analysed with reference to the history of socialist internationalism, the neo-conservative turn in Hungarian art and society during the 1970s, and individual experiences of anti-Semitism and political repression.

In his wide-ranging article entitled 'Amateurism under Socialism: The Politics of Art Education in the work of Milan Adamčiak, Július Koller and Jiří Valoch', Daniel Grűn illuminates the contrasting approaches to popular artistic education taken by three highly individualistic figures of the Czech and Slovak art scenes. He also charts their trajectories through the challenges of the normalisation era, from finding in amateur art a liminal zone between official culture and free-time activities, to striking a precarious balance between promoting experimental art and collaborating with the authorities or withdrawing completely from collective public performances. Candice Hamelin expands the coverage of this special issue into the particular context of the GDR in her '*Sibylle*: An Alternative Venue for East German Art Photographers in the 1960s': a women's fashion magazine is revealed as a rare public platform in which artists could publish socially-critical and experimental photographic works, at a time when the authorities were carefully controlling the institutions, galleries and publications of East German photography. Photography is also the main focus of Hana Buddeus's reassessment of the career of Czech performance artist Petr Štembera. In 'Infiltrating the Art World through Photography: Petr Štembera's 1970s Networks' she describes the importance of photographic documentation in enabling information about his work to spread internationally, as well as his fundamental ambivalence towards such processes of decontextualised artistic transfer.

As Alina Șerban argues in the 'Sigma Group: Negotiating New Spaces for Art', it was during the reformist period at the beginning of Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule that this Timișoara-based group of artists were able to benefit from short-lived official support for their interdisciplinary approach to visual research. This enabled them to devise proposals for cybernetic interventions in public space, projects for collaboration with socialist industries and experimental educational programmes, until the political climate changed in 1974. The conditioning role of the socialist state in defining the scope of artistic activity is also investigated by Raino Isto in 'The Dictator Visits the Studio: The Vlorë Independence Monument and the Politics of Socialist Albanian Sculpture, 1962–1972'. The notion of artistic collaboration receives an expanded interpretation in order to account for the multi-sided co-operation between the artistic collective, the commissioning authorities and even leader Enver Hoxha involvement in erecting public monuments. Also examined is the significance for Albanian cultural production of the local communist party's brief flirtation with the anti-Soviet, radical leftist ideological orientation of Maoism.

The ambivalent legacy of Hungarian film-maker Gábor Bódy, who was both a leading figure in the neo-avant-garde until his alleged suicide in 1985 and a police informant during the 1970s, is addressed by Sonja Simonyi in 'The Man Behind the Curtain: Gábor Bódy, Avant-garde Film Culture and Networks of State Control in Late Socialist Hungary'.



Setting out and extrapolating upon the various interlinked explanations for his secret collaboration with the authorities and untimely death, she uses his case to further illustrate the inadequacy of the binary interpretative division between heroic resistance and complete subservience under socialism. The dynamic relationship between the radical agenda of experimental artist groups and the ideological red lines of the authorities around the national currency, the myth of brotherhood and unity and the cult of Marshal Tito is brought into focus by Marko Ilić. In 'A Taster of Political Insult': The Case of Novi Sad's Youth Tribune, 1968–1971', he exposes the discrepancy between public endorsement of artistic freedom as a principle of socialist self-management and the willingness of the state to use Soviet-style methods of repression in response to the political upheavals of the early 1970s. Armin Medosch, who sadly passed away during the production of this special issue, pinpoints the moment in the later 1970s when the illusion that self-managed socialism could be renewed through an infusion of radical New Left ideas evaporated. His 'Cutting the Networks in former Yugoslavia: From New Tendencies to the New Art Practice' follows the decline of one of the region's most distinctive artistic platforms from a position of near hegemony in the mid-1960s to virtual oblivion by the end of the 1970s.

Together the contributions to this special issue on 'Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism' locate East European artists within the complex settings in which they worked during the 1960s and 1970s, revealing these region-specific contexts as not only political and ideological in character but also grounded in economic and institutional realities. Artists found themselves from the outset inextricably embedded in the subtle control mechanisms of an official artworld that relied on a non-market-based system of financial incentives and institutional compensations to secure collaboration. As a result, the usual distinction made between those who opted to work within the bounds of official art and a significant minority who steered clear of state-supported art institutions loses much of its explanatory power. A more nuanced assessment of the neo-avant-garde is emerging, which depicts them not just as a rebellious clique in direct opposition to the state, but in light of the actual dilemmas they faced as *de facto* participants in socialist artworlds, the compromises they made in order to sustain themselves, as well as the occasional overlaps and shared interests that existed between experimental artists and reformist tendencies in the party. The political and ideological crisis of actually existing socialism identified by Bahro was anchored in an economic and technological malaise that reflected the failure to reform and modernise a decaying social system. By the end of the 1970s it was apparent that there was no way forward for the version of socialism that was put into practice in Eastern Europe, a diagnosis that also had irreversible implications for the future prospects of its artworld.

# Artists in the Service of the Public

Tomáš Pospiszyl

*The Facade: M. N. O. P. Q.*, a novel by Czech-German author Libuše Moníková, is far from a standard work of non-fiction; the style and motifs in this intensely grotesque prose aligns itself with the legacy of Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek. In her internationally acclaimed book, Moníková tells the story of four Czechoslovak artists who are repairing the façade of a small-town Renaissance palace in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Their world is governed by its own rules, which seem particularly absurd to the outside viewer: the artists toiling away on the scaffolding were highly acclaimed just a few years earlier and their art served to represent the country internationally – but things have since changed and the artists have been removed from these assignments. However, they have won a long-term commission to restore Renaissance graffiti. Due to the shortage and poor quality of the materials and the scope of the project, the assignment is endless: by the time they finish the façade, it is already starting to crumble and they must begin work to restore it once again. Since the motifs they scratch into the façades are of no interest to anyone, their restoration work reflects their own personal interests and social situation. The rejected artists find themselves in the position of regularly paid workers who make enough money in the summer season such that they can focus on their own work during the remainder of the year. This realist foundation develops into symbolic, borderline psychedelic scenes from Czech history. As a whole and in the details, it matches the true story of Czech artists Václav Boštík, Stanislav Podhrázký, Zdeněk Palcr and Olbram Zoubek, who together restored the façade of Litomyšl Castle between 1974 and 1992.

1 Libuše Moníková (1945–1998) left Czechoslovakia for the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s. She wrote *The Facade* in German, and it was first published in Germany in 1987. Several translations followed, including into English, French, Spanish and Czech.

Libuše Moníková's apparent literary hyperbole describes these artists' everyday lives at the time. Through no fault of their own, the state had disowned them – but still employed them. The state restricted their ability to show their work publicly, but granted them time and space to create their own work. The artists, displaced and proletarianised, took on an aura of de facto impunity. They defended their autonomous positions between themselves and those around them. While their work on the palace



2 In Czech literature alone there are the special issues of *Výtvarné umění* (*Fine Art*) journal from 1995–1996 [*Výtvarné umění* 3/4, 1995 and *Výtvarné umění* 1/2, 1996] suggestively titled *Zakázané umění I and II* (Banned Art I and II), and the oversimplified chapter on official art in the 1970s and 1980s in *Dějiny českého umění* (History of Czech Art); see Tereza Petišková, 'Oficiální umění sedmdesátých a osmdesátých let' (Official Art of the Seventies and Eighties), Rostislav Švácha and Marie Platovská, eds, *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění VII/1, 1958–2000*, Academia, Prague, 2007, pp 447–459.

3 An example of an interesting attempt to understand Czech art of the 1970s and 1980s is Josef Ledvína's article 'České umění kolem roku 1980 jako pole kulturní produkce' (Czech Art of the 1980s as a Field of Cultural Production), in *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny* (Booklet for Art, Theory and Associated Zones), no 9, 2010; see <http://vvp.avu.cz/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/sesit9-ledvina.pdf> for English translation. The author views Czech art through the methodological prism offered by Pierre Bourdieu's book *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1996), which allows him to form an original analysis of artists' approaches to various forms of social capital and an entirely new understanding of intergenerational dynamics at the time.

4 There are many examples of a similar approach in Eastern Europe, such as the Július Koller retrospective exhibition curated by Petra Hanáková and Aurel Hrabušický (23 April – 20 June 2010) which also included paintings that were a means of subsistence for the artist; see Petra Hanáková and Aurel Hrabušický, eds, *Július Koller: Science-Fiction Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Slovak National

façade and in their private studios was not contaminated by concessions to power, it was also not overtly dissident. These paradoxes clearly show that a fictional novel is able to provide a realistic picture of conditions in the artworld – or to be more precise, it has done so better than traditional art history has been able to.

Simply pigeonholing art into the 'official' and 'unofficial' cannot fully illustrate what conditions were like under communist rule, but historical reviews of Eastern European art have resorted to such examples of oversimplifications.<sup>2</sup> Only gradually does it become clear that the dichotomy of official and unofficial came in many different shades and provides only a two-dimensional view of the period's art. Staking out the borders between the ideologically possible and impossible and comparing Eastern European and Western European art is important, but as a consequence of this approach the only art that is explored is that of artists who ostensibly did not compromise with the political regime in the slightest and whose oeuvres can be easily compared with Western art production. The entire body of art created during communism, which it would not be misleading to term 'socialist art', is far broader, however. In most of Eastern Europe clear-cut examples of 'artist-opportunist functionaries' or 'artist-fighters for freedom of expression' were the rare extreme ends of a richly structured, dynamic cultural space that official and unofficial artists formed together.<sup>3</sup> Socialist art is difficult to comprehend without understanding the special features of the socialist economy and the linked economies of symbolic capital that were a feature of the communist era.<sup>4</sup> Ideological evaluations and the subjective recollections of direct participants are gradually being replaced by more careful analysis in Eastern European art history, including interest in official socialist-era art and the numerous, but today often overlooked, material remnants of the period.

Studying the practical conditions in which fine art was created, including the economic context, may help us understand not only the manner in which art was produced, but also the possible meanings and symbolic functions of individual works of art.<sup>5</sup> I will attempt to demonstrate just how complicated the creative life of an Eastern European artist living in the latter half of the twentieth century could be with the example of sculptor Olbram Zoubek (1926–2017), one of the main protagonists in *The Facade*. Zoubek is considered a major figure in Czech culture, and he is also respected as a moral authority. Over the course of his lifetime he lived through German occupation, Stalinism, the political thaw of the 1960s, the crackdown of the 1970s, and parliamentary democracy and the market economy following 1989. He was part of a generation that sympathised with leftist ideals following the war and was not against realist sculpture and official commissions in the 1950s. Around 1960 his figures started to become more abstract. He created a number of public commissions: sculptures, placards, decorative walls and even children's playgrounds. In the second half of the 1960s his work may be considered a sort of official avant-garde. He balanced a return to more classical figures with innovative attempts to install his sculptures in public spaces. In 1969 Zoubek created the death mask and tombstone of Jan Palach, a student who immolated himself on Wenceslas Square in Prague in protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. Several weeks later the police removed and destroyed the tombstone,

Gallery, Bratislava, 2010, or the exhibition of Polish artist Alina Ślesieńska that also emphasised media marketing of the artist (*Alina Ślesieńska 1922–1994* (8 December 2007 – 24 February), Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2008). Armin Medosch's recent study *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)*, Leonardo Book Series, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2016, also attempts to understand the Yugoslav New Tendencies movement in the context of socialist modernity.

- 5 A similar approach has traditionally been one of the basic art history methodologies. In addition to now classic studies of historical art (such as Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988), similar recent attempts in the art sector can also be noted. Sophie Richard's thought-provoking research focuses on the origins of Western conceptual art and its relationship to the market and art institutions of its time; see Sophie Richard, *Unconcealed: The International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967–77, Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*, Lynda Morris, ed, Ridinghouse, London, 2009.

and its creator – like most of his contemporaries participating in the cultural renaissance of the latter 1960s – fell into disfavour with the new political elite. Zoubek's studio became a place where dissidents against the regime would converge; Václav Havel was a frequent guest. In the 1970s Zoubek spent most of his time on restoration work, but he also focused on his own independent work. His art did not reflect political themes; the artist's goal was to satisfy his need for beauty and harmony. This corresponded with his turn towards more classical expression. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, without publicly proclaiming that he had been wrong or making any sacrifices to the regime, Zoubek started to do well in public art competitions, often replacing the ideological assignment with mythological themes. After 1989 Zoubek's sculptures adorned not only the President's office, but also buildings for the rapidly-developing banking sector in the post-socialist economy. In May 2002 his *Memorial to the Victims of Communism* was unveiled in Prague, and in late 2013 and early 2014 a retrospective exhibition of his work was held at Prague Castle Riding School (29 November 2013 – 2 March 2014).

Despite the historical mishaps indicated here, Zoubek's sculptures represent a certain stable point from which we can decipher the social conditions of the time. If the discontinuity of political and cultural development tends to be emphasised in the histories of Eastern European countries, Zoubek may be proof of the opposite. His creative life is an uninterrupted series of works of art that, with few exceptions, he has been able to display public. Zoubek was able to respond to competition calls without ideologically undermining his practice, while also being able to transform his existing works for various purposes. One example is the history of Zoubek's monumental sculpture for the exterior of the former Czechoslovak Federal Assembly building.

Architect Karel Prager contacted Zoubek with an offer to provide a sculpture for the National (later Federal) Assembly building in 1967 – the early days of the Prague Spring movement. Prager had won the competition to design a new parliament building for the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. His bold architectural concept attached the former stock exchange to a new wing, which jutted out horizontally from the top of the historical building. The new Federal Assembly, although originally considered a temporary solution, was a closely-watched project that was given overriding priority. Prager did not issue calls for individual art works, but instead contacted artists whom he felt were directly suited to the commissions. He needed a vertical sculpture in front of the main entrance that would balance the visual appearance of the building – and for this he chose Zoubek. Prager designated the exact site and content of the work: it should be a monumental, five-metre-high vertical sculpture, the theme of which should be (in light of the function of the building) a milestone of history.<sup>6</sup>

Construction of the Federal Assembly took seven years – from 1966 until 1973, during this period Czechoslovak society and Karel Prager himself underwent a radical transformation. The architectural competition was held in an atmosphere of political liberalisation, but ended during the communist crackdown. Prager had a special position during this period of 'normalisation'. In Prague, he carried out a number of important projects, and thus many viewed him as a supporter of the com-

- 6 Zoubek's archive contains contracts and correspondence documenting the individual phases of the commission.





Olbram Zoubek, *Milestone (Man-Milestone, Wounded and Burned)*, 1967, lead, height 95 cm, image courtesy: Kmentová Zoubek Fund, Prague



Olbram Zoubek, *Prodigy of the Nation*, 1970, lead, height 52 cm, image courtesy: Kmentová Zoubek Fund, Prague

munist government. He was an architect who was able to handle projects that were difficult to produce and artistically complex; at the same time, however, the *nomenklatura* viewed him with suspicion. As the Federal Assembly building was nearing completion, his name was never mentioned in association with the project. The regime did permit him to complete the project in its original form – since it was unable to generate any viable alternatives. Rather than in the Federal Assembly building itself, which underwent only minor changes, the shift in the political climate can be seen in the artworks accompanying the building. Prager chose a group of artists whose means of expression and positions were unacceptable to the communist regime after 1968. Nevertheless, Prager tried to adhere to the original sculptural concept and fought with approval committees over its execution. In some sense, Zoubek's different designs for the main entrance sculpture, over ten of which have been preserved, truly mark the historical events of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The first design from 1967 is titled *Man Milestone, Wounded and Burned* and is in the form of an abstract torso in mid-stride. The structural surface brings it close to Art Informel with a powerful symbolic message. The enormous figure is walking forward, even though its form has been eroded by time. In 1968 Zoubek altered the concept, elaborated in four different studies. The work was now called *Prodigy of the Nation*; the torso is no longer weathered, and now complemented with wings, optimistically gesturing to imminent flight. In 1969 Zoubek created a one-third size model of this sculpture in cement and lead. The winged *Prodigy of the Nation* returned to the ground in 1969 in two versions of *The Pedestrian*, a headless figure heading into the unknown. The connection with historical events can also be seen in two variations of *Prometheus*, also from 1969. Here the symbol of the nation is transformed into the form of a martyr – undoubtedly inspired by the death of Jan Palach – facing his fate.

Zoubek did not support the country's post-1969 political course, which led to the establishment of a neo-Stalinist state. On the contrary, perhaps unintentionally at first, he took a strong stance against the new order with his poignant portrayal of Jan Palach, whose death had a profound impact on him. Within a few years, the creation of a sculpture for the Federal Assembly building, an assignment connected with the ethos of political liberalisation, turned into a project for the new political elites, whom part of the nation considered collaborators. Nevertheless, Zoubek did not contemplate deserting the project. As I will argue in my conclusion, this was not due to self-interest or calculated pragmatism.<sup>7</sup> In the new atmosphere of 'normalisation', Prager also repeatedly tried to advocate in favour of installing Zoubek's work in front of the parliament building. He asked the sculptor to continue to provide new designs, which he then submitted to the approval committees. All of the designs were remunerated and created based on legal purchase orders issued by the building investor. Although work on the building was halted for a while in 1970, the following year the artist received a written offer to complete the commission. The following *Milestone of History* from 1970 is an angular, heavily built torso with arms hanging limply. It is not walking anywhere; the structural and again slightly eroded surface adds to the petrified, stiff character. In 1973 Zoubek proposed an entirely new design: the sculpture was

7 A large number of artists, representatives of Czechoslovakia's avant-garde who enjoyed acclaim and public commissions in the 1960s, fell out of favour after 1969. The subsequent course of their lives sometimes features elements that, in retrospect, bear the mark of professional opportunism. For example, several accepted a financially rewarding offer from the state-run monopoly art agency Art Centrum to work on memorials and museum installations in Tehran glorifying the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi between 1969 and 1977. These artists included sculptors Hugo Demartini and Stanislav Kolíbal, who otherwise were prohibited from exhibiting in Czechoslovakia, and printmaker Oldřich Kulhánek, who had received a prison sentence of several months for creating prints ridiculing the leaders of various communist countries. For more information see Daniela Kramerová, 'We Sell Dreams: Work Commissioned by the Shah of Iran from Czech Artists in the 1970s', *Umění/Art*, vol. LXI, no. 4, 2013, pp. 341–355.





Olbram Zoubek, *Milestone of History*, 1970, plaster, height 170 cm, image courtesy: Kmentová Zoubek Fund, Prague



Olbram Zoubek, *Milestone of History*, 1973, lead, gold leaf, height 53 cm, image courtesy: Kmentová Zoubek Fund, Prague



Olbram Zoubek, *Milestone of History*, 1973, layered lead, height. 530 cm, image courtesy: Kmentová Zoubek Fund, Prague



now a simple block, at first glance not representative of a figure, with a contrasting gold, organically-bent shape at its peak. Breaking free from the pedestal in the various following studies are a wing, a body and drapes – perhaps the idea that not even history can be shackled by gravity. The final version of *Milestone of History* (1973) can be considered as a compromise and cross-section of Zoubek's six years of work on the project. Created using a tin layering technique, the sculpture stood five and a half metres tall. The figure, in mid-stride, is draped, like a winning athlete wrapped in a flag after breaking the finishing-line tape. There is a strong contrast between the mass and weight of the figure and the lightness and diaphanousness of the drape – a motif that can be found in numerous Zoubek sculptures from the 1970s through the 1990s.

In his various models, Zoubek did not attempt to ideologically or artistically pander to the client's demands; he instead attempted to present designs that were an honest reflection of his monumental interpretation of the subject. However, he did not enter into an open conflict with the ruling establishment. In 1973 Zoubek prepared a full-scale sculpture, but it was not installed in front of the Federal Assembly. Insistent, in 1973, Prager attempted to install the sculpture in front of the Municipal General Contractor's office building located on the grounds of Prague's Emmaus Monastery. The building had been designed by none other than Prager himself and was the location of his studio, but not even here was the finished sculpture allowed to be publicly displayed. Zoubek tried to have the work installed in front of the Folimanka sports hall in 1977, a promising prospect given the potential for an athletic interpretation of the work. He was still pressing to have the sculpture permanently installed in 1982, but in vain. His motivation for this was essentially due to practical reasons – paid for and ready, but technically not fully completed, the work was standing in front of Zoubek's studio and was, as such, being damaged by the elements. Finally, in 1982, the sculpture ended up in the collection of the National Gallery in Prague and was permanently installed in the garden of Zbraslav Chateau, the site of the gallery's sculpture collections. In 2000 *Milestone of History* was seriously damaged during an attempt to move the sculpture and Zoubek decided not to attempt to restore it.

However, in the context of Zoubek's work in the 1970s, the costly execution of *Milestone of History* is an exception. Public sculptures practically vanished from his oeuvre during this period; similar commissions were awarded only to artists favoured by the regime, and Zoubek certainly was not one of them. For him, his restoration work represented a means of economic survival – and, to a certain extent, creative realisation. As a freelance artist, the character of his façade repair work at Litomyšl Castle was not unlike that of a seasonal worker.<sup>8</sup> The decades-long commission was not a given, and Zoubek and his friends had to repeatedly reapply for it. There is not enough documentary material to offer a general analysis of Zoubek's financial status or income from his work in the 1970s and 1980s. One can argue that political repression, together with the independent artist's activities and specific talents, paradoxically led Zoubek to the world of entrepreneurialism even as the communist state structure consolidated power. He had to seek out and apply for restoration commissions, negotiate working terms and conditions, and set up

8 During communist rule, the 'freelance artist' represented a special social category. State-certified artists were not subject to the universal obligation to work and could not be accused of the crime of 'parasitism'. For many, this made the status of professional artist even more attractive.

a team to work with him. He later put this experience to use in his own independent work.

Occasionally Zoubek would self-critically admit there is ‘too much Zoubek’ in Czech public space. Sustained interest in his work and Zoubek’s interpretation of sculpture, which does not evade stimuli and commissions from the outside, are to blame for this. He seeks out collaboration with architects, and the techniques he uses (asbestos cement, layered tin), which in some cases results in financial savings, have had an impact on his success in competitions. Although exhibitions of his work were banned in Prague in the 1970s, by the 1980s, as large housing estate developments were being built on the outskirts of Prague, he was able to win commissions that were significant both symbolically and in terms of size. However, construction delays resulted in the commissions being postponed and the sculptures were not installed until the new social atmosphere following 1989. What at first seems like Zoubek’s extraordinary upturn, connected with the fall of communism after 1989, is in fact deeply rooted in the previous decade, under entirely different conditions.

Zoubek’s three-figure sculpture *Day, Night and Time* for the Jižní Město housing estate in Prague may serve as a good example. In 1980 Zoubek originally competed for a sculpture to be installed in a less attractive location near Kosmonautů (now Háje) metro station. Zoubek shifted the typically communist assigned theme of ‘work and rest’ to allegory and created a group of sculptures that were mythological/astrological in character and connected to a sundial. His design, which diverged from the period’s feeble rehashing of Socialist Realism, impressed the approval committees: ‘Given the high quality of the design by sculptor Zoubek, both committees recommend that the project architect consider installing it in the open space – green area at the complex.’<sup>9</sup> The set of sculptures moved to another space near the metro station. The work was approved and a written order was issued in 1981, but the deadline for completing *Day, Night and Time* was postponed five times. Initially it was supposed to be completed in June 1983, then November 1983. Subsequent addenda to the contract moved the deadline to 1984; in 1985 it was postponed to 1987; and in 1988 it was pushed forward to 1990. In the end, *Day, Night and Time* was not installed until June 1991. In response to an appeal in May 1991 to install the sculpture, Zoubek asked about contact information for the people in charge – because he ‘expect[s] there are] new people and new contacts’ (translation by the author). But aside from the mere administrative detail of the changing names and numbers of those in charge, the very perception of public space and the art within it had undergone a substantial transformation after 1989. Sculptures commissioned deep in the throes of the communist regime were often caught up in an ownership vacuum. The area around Háje metro station was turned into a shopping centre, with all the traffic and visual pollution by advertisements that this entails. One of the sculptures in Zoubek’s set was damaged and a second was destroyed. The Galaxie multiplex cinema arose next to Háje metro station in 2001; the cinema had purchased the adjacent land, including the street furniture, but whether the purchase included the sculptures – and what will become of them – remains unclear.

<sup>9</sup> Entry from the public competition, Zoubek archive (translation by author)

Thanks to competitions and architects who appreciated his work, Zoubek and his sculptures received increasing acceptance and their presence in public spaces increased significantly in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Initially his works appeared outside of Prague – such as his monumental *Lion* at architect Václav Aulický's television transmitter in Ostrava-Hošťalkovice from 1978 – or a number of smaller and larger works created for the banking sector from 1981, which were often initiated by architect Karel Prager. Zoubek never sought out these types of commissions and years later he was critical of several of them; he was not particularly satisfied with his reliefs for Komerční Banka in Prague and repeatedly criticised them in the press.

I used to have the strength to turn down the communists, but now I don't have the strength to refuse. It's like an inconspicuous, creeping virus. An investor comes along and tells me that I'm wonderful and that the only right thing that would fit in over there is my thing – he decorates the commission with pretty ribbons and then springs a cutthroat deadline on me.<sup>10</sup>

The 'migration' of Zoubek's sculptures from place to place, motivated by practical and ideological reasons and due to society's changing appreciation of the artist's work, is another unique phenomenon. In the 1970s and 1980s, Zoubek sometimes took his works that were not permitted to be installed in their originally-intended locations and placed them in schools, hospitals, cultural centres, theatres and post offices, or he equipped similar institutions with additional casts of his work that had already been made. The travel logs for some of Zoubek's sculptures are almost bitterly grotesque. In 1987 Zoubek created two sculptures named *Sisters* for the staircase of Dům Elegance (House of Elegance), a clothing store on Prague's Na Příkopě street. A copy of *Sisters* has been sited in front of the Czech Television building in Prague's Kavčí Hory since 1996. The original sculptures remained inside the clothing store for only a few years; after 1990 the design of the store was changed as the socialist Dům Elegance was converted into a Benetton store. The new owner offered the sculptures to a retirement home in Lysá nad Labem, but they were not to find a permanent home here, either. Today they are located in the garden of a holiday cottage in Kersko owned by the director of the aforementioned retirement home. Journeys of this sort could easily be the subject of another grotesque novel along the lines of *The Facade*, but one testifying to the privatisation of public space in post-socialist countries.

Zoubek's story not only reveals the impact cultural politics has had on him or changes in the ownership of specific sculptures, but also the comprehensive transformation of the relationship between art and society. Regardless of Zoubek's own political opinions, he had no other choice but to work in the environment in which art was being created in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. He retained his artistic autonomy and did not compromise practice by pandering to the regime; at the same time, as a sculptor he did not abandon the reality of the existing artworld – he did not stop creating and making a living from art.<sup>11</sup> For similar reasons, the number of Eastern European artists who truly and thoroughly refused to have a relationship with the official art structures of the time is

10 Jana Klusáková, 'Život v otázkách a odpovědích' (Life in Questions and Answers), in Jaroslav Malina, ed, *Olbram Zoubek*, Nadace Universitas Masarykiana, Brno, 1996, p 31 (translation by author)

11 At the same time, however, the position of any artist in the 1970s who relinquished the opportunities to seek success beyond the borders of the state was commended in unofficial art circles. For example, critic Jindřich Chalupecký associated the position of Czechoslovak artists who did not support the regime with modernist myths about misunderstood artists, from Baudelaire to Duchamp. See Jindřich Chalupecký, *Úděl umělce: Duchampovské meditace* (The Destiny of an Artist: A Meditation on Duchamp), Torst, Prague, 1998.



very small. Communism did not offer a free market for monumental sculptors. Apart from exceptional cases, such as a commission for a cemetery sculpture, the only client was the state. Yet in the seemingly homogenous, strictly socialist economy of Czechoslovakia, visual artists, architects and other professions encountered some elements of the market economy, which then seeped into their practice. The state imposed and to varying degrees maintained ideological censorship, but at the same time it enacted laws supporting public art.<sup>12</sup> After 1989 not only censorship but also support disappeared.

In addition to economic changes, there were also inverse changes in ideological values after 1989. Not only was state intervention in the arts rejected, but the social function of art itself was questioned. Emphasis was placed on the subjective level of art and the moral integrity of the artist taking a definite position against oppression. Rather than describing the actual situation of socialist art, after 1989 the polarity of official/unofficial took a stance on the new discourse on values, according to which all major artists of the past were seen as somewhat 'unofficial'. Concurrently, however, the art that was created officially (paid for by the communist state) did not necessarily represent an ethical failure on the part of the artist. If this had been the case, art as a whole would have failed. Therefore, one must accept the fact that art in communist countries was created under specific economic and ideological conditions, and these shaped art more than an awareness of the pioneering achievements of Western art or ideas about the ethical dimension of creative work.

12 In 1965, Czechoslovakia passed a law that between one and four percent of the budget for every public building had to go towards works of art. See Jana Kořínková, *To Brighten Up and Make It Special: Fine Arts in the Space of Brno Housing Estates*, SPKH, Brno, 2012. Similar laws existed and exist in various countries with differing political systems.

# KwieKulik and the Political Economy of the Potboiler

Tomasz Załuski

## Introduction

The KwieKulik duo was formed by Przemysław Kwiek and Zofia Kulik, who lived and worked together as artists from 1971 to 1988.<sup>1</sup> They invented and developed their own form of performative artistic practice which was called *Działania* (Activities). The processual and ephemeral art that they created often addressed institutional, social, economic and political issues. KwieKulik used their bodies and configurations of everyday life objects to generate material, visual and performative metaphors as well as to expose various factors and conditions that determined artistic production and life in People's Republic of Poland. What is more, their own methodical documentation of their artistic activities became an immanent part of their creative undertaking and was treated as an art form in itself. The duo also documented selected performances of other Polish artists of the 1970s and 1980s and, as a result, quickly built a huge archive of Polish ephemeral art. During numerous meetings with Polish and foreign audiences, KwieKulik presented parts of the archive in the form of multi-projection slide shows, accompanied by their own commentary.

KwieKulik conceived of their art as 'a practical science', after the term coined by Polish philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbiński.<sup>2</sup> It took the form of artistic, material and performative knowledge production. They wanted to become artists-as-scientists and tried to model their artistic practices on scientific methods and procedures. They therefore devoted a lot of time and effort to self-education in the fields of logic and praxeology as well as drawing inspiration from other theoretical sources of the era: linguistics, semiology, information theory and cybernetics. Importantly, KwieKulik made every possible effort to have their experimental ideas and practices officially accepted into, as well as financially supported by, the institutional and administrative mainstream of Polish art, by the authorities governing the sphere of culture. Nevertheless, as soon as the

<sup>1</sup> This article is largely based on documents housed in the KwieKulik archive in Łomianki together with my interviews in 2014 and 2016 with Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek on the issue of potboiler works. For a comprehensive account of KwieKulik's artistic practice as divided into over two hundred events see Łukasz Ronduda and Georg Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik: Zofia Kulik & Przemysław Kwiek*, Marcin Wawrzyńczak et al, trans, the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; BWA Wrocław Galleries of Contemporary Art, Wrocław; Kontakt: The Art Collection of Erste Group and ERSTE Foundation, Vienna, and the KwieKulik Archive, Warsaw-Łomianki, 2012. The publication includes English translations of KwieKulik's selected texts and other documents from the artists' archive. Where possible, I refer to this fundamental sourcebook.

<sup>2</sup> Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, a folder with the title 'Do Instytutu Sztuki PAN' (For the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences), April 1974, handwriting and photographs of typed text pasted onto the paper,

twenty numbered pages and eighteen unnumbered, KwieKulik archive; Tadeusz Kotarbiński, 'Pojęcia i zagadnienia metodologii ogólnej i metodologii nauk praktycznych', *Studia Filozoficzne* 1, 1974, pp 5–6.

3 As I try to do justice here to the specificity of the artistic production in Eastern Europe, I do not use, for both historiographical and cultural-political reasons, the concept of institutional critique, which was, at its source, a Western invention. Instead, I analyse KwieKulik using the concept they themselves applied to 'Activities' and developed with reference to them, namely, 'exposure of conditions' of artistic production and life under socialism. I believe that only when Eastern art practices that seem to be analogical to the Western institutional critique are reconstructed and examined in detail in their own terms, can they be treated as the Eastern variant of institutional critique and used to extend the concept, or be included in the emerging global art historical canon under a separate name as a specific phenomenon. This, however, entails further basic research and detailed historical case studies which need to be undertaken before it is possible to proceed to comparative analyses and generalisations. The present study aims to contribute to such comparative and synthetic work yet to be done.

4 See also Max Cegielski, *Mozaika: Śladami Rechowiczów*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warszawa, 2011

artists graduated from the sculpture department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw at the beginning of the 1970s, their ambitious plans were confronted with the harsh realities of artistic production. Namely, in order to earn a living, KwieKulik had to start making craft-like works commissioned from visual artists by the socialist state. For the aspiring neo-avant-garde artists-as-scientists, this kind of work, which often involved physical drudgery, was nothing but *chaltura* – potboiler work, done below one's ambitions and artistic capacities, solely to earn money.

In this article, I attempt to demonstrate that KwieKulik managed to turn a political and economic necessity of doing potboiler work into a critical exposure of the conditions of artistic production and life under socialism.<sup>3</sup> The duo was exceptional in the field of 1970s and 1980s Polish art in so far as they included the existence of potboiler work into their experimental artistic 'Activities' and commented upon its socio-economic dimensions. A close examination of KwieKulik's selected works and documents from their archive which I present here provides insight into the functioning of the system of potboiler work which formed a defining part of the actually existing socialist 'artworld' in Poland.

## The Conditions of Potboiler Work

'Potboiler work', a popular term for work on commission, was used by artists to express their discontent, not only with the conditions of work and payment but, above all, with the fact that the nature of many commissioned works did not match their artistic ambitions, tending to reduce them to craftsmen or mass producers of visual objects. However, it must be remembered that some more traditional artists who worked in the domain of 'plastic arts', for example painting or sculpture, as well as certain designers – architects, industrial, interior and exhibition designers etc – would not consider such commissions as potboiler works. In terms of technology, style, artistic quality – and sometimes even thematic content – there was no distinction for them between their individual artistic careers and what they were expected to do in the case of commissioned work.<sup>4</sup> The same did not apply to conceptual, media and performance artists who, when working on a commission, were forced to act in a technological and artistic domain they tried to distance themselves from in their own artistic work. It is easy to understand that for them such commissions were regarded as 'potboiler work'. The very term was rarely used in conversation, even in friendly exchanges, as the very issue of doing work commissioned by the socialist state was a shameful subject, not only for artistic reasons but, at least in some cases, for political ones as well.

In socialist Poland, the monopolist institution responsible for commissioning potboiler works – designed to be tools of visual propaganda, media of collective commemoration practices, items of scenic decoration for social and political rituals, or simply visual information for everyday pragmatic purposes – was Państwowe Przedsiębiorstwo Pracowni Sztuk Plastycznych, PSP (State Enterprise of Visual Arts Workshops). Established in 1951 as a replacement for an earlier institution of a similar kind, called Państwowe Przedsiębiorstwo Robót Dekoracyjnych (State Enterprise of Decorative Works), PSP was from its inception the



main source of work and income for the majority of Polish visual artists who graduated from art schools or academies of fine arts and became members of the Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków, ZPAP (Union of Polish Visual Artists).

In its official bulletin, PSP was advertised as an enterprise which ‘designs, controls and supervises artistic quality and commissions work in the following fields: interior and exhibition architecture, decorations of events, printmaking, painting, sculpture and artistic photography’.<sup>5</sup> It aimed to present itself as a modern institution that was becoming increasingly active in many interconnected domains: apart from commissioning, it had its own centre of scientific and technical information, ran galleries of contemporary art and disseminated new artistic ideas. Therefore, PSP could openly declare its monopolist position: it had the highest number of branches in the whole country, the highest number of commissions – thirty thousand a year – and the legal entitlement to supervise all commissions executed by artists working for other enterprises and institutions. Finally, it had its own art market; it ran art galleries and shops where art could be legally bought and sold.<sup>6</sup>

All of this may look and sound very impressive. However, the reality was quite different, especially in terms of work and payment conditions for artists. PSP, together with ZPAP and the Department of Visual Arts at the Ministry of Culture and Art formed a complex and efficient system which implemented and performed what fully deserves to be called a ‘political economy’ of artistic production. PSP could control and discipline artists by means of unequal distribution of work and payment. With no clear rules concerning the assignment and distribution of work, the state enterprise could easily privilege some artists and exclude others; in effect, it quickly became a space of barely disguised clientelism.

The system was structured such that PSP commissioned work from professional artists who graduated from art schools or academies of fine arts and became members of ZPAP.<sup>7</sup> Artists had to apply to PSP for work and, once they were officially accepted, could start to ‘co-operate’ with the enterprise. While in most cases it was PSP who contacted an artist and commissioned work, on occasion artists, especially those who had not been given work for a long time, would contact the enterprise and asked for commissions. There were different stages in the process of executing a commission, depending on the artistic discipline, technology and specificity of the work. In the case of sculpture, there was usually a ‘sketch’, ‘design’ and ‘completed work’ – which might still be a gypsum model to be cast in metal, carved in stone and so on. It was not until the late 1970s that more precise terminology for describing stages in the process of making commissions was finally established by the state. In the ‘Ordinance of the Council of Ministers of 11 November 1977 on rules and rates for creators of plastic arts works as well as on contracts for making or using such works’ the process of making sculptural works is divided into ‘preliminary design’ (a sketch of the design), ‘general design’ (a real size working model prepared in any material), ‘execution design’ (a real size gypsum model in its final sculpted form, such that allows for execution of the final work in a given material and using a given technology) and ‘final work’.<sup>8</sup> The Ordinance also specified the minimum and maximum rates for making all those elements. In the

5 *Biuletyn Informacyjny PSP* 5, 1973, second page of the cover.

6 Ibid

7 Those who were not members of ZPAP or the other unions of artists or designers – Związek Polskich Artystów Fotografów, ZPAF (Union of Polish Artists Photographers) and Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich, SARP (Association of Polish Architects) – had to apply to a special committee at the Ministry of Culture and Art in order to be recognised as artists. Only once accepted could they then apply to PSP for commissions.

8 ‘Rozporządzenie Rady Ministrów z dnia 11 listopada 1977 r. w sprawie zasad i stawek wynagrodzenia twórców dzieł plastycznych oraz umów o wykonanie lub wykorzystanie tych dzieł’, *Dziennik Ustaw* 36, 1977, p 308

case of sculpture, the preliminary design was between five hundred and two thousand zlotys, the general design between two thousand and eight thousand zlotys and the execution design of a small sculpture (up to one metre tall) was between eight thousand and forty thousand zlotys. The rate for execution of the final work depended on the material; being between a hundred and three hundred per cent of the rate for the execution model in the case of wood, between a hundred and three hundred and fifty per cent in the case of stone, and between a hundred and five hundred per cent in the case of metal.<sup>9</sup>

It was possible to get a commission which included all the elements – from preparing the preliminary design to executing the final work. But it was also a common practice on the part of PSP to introduce a division of labour. In such cases, some artists could be responsible only for the preliminary and general design, while others were supposed to prepare a real size gypsum model and sometimes also execute it in a given material. At each of its stages, the work had to be presented before a committee of experts at PSP, whose task was to judge if it matched a set of norms and criteria, evaluate it and either approve or reject it. This meant that artists who were working on a commission, especially in its final stages, had to demonstrate a certain level of manual dexterity, be capable of using appropriate material processing techniques and, generally speaking, follow the rules of craftsmanship. In order to get their work accepted, it was also necessary to learn how to design and execute works that would appeal aesthetically and stylistically to the tastes of the committee experts.

The division of labour into creative design and craft-like material execution was one of the main tools for governing, disciplining and manipulating artists as a social group. A relatively small number of artists with what might today be termed high ‘relational capital’ – those who had strong professional and personal connections to officials, experts and clerks at PSP – were given the majority of commissions, especially ones which were well-paid and involved the creation of a design of a work to be made by someone else.<sup>10</sup> Other artists continued to be assigned work that demanded the execution of designs that were not their own. By promising to give them better-paid and more creative tasks in the future, or by implying that they might not be given any work at all, PSP was usually able to find artists ready to do such craft-like work. This was also a way of silencing those who wanted to criticise PSP and protest against its exploitative practices. PSP also took advantage of its monopolist position and often acted as an intermediary institution or ‘artist agency’. When another state institution or enterprise wanted to commission work from artists, it was required to contact PSP, who would choose and appoint a professional to perform the task. Even if the institution or enterprise wanted a particular artist to execute the commission, PSP could decide otherwise and assign work to someone else.

## Critical Exposures

KwieKulik were an exceptional case in the Polish neo-avant-garde milieu of the 1970s in so far as they made potboiler work an explicit subject of

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p 312. The average monthly salary in 1977 in Poland was 4,596 zlotys, the minimal monthly salary 1,400 zlotys. See ZUS (The Polish Insurance Institution), <http://www.zus.pl/default.asp?p=48&cid=3381> and <http://www.zus.pl/default.asp?p=48&cid=3405> respectively, accessed 15 October 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ewa Toniak provides relevant figures for the situation in PSP at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1959 5.1% of all artists who were getting commissions from PSP earned 21.6% of the total income of the whole group, in 1960 the figures changed respectively to 4.7% and 33.4%. See Ewa Toniak, *Prace rentowne: Polscy artyści między ekonomią a sztuką w okresie odwilży*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa, 2015, pp 126–127.



The unveiling ceremony of the AK Kinga Plaque carved by KwieKulik (potboiler work), 103 Solec Street in Warsaw, 6 April 1974, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

their experimental art that critically commented upon the institutional setting of artistic production under socialism. Having graduated, Przemysław Kwiek (in 1970) and Zofia Kulik (in 1971) applied to PSP, asking for commissions. They were approved and, during the next decade, given a number of tasks: exactly twenty-seven works between 1970 and 1981. During that time, they also received twenty commissions from other public institutions or – unofficially and illegally – from private persons. Some of the potboiler assignments undertaken by KwieKulik included commemorative plaques and plaquettes, often connected with events of World War II; decorations of social festivals and political events – for example boards advertising state enterprises or flags of other socialist countries and scenic designs for meetings or congresses, such as the general congress of the Association of in 1978. A special case was the design of a touring exhibition of the Lenin Museum, which KwieKulik developed and executed in 1977 on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution.

While executing such potboiler commissions, KwieKulik also created their ephemeral and documented ‘Activities’. They combined potboiler works with their experimental artistic practice in order to show that they were able to ‘act efficiently’ within given conditions of life and artistic production and, at the same time, critically expose those very conditions. This was a way to combine ‘art and life’ under socialism. Such joint works were called *Earning and Creating*.



*Activities with the AK Kinga Plaque* (1974) – one of the first and most systematic attempts at combining earning money with creating art – provides an example of this. While carving a commemorative inscription in honour of the murdered National Army Soldiers in a large sandstone slab, KwieKulik made a number of combinations of objects from everyday life set on the plaque. The configurations were documented in a handwritten catalogue with drawings and were also photographed. By placing the objects onto the plaque in various combinations and relationships, the artists generated shifting meanings, associations and metaphors. In one of the photographic slides, the statement on the plaque, consisting of the already carved letters with the addition of words written on pieces of paper, read: ‘In this very place Z K and P K died a heroes death at the hands of mediators, art critics, cultural activists, Ministry of Art and Culture officials, Czartoryska, Skrodzki, Osęka, director Urbanowicz and Stanisławski.’ Urszula Czartoryska, Wojciech Skrodzki and Andrzej Osęka were art critics considered by KwieKulik to be hostile to their art, Henryk Urbanowicz was the managing director at PSP and Ryszard Stanisławski was the director of Museum of Art in Lodz. For a short – but well-documented – moment, the potboiler work became a critique and



KwieKulik, *Activities with AK Kinga Plaque*, ‘aesthetic time-effects’, recorded on colour diapositives, with the statement: ‘In this very place Z K and P K died a heroes death at the hands of mediators, art critics, cultural activists, Ministry of Art and Culture officials, Czartoryska, Skrodzki, Osęka, director Urbanowicz and Stanisławski’, 1974, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik





KwieKulik, *Activities with AK Kinga Plaque*, 'aesthetic time-effects' recorded on colour diapositives, 1974, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

an indictment of the Polish institutional 'artworld' of the 1970s, represented there by the names of its leading protagonists.

In 1979 KwieKulik prepared *Thingy. A Monument of Potboiler-Culture Cult*. The work comprised an installation with a sculpted head, a multi-slide projection and a performance. The slides documented various potboiler works the artists had made up until that time. Another element of the installation, namely a catalogue of their potboiler works, was placed on the sculpted head, where it could be browsed through by the viewer.

From the very beginning of their 'co-operation' with PSP, KwieKulik contested the poor material and economic conditions of artistic work that the state enterprise offered them. Already in 1973, during the second edition of the Festival of Art School Students in Nowa Ruda, they designed and distributed a xeroxed leaflet with the slogan: 'PSP humiliates!' Not only did they express their discontent and anger on a symbolic level, but they also attempted to change the real conditions of artistic production: they sent numerous letters of complaint to PSP in which they protested against not being given any work for months, criticised delays in payment or complained about being paid less than had initially been agreed. As there was no satisfactory reaction on the part of PSP, the artists started making complaints to officials at ZPAP, the Ministry of Culture and Art and even to parliamentary representatives at the Polish parliament, the Sejm. In 1973, among a number of issues

made in a petition-complaint to the then Minister of Culture and Art, Stanisław Wroński, KwieKulik also touched upon the subject of PSP:

we have to earn our living by carving commemorative plaques at PSP, the idiotic, swindling institution, [we have to be – TZ] hewing tombstones, calligraphing letters, priming white canvases in order to, if we are lucky, copy somebody else's designs onto them. No one, including the PSP artistic committee itself, believes in the sense and usefulness of these jobs (which you need to wait months for).<sup>11</sup>

In February 1974, at Jabłonna near Warsaw, during a meeting of young Polish artists with the authorities from ZPAP, the Ministry of Culture and Art and the Communist Party, KwieKulik openly criticised the exploitative economy of PSP and denounced the connections of its director Urbanowicz to officials at the very top of the Communist Party hierarchy: Piotr Jaroszewicz, who was the prime minister at the time, and Edward Gierek, the then first secretary of the party. Kwiek said:

I wonder how Mr Urbanowicz has managed to keep his job since the war – despite the attacks by young artists – and I'm not surprised at all because when I was in his office, I saw on the walls letters of thanks from Piotr Jaroszewicz and Edward Gierek for PSP. The thanks are because PSP has

11 Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, 'Ministry of Culture and Art, Minister Stanisław Wroński, Letter-Complaint', in Ronduda and Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, p 439



KwieKulik, *Activities with AK Kinga Plaque*, 'aesthetic time-effects' recorded on colour diapositives, 1974, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik



KwieKulik, *Videodecoration*, frames from the film documenting the television report of X Congress of the Polish Journalists Association (SDP), decoration for the congress platform designed by the artists (potboiler work), February 1978, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

contributed 20 billion zlotys to the Central Bank. How does it work? A friend of mine was commissioned for a project. He was told it was community work, for free. The job was to arrange an exhibition at the Central Committee. He said he wouldn't do it for free. He was told, 'Still, do it. Because it needs to be done.' That's one form of thievery. Here's another: there was a contract worth 25 000 zlotys. They said, 'It has to be done for 18 000 maximum.' When the contractor refused, they said, 'We'll wait.' A year later, the guy comes and says he will do it for 18 000. He does it because he has to and PSP can contribute to the central bank... This is unbearable. I am asking for a firm intervention in this regard.<sup>12</sup>

12 See Ronduda and Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, p 169. Translation modified by the author.

13 Kulik and Kwiek, A Letter of Complaint to Parliamentary Representatives at the Sejm, 2 October 1974, typescript, four numbered pages, p 1, KwieKulik archive, author's translation

KwieKulik criticised director Urbanowicz again in a letter of complaint to parliamentary representatives written in October 1974. Having exposed the exploitative economy of PSP, the artists claimed that it was impossible to design any modern, original and creative work there: 'when you are forced to work for PSP, you can be sure that you will not be given any chance to use your talent and show your originality, you will not perform as an artist but as a craftsman. So, as an artist, you will waste your talent and your life.'<sup>13</sup> An important demand was also included – namely, that the PSP Foksal Gallery should be closed down. According to KwieKulik, this contemporary art gallery was used to veil





USSR flags painted by KwieKulik (potboiler work), 13–14 May 1977, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik





Zofia Kulik working on the project for the exhibition 'October Revolution and Poland' in the Lenin Museum (potboiler work), Warsaw, September – October 1977, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

the real functioning of PSP by giving it an air of an institution that supports and promotes experimental avant-garde art, whereas in reality it turned avant-garde artists into traditional craftsmen.<sup>14</sup>

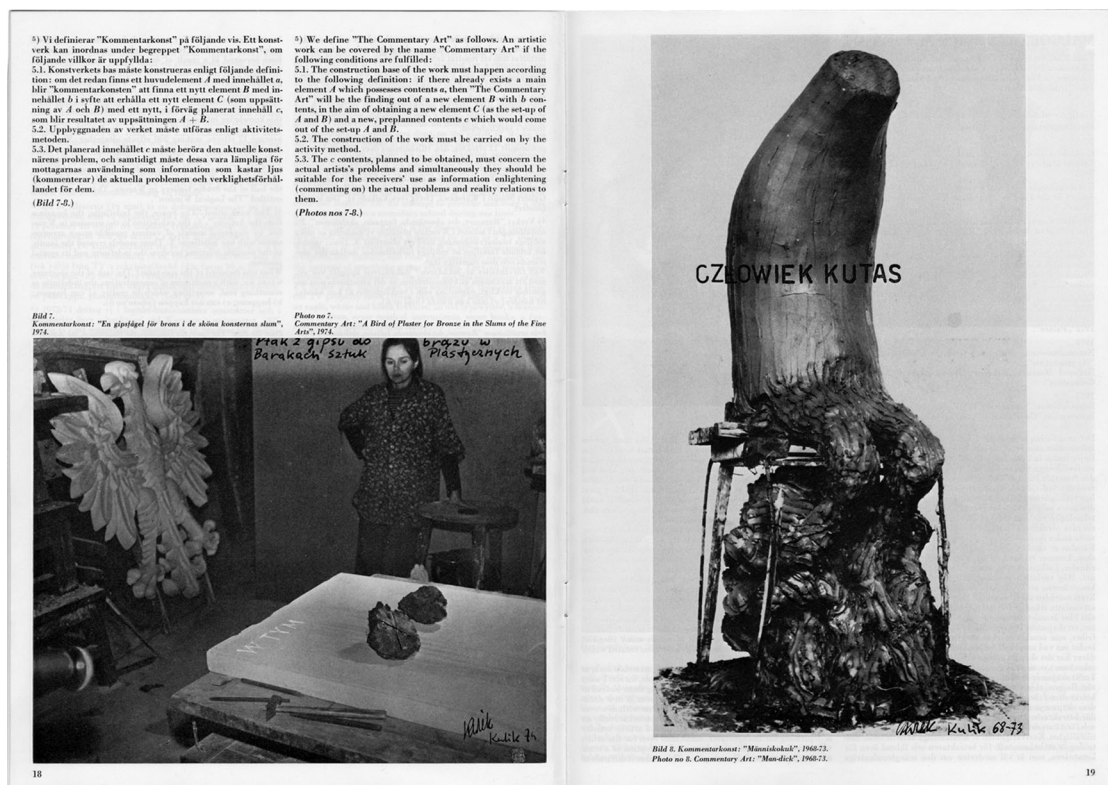
The complaints did have certain effects but not the ones that KwieKulik might have hoped for. In 1975 the artists took part in the exhibition 7 Young Poles in Malmö, Sweden. In the exhibition catalogue they managed to publish, beyond the reach of Polish censorship, a photograph of a PSP workshop with Zofia Kulik, who was working on a commission – a plaque commemorating soldiers of the Polish Home Army murdered by the Nazis, and with a work by another artist – a plaster eagle, probably part of the Polish national emblem. The photograph featured a critical comment concerning the working conditions the institution offered: 'A Bird of Plaster for Bronze in the Barracks of Fine Arts'. What is more, the photograph was printed alongside another, more general (and more explicit) commentary on the socialist reality: an image of Kwiek's student sculpture with the caption 'Man-Dick'. When officials at the Ministry of Culture and Art found out about the publication, KwieKulik were accused of 'political excesses against the national emblem'.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence of this absurd accusation, they were banned from travelling out of Poland and representing Polish art abroad for three years. It is highly probable that the whole affair and the decision it resulted in were inspired

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p 2

<sup>15</sup> See Maryla Sitkowska's interview with Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, *KwieKulik – Sztuka i teoria ilustrowana przypadkami żywiołowymi czyli Sztuka z nerwów*, typescript, KwieKulik archive, author's translation



KwieKulik, *Thingy — A Monument of Potboiler-Culture Cult*, installation with a catalogue of potboiler works on the top of the sculpted head, projection of documentation of potboiler works on the walls in the gallery, Galeria Repassage 2, Warsaw, 29 March 1979, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik



Layout of two pages in the catalogue of the exhibition '7 Young Poles', Malmö Konsthalle, 1975; the photograph with the eagle called *A Bird of Plaster for Bronze in the Barracks of Fine Arts* was placed by the Swedish designer next to the *Man-dick*, both works from the Commentary Art series by KwieKulik, photo KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

16 This was what KwieKulik suggested in their official letter to the Ministry of Culture and Art in which they tried to explain what came to be known as 'the Eagle Affair' and once more criticised director Urbanowicz for the exploitative economy of PSP; see Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, A Letter to Tadeusz Kaczmarek, Deputy Minister of Culture and Art, in Ronduda and Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, pp 443-444.

17 See Ronduda and Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, p 205

by director Urbanowicz himself.<sup>16</sup> What is more, it might have been connected to ongoing surveillance of Przemysław Kwiek and another artist, Marek Konieczny, by the Security Services. In 1975 the two artists were collecting signatures from a group of around forty artists for a petition which expressed their discontent with PSP. The Security Services launched 'a case of operational verification' against Kwiek and Konieczny in order to check if their activity was 'political' and 'hostile'.<sup>17</sup> After the verification, a Security Services officer who supervised the case decided that it was only a matter of economy, and not politics. Interestingly enough, the officer gave an insightful and truthful analysis of familiarism, clientelism and bribery mechanisms at work in PSP:

The orders are distributed by PSP employment officers, who are in the position to commission a better-quality work, hence better remunerated from one artist, and a worse one from another. Older generations of artists know a lot of officials working at PSP, with whom they have personal contacts, and who receive valuable gifts from the artists, who then obtain better-paid commissions.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s KwieKulik were slowly turning their critique of the political economy of the Polish



18 Ibid. See also Łukasz Ronduda, 'KwieKulik Towards the PSP: The SB Towards KwieKulik', in *ibid* pp 525–526.

'artworld' into a critique of the Polish 'socialist' state as such. What made this critique all the more complex was the fact that they invoked certain socialist values and ideals: creativity, the right to self-development, and egalitarian culture available for everyone. It was both a way of 'taking socialism at its word' and a kind of tactical 'ideological blackmail'. But in the 1970s and 1980s the state authorities in Poland no longer really believed in socialist ideals and, if only for this very reason, KwieKulik's ideological blackmail could not have had any real effect.

In 1980, in a letter of complaint to the director of the Department of Visual Arts at the Ministry of Culture and Art, Janusz Przewoźny and the Vice-Minister Władysław Loranc, KwieKulik wrote that within the state forms that regulated artistic production in Poland it was virtually impossible to create experimental, innovative and socially engaged art as a grassroots initiative, even though the state itself seemed to invite and promote such initiatives. They also claimed that it was a duty of the socialist state to financially support the development of such non-traditional art because artists could not, within the context of the socialist political economy, use private sources of income to practice in the existing cultural framework. In anger they concluded:

Things go very badly when 'the state forms' are not elastic and open enough to assimilate and support an individual grassroots initiative. When they are not receptive to the 'new', when they do not react properly to the contemporary in its becoming. Then the authorities, the power in its 'state forms', are too weak to hold power, as they lose touch with reality.<sup>19</sup>

19 Kulik and Kwiek, letter to Janusz Przewoźny, Director of the Department of Visual Arts at the Ministry of Culture and Art, and Władysław Loranc, Vice-Minister of Culture and Art, 15 June 1980, typescript, four numbered pages, p 3, KwieKulik archive, author's translation



KwieKulik, *Supermarket*, Stuttgart, 24 October 1981, video still



Artysta robi obiekty, które można nabyć w miejscach do tego przeznaczonych. Artysta produkuje się, co można obejrzeć w miejscach do tego przeznaczonych nabywając bilety. Artysci robią różne projekty które można nabyć. Ale dlaczego by nie można kupić artysty - żywego? I dopiero mając go - żądać. Nadać temu aktowi formę znaną i stosowaną. Artysta staje się wolnym - nie tym, który musi sprzedawać a tym kogo się kupuje. Nie ma wtedy artystów, którzy jeśli nie sprzedają to państwo mówi, że powinno się im pomóc. Relacja: społeczeństwo - artysta zanika, a pojawia się: człowiek - artysta. Kwieka i Kulik będzie można kupić. Dzisiaj, tj. 11 III 85 w godz. 18 - 20 i 12 III w godz. 11-14 przyjmujemy zamówienia. Cena 5000 zł dziennie za 2 osoby /ok. 8 godz./. Zakres czynności które możemy wykonywać - dowolny, oczywiście z wyjątkiem realizacji życzeń o charakterze ekscesów, uwłaczających godności i zdrowiu.

KWIEK  
KULIK



KwieKulik, *To Buy an Artist*, Pracownia Dziekanka, Warsaw, 11 March 1985, digital collage of the scanned slide and the text pasted from a text file, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

Throughout the 1980s KwieKulik made performances which commented upon general issues of ideology and politics, the severe crisis in the Polish economy, shortage of goods and a high exchange rate that made it impossible for Polish citizens to buy merchandise in what appeared to be the consumer paradise of Western capitalist countries. The latter issue became the subject matter of *Supermarket*, a video performance shot in 1981 in Stuttgart. The video shows KwieKulik in a German supermarket, where they are compulsively packing goods into a trolley. After discussing the choice and realising how extremely expensive the goods are due to the high exchange rate of the West German mark to the Polish zloty, they are shown putting them back onto the shop shelves. Having repeated this activity several times with different products, they leave without buying anything.

KwieKulik were also soon to experience the benefits of the high exchange rate in their personal lives too. At the beginning of 1982, on Kulik's initiative, the artists bought an old house in Łomianki, a small village near Warsaw, and decided to move out of the city. As the building was in a very bad condition, they started to renovate it, mostly on their own, which was to engage them for the next few years. This new occupation, together with the distance from Warsaw informed their decision to cease producing potboiler work. They also knew they would be able to make their living and renovate the house thanks to support from a family member. Throughout the 1980s KwieKulik were getting US dollars from Kulik's mother who had emigrated to the USA in search of work. Selling the foreign currency on the black market in Poland created a source of income that allowed KwieKulik to finally withdraw from their 'co-operation' with PSP.

## In Search of an Alternative Artistic Economy

At the turn of 1985 and 1986, being in a situation of relative financial security, the artists made three performances in which they reflected on alternative methods for securing financial support or payment for experimental art practices. All the presentations took place at Pracownia Dziekanka (Dziekanka Studio) in Warsaw. The first, entitled *To Buy an Artist*, was shown in March 1985. KwieKulik sat on chairs in front of the public, with panels on their chests that declared they were 'for hire'. The idea was further explained in the text that was projected above their heads. It proposed that instead of producing objects that could be sold, or actions that could be paid for, the artist themselves could be bought:

The artists make various projects that can be bought. But why couldn't you buy a living artist? And then, having them, make demands?... The artist becomes free – not someone who has to sell but someone who is bought. Then there are no artists who – if they do not sell – are told by the state that they should receive aid. The relationship between the society and the artist disappears and the one between the human being and the artist emerges.<sup>20</sup>

20 See Kwiek, 'Artistic Money', in Ronduda and Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, p 392, translation modified by the author

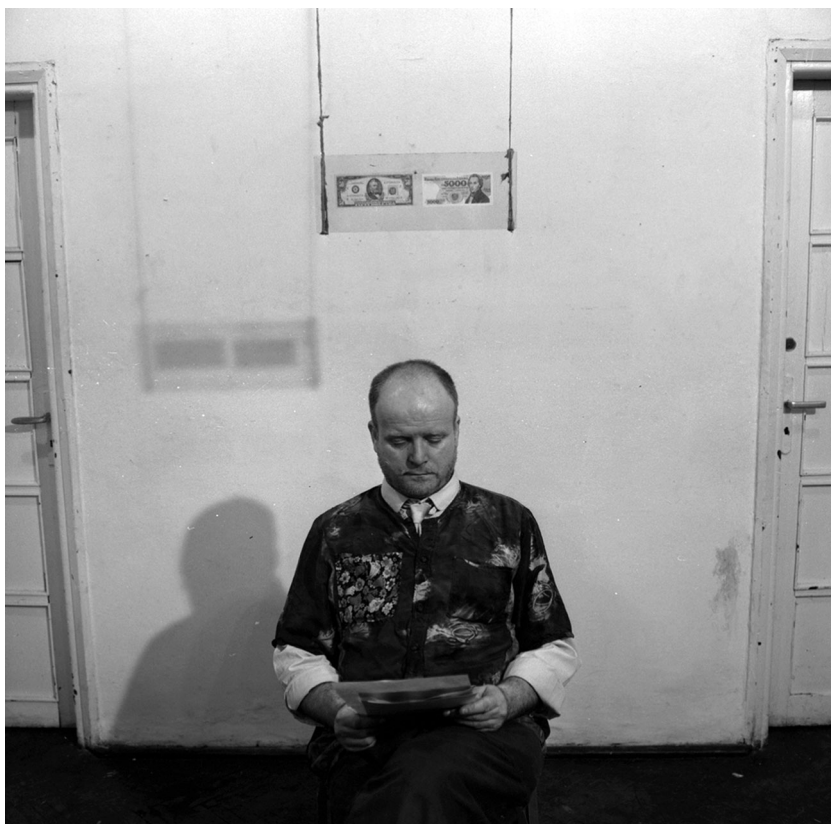
On the one hand, by offering themselves for hire – the price of five thousand zlotys for two people per day was equivalent to eight working



KwieKulik, *Equivalent in Money*, film stills documenting the action of giving money to the guests who came to the KwieKulik performance, Pracownia Dziekanka, Warsaw, 17 November 1986, photo: KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

hours – KwieKulik seemed to be creating a powerful performative metaphor for their stupefying experience of ‘being sold’ to PSP and of waiting for commissions. This meaning was also suggested by the fact that during their presentation, the artists played an audio recording titled *Idiot*. A voiceover described three portraits: Zofia Kulik as ‘An Idiot Woman’, Przemysław Kwiek as ‘An Idiot Man’ and their son Maksymilian – who often accompanied his parents during their potboiler work – as ‘A Dolt’. On the other hand, the artists seemed to be going beyond this bitter irony and trying to imagine a different solution to the problem of financing experimental art. What they proposed at this stage, though, amounted to a rather traditional vision of a personal relationship and a private commercial exchange between an artist and an individual who demands the creation of a particular, most likely non-experimental art form.

The second performance, *Equivalent in Money*, was shown in November 1985. Initially, KwieKulik had planned to make a different presentation (*Poetisation of Pragmatics*) and had already sent out the invitations for this. Having realised that all the shows they had been doing were at their own cost, they felt resigned and decided not to appear in the gallery. They sent Kwiek’s brother Paweł instead, who apologised to the public and offered them financial compensation, the eponymous ‘equivalent in money’, for the non-performed performance. The final situation, apparently absurd, and yet witty and poetic, seemed to suggest that every artistic act, even one that was experimental and



Przemysław Kwiek preparing his speech about *Artistic Money*, documentation made before the guests arrived, Pracownia Dziekanka, Warsaw, 26 November 1986, photo KwieKulik Archive, courtesy of Zofia Kulik

performative, had a certain financial value and, therefore, its creator should be remunerated.

A further meaning of the act was revealed two weeks later, during the third performance, entitled *Artistic Money*. It made references to the earlier presentations and turned the whole series into a coherent narrative. Kwiek was seated at the end of a pathway formed by stands with paper bags that resembled human faces. Above him, there were two banknotes, fifty US dollars (a huge sum of money in Poland in the mid-1980s) and five thousand zlotys, exhibited between two panes of glass. He read out a text which presented KwieKulik's concept of 'artistic currency'. It began with the premise that artists could be financially compensated for their artistic practice, and yet remain free to do what they want in their art, only on the condition that they buy their own art. By paying for their own art, they would be changing 'casual currency' into 'artistic currency'. This means, however, that their own work, commissioned by themselves, was not

remunerated. How can you get money for your own remuneration? You have to work in order to work, ie, capitalise on 'casual' work or 'marketable' art to remunerate yourself for your own free work... 'Artistic currency' acquired from 'casual' work would have a two-fold sense: of the



money earned in a casual way in order to become later, with your own free work, the equivalent [of the work], ie 'artistic currency'.<sup>21</sup>

Dividing one's career into making socially accepted works which allowed one to earn money and spending the money on freely-created experimental art was exactly what KwieKulik had been forced to practise for years but they never considered it a viable option. Moreover, this negative necessity was symbolically enacted during the earlier performance *Equivalent in Money*. Referring back to this event, Kwiek pointed out that they had managed then to transform – while, unfortunately, spending it – a huge sum of 'casual money' into 'artistic money'. The banknotes presented during the third performance served as evidence and residue of that transformation.

If spending one's 'casual money' on experimental art did not seem to be a plausible option, then the only remaining solution was:

to 'print' 'artistic currency', eg in the form of a piece of paper with the inscription 'artistic currency' and use these papers as shares, for the sake of future work... The buyer would have to pay for something that he wouldn't receive, only for the paper that would be equal in value to the artist's 'working for themselves'... The buyer would then pay not for the 'marketability' and enslavement, but for the artist's unrestricted liberty. The buyer would become the artist's shareholder... The buyer would become the co-owner of the idea of 'working for oneself'... the new definition of patronage would define it as 'looking after the freedom performed by another person'.<sup>22</sup>

This meditation bears a striking resemblance to the famous passage on commodity fetishism in *Capital*, where Karl Marx analyses the change of a trivial everyday thing and its use-value into a commodity with exchange value.<sup>23</sup> This being the case, what Kwiek proposed would amount to a displacement and reversal of the analysis in *Capital*. Kwiek elevated the description of a useful casual thing turned into an exchangeable commodity onto a different level and applied it to the money itself; hence his idea of 'casual currency' turning into 'artistic currency'. At the same time, he gave his vision of the patron-shareholder who was to pay for and look after the freedom performed by the artist an apparently emancipatory and slightly utopian twist. He seemed – or possibly pretended – to believe that the market, along with competent, risk-taking businessmen who would be ready to invest in unrestricted artistic freedom and wait for highly uncertain future profits, was the solution to the problem of financing experimental art.

This notion dated back to the late 1970s. In 1977 KwieKulik wrote 'Our Comments on the East and the West', a text in which they compared conditions of artistic production and political economies on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Among other things, they provocatively reproached Western artists for their critique of business in art:

One feels like saying: why complain about business in art? Be happy that you have the hope that your art will be bought one day and that will enable you to keep on living and making art. Be happy – business in art

21 See Kwiek, 'Artistic Money', *ibid*, p 392

22 See *ibid*, translation modified by the author

23 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I*, Ben Fowkes, trans, Penguin Books and *New Left Review*, London, 1976, pp 163–177. What is more, certain figures and phrases used by Kwiek suggest that Marx's analysis might have been a direct source of inspiration for him. This concerns, above all, the immaterial and non-sensible nature of the respective changes described in both texts. As is well known, Marx argues that in order to describe the commodity, an analogy must be sought in 'the misty realm of religion', see p 165. Therefore, a commodity is for him a thing that 'transcends sensuousness', has a certain 'enigmatic', 'mysterious' and 'mystical character', and generally abounds in 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties', see pp 163–165. Analogically, elsewhere in his text Kwiek described the change of 'casual currency' into 'artistic currency' in terms of 'a theoretical transformation', compared it to the religious transfiguration of wine into God's blood and also spoke of the 'metaphysical appearance' of 'artistic currency' – Kwiek, 'Artistic Money', in Ronduda and Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik*, *op cit*, p 392.

accelerates the moments of social consent to the new art. Is business in art not better than a constant division between a) making art and b) earning one's living + earning to finance one's art + earning to finance its distribution? Do you want to live off hairdressing or be a clerk? Or do you want full state support? This requires competent and risk-taking officials, that is, officials that keep up with artists. That is certainly utopian.<sup>24</sup>

And yet, equally utopian was the hope that the market would 'keep up with' artists, financially support their experimental art, accelerate its social acceptance and finally lead to the dissolution of the division of labour between earning one's living and making 'private' artistic works. It is the precarious condition of contemporary artists, not only in Poland but all around the world, which proves that this hope will never be matched in the reality of a neoliberal capitalist society.

24 Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, 'Our Comments on the East and the West', in Ronduda and Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, p 446, translation modified by the author

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# Exhibition as Diplomatic Tool

## The Search for Artist Solidarity For László Beke

Zsuzsa László

### The Culture of the Seventies: A Conservative Turn and Prevailing Hope

1 The New Economic Mechanism introduced decentralisation and market considerations in Hungary in 1968 to balance central planning and make state firms more profitable.

2 This was a clear reference to Rudi Dutschke's slogan or Antonio Gramsci, who both suggested changing the system from within by replacing conservative cultural elites.

3 Ákos Szilágyi, 'Két szék között, a pad alatt', in András Veres, *A hetvenes évek kultúrája*, Balassi, Budapest, 2002, pp 13–31

4 A semi-public venue run by the Communist Youth League. Its programme in the first half of the seventies included conceptual exhibition and performative events that presented neo-avant-garde artists from both socialist and capitalist countries.

5 László Beke, (comment to the debate), in Veres, *A hetvenes évek kultúrája*, op cit, p 93

At the conference on the 'Culture of the Seventies' held at the Club of Young Artists in 1980 (10–12 April) in Budapest, Ákos Szilágyi, a Hungarian poet and literary historian described this decade in terms of a conservative turn following the disillusionment from the revolutionary hopes of 1968. He described the seventies as the era of the Gulag shock and that of the shallow affluence of the New Economic Mechanism,<sup>1</sup> when the revolutionary spirit withdrew to a 'long march' through institutions and culture.<sup>2</sup> He also mentions that developing from the peace and love of the hippies this decade brought about the aggression of punk and terrorism, instead of the radicalism of Herbert Marcuse and Che Guevara, private life and irony is valorised in the shadow of catastrophe. Szilágyi spoke from a generational point of view, demonstrating a kind of individualist independence of East European dissident intelligentsia, but with the intention to avoid the supposition of an unbiased, off-handed world-consciousness.<sup>3</sup> At this conference the representatives of various spheres of culture ranging from Party leaders through employees of state institutions, to members of the democratic opposition, as well as dissidents, were able to exchange their evaluations of the period in the semi-public context of the Club of Young Artists.<sup>4</sup> László Beke, art historian and curator, protagonist of the neo-avant-garde art of the seventies, also in the above-mentioned conference, claimed – with nostalgia – that in the 1970s art was considered to be the only chance.<sup>5</sup> This confrontation was pivotal as socialism's compromise with more liberal economic policies was counterbalanced by a more controlled and doctrinaire cultural politics

compared to that of the 1960s, and as a result the disparity between official and parallel culture looked wider than ever.<sup>6</sup>

The neoconservative turn of the seventies in Hungary was not just a vague spirit of the times as it might seem, but correlates to some particular, local and global political processes that are worth a brief survey. After the 1956 revolution, a gradual burgeoning of cultural life occurred in Hungary, in line with the Khrushchev Thaw experienced in the whole Soviet Bloc. Intellectuals were reconciled with the state, a Marxist renaissance began with the rehabilitation of György Lukács and substantial state support of moderate modernist art and science, which only needed to avoid certain taboos. The cultural life of this period was defined by György Aczél who held various leadership positions from the early sixties until 1974 and introduced the policy of the 'Three Ts' dividing cultural activities into Supported (*Támogatott*), Tolerated (*Tűrt*), and Prohibited (*Tiltott*) categories, and initiated more opportunities for artistic independence. This prolific process was halted first in the late sixties as a result of Leonid Brezhnev's anti-reform policies, rising anti-Semitism in Soviet countries as a result of the Six-Day War (5–10 June 1967), and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, just to mention a few factors. Later in the seventies economic stagnation heightened divisions within the public sphere, and the detachment of parallel, self-organised culture, which still relied heavily on state-institutions but distanced itself from the ideological doctrines of the state.<sup>7</sup>

6 Parallel culture is used mainly as synonymous to underground, sub-, counter-, alternative- or non-official culture, and correlates with the wider concept of 'second publicity' but it suggests a less hierarchical approach not defined in opposition to the mass/official/state-run culture but by similar structures and parallel existence. Parallelism was also an important concept in the practice of Tamás Szentjóbby who regarded art as such a parallel reality in which the unjust hierarchies of the existing world can be freely subverted.

7 For the most comprehensive description of the cultural politics in Hungary including the neoconservative turn from the late sixties/early seventies see Péter Agárdi, 'Közelítések a Kádár-korszak művelődéspolitikájának történetéhez' [1993], in Agárdi and Páky Viktória, eds, *Művelődéstörténeti szöveggyűjtemény II/2* (1945–1990), JPTE, Pécs, pp 711–747; see also Melinda Kalmár, 'An Attempt at Optimization: The Reform Model in Culture, 1965–1973', in György Péteri, ed, *The Sixties in Hungary*, Trondheim University, 2005, pp 53–82.

## Histories of Exhibitions: A Chronology of Artist Solidarity

Art, and more precisely art events nevertheless provided a regular opportunity for salvaging revolutionary attitude and old or new leftist commitments to fight social injustice, exploitation and colonialism, and to emancipate disadvantaged social or ethnic groups, not only for dissident leftist intellectuals of Hungary, but also for state-officials. Hence the approach of exhibition history is highly relevant for unpacking the complex network of official and non-official cultural and artistic positions of this time and to gain a better understanding of how these contested spheres of cultural practices were developed and related to each other. Since the late nineteenth century exhibitions have primarily been sites for the mobilisation of attention and public discussion. Exhibitions and the history of exhibitions establish the public and political potential of art in a different way to the history of art. The narratives of exhibition history are not based on oeuvres and objects of art but on particular events that potentially capture, concentrate and conserve the complexities of their historical moment. It is a history of situations, rather than isolated objects or personalities. The mapping of this territory has a great potential to go beyond the already established histories that are written by powerful institutions and the art market. The history of exhibitions is more sensitive to the interactions between artistic production and its political context, where exhibitions as social events can serve as sites of critical reflection, intervention and the emergence of political consciousness. These issues have a special significance within the historical and geographical



8 I have been researching exhibition history in the framework of tranzit.hu's project 'Parallel Chronologies' that was realised in the form of exhibitions, publications and an online archive of art events presented as chronologies compiled by curators researching different East European art scenes; see Parallel Chronologies: An Archive of East European Exhibitions; <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/>, accessed 28 May 2018.

9 Between the 1920s and 1940s Hincz was a member of international modernist avant-garde artist groups like Der Sturm, and the Kézsművészek Új Társasága (New Society of Artists) (KUT, 1924–1950), the most important interwar modernist group in Hungary. After World War II Hincz became a director of the Academy of Applied Arts and followed more conventional realist pathways. He made more study trips to China, Korea and Vietnam (1947–1948), but never travelled to Arab countries. From the 1950s he worked as a popular illustrator of literature, had several mural commissions and elaborated a moderately modernist artistic language of socialist humanism. He represented Hungary in the Venice Biennial in 1960 and 1970. Hincz had no personal relation to the Palestinian cause on the basis of the information gained from publications, national archives, his family and art historians who research his work. His etching *Peace* was most probably sent to Beirut through diplomatic channels.

10 Research on Cold War cultural politics is predominantly focused on case studies from the fifties and sixties, for instance David Caute discusses 'An Exhibition of Works by Russian and Soviet Artists', London, 1 January – 1 March 1959 at the Royal Academy of Arts,

context of 'Eastern Europe' that is no longer a geographical, but rather a historical denomination in itself, referring to the Cold War era.<sup>8</sup>

Art historical and curatorial research of the 1990s and 2000s focused mainly on East European art practices that lacked an institutional background, whereas the infrastructure of state socialist art institutions actually constituted a very powerful system. There are several examples which demonstrate that on the one hand the *modus operandi* of these state-run art institutions was not so disconnected from that of the parallel culture, while on the other, their educational, international and political missions are still relevant, even if the artworks instrumentalised for these purposes might now appear to be stylistic dead-ends of art history. One seemingly commonplace example for such an instrumental artwork utilised for the cultural diplomacy of Cold War Hungary is the 'Peace' series of Gyula Hincz (1904–1986), which I would like to pose as a case study for state-organised artist solidarity.<sup>9</sup> The work addresses a topic, peace and solidarity, which from a vital mission in the early 1950s became an omnipresent, empty and universalist slogan, but still remained intriguing and unavoidable for artists and intellectuals active in the parallel culture.

I present here a chronology of exhibitions and related public and political events centred around the theme of peace and solidarity, transcending the ideological or rhetoric opposition so often drawn between state- and self-organised culture. Though capitalist countries also heavily utilised cultural events for political purposes,<sup>10</sup> this article aims at a micro history, a genealogy of the iconography of peace and artists' solidarity within the cultural scene of Hungary – taking into account its actual international relations – rather than presenting a far-reaching global account of the cultural diplomacy of the Cold War era. I also attempt to demonstrate how the approach of exhibition history can be used to gain a better understanding of cultural events as intersections between artistic concepts and social-historical-political situations. In this sense, instead of reconstructing individual artistic intentions, I will focus on the dialectic constellation of various different artistic and institutional positions that are pertinent to the discussed art events.

## Peace and Cultural Freedom

In the international communist Peace movement that emerged after World War II, culture and art played a key role. The movement started with the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace in 1948 (25–28 August), in Wrocław, with the participation of Mulk Raj Anand, Louis Aragon, Bertolt Brecht, Béla Czóbel, Ilya Ehrenburg, Paul Éluard, Renato Guttuso, Aldous Huxley, György Lukács, Pablo Picasso and among others, as well as Alexander Fadeyev the head of the Soviet delegation. In his keynote speech the latter attacked modernism with his famous pejorative simile comparing T S Eliot, John Roderigo Dos Passos, Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux to literate hyenas and jackals.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the congress's commitment to modernism was obvious in view of the accompanying exhibition, 'Recovered Territories' featuring modernist utopian architecture and design.<sup>12</sup> The massive support given to the Soviet-friendly World Council of Peace (1949–) by

HUNGARY / هنغاريا

INDIA / الهند



57 — Gyula HINCZ  
« War No 1 Peace No 1 »  
Etching 30 × 27 cm

٥٧ - جيولا هينش  
الحرب رقم ١ السلام رقم ١  
حفر ٢٠ × ٥٧ سم



58 — Krishna REDDY  
« Plants » Etching 34 × 44 cm

٥٨ - كريشنا ريدي  
« نباتات »  
حفر ٣٤ × ٤٤ سم



Gyula Hincz, *Emlék a XXII. pártkongresszusról* (Memory of the XXII Party Congress), 1962, poster, private collection





Picasso  
CONGRÈS MONDIAL  
DES PARTISANS  
DE LA PAIX

SALLE PLEYEL  
20·21·22 ET 23 AVRIL 1949  
PARIS

Poster of the World Peace Congress, Paris, 1949 with the reproduction of Pablo Picasso's lithograph, *Dove*



exhibitions of American art touring in Europe, and the 'New Reality' exhibition at Manezh, Moscow, 1962 as example exhibitions with cultural and diplomatic, and not so much political/foreign intelligence missions: see Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.

- 11 On the debate on Modernism in the Wrocław Congress, see Kingsley Martin's report on Fadeyev's speech: 'Hyenas and Other Reptiles', *New Statesman and Nation* 36, 4 September 1948, pp 187–188; and on Picasso and Fadeyev see Caute, *The Dancer Defects*, op cit, pp 575–576.
- 12 Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, 'Modernism between Peace and Freedom: Picasso and Others at the Congress of Intellectuals in Wrocław, 1948', in David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds, *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*, V&A Publishing, London, 2008, pp 41–43
- 13 The International Peace Bureau was founded in 1891; between 1949 and 1964 its name was the International Liaison Committee of Organisations for Peace.
- 14 On the activity of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its relation to modernism and engaged art, see Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe*, Free Press, New York and Collier Macmillan, London, 1989; and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, New Press, New York, 1999. The claims of Saunders regarding CCF collaboration with the CIA are however exaggerated

prominent figures of the post-World War II intelligentsia could hardly be countered by its capitalist counterpart, the International Peace Bureau.<sup>13</sup> The real Western opposition to the cultural support of the socialist peace movement endorsed by the most prominent artists of the Cold War period was the anti-communist Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF, 1950–1979) with the backing of renowned artists and intellectuals, like Alfred H Barr, Benedetto Croce, John Dewey, Clement Greenberg, Karl Jaspers, Arthur Koestler and Bertrand Russell. It supported avant-gardism merely to prove the cultural supremacy of Western liberal democracies and objected to the ideological constraints on artistic expression in the Soviet-controlled countries. The Congress – taking into account its affiliation with the CIA – established a paradoxical discourse of cultural freedom, ie non-engagement of culture with Jazz ambassadors, Radio Free Europe, and touring exhibitions. CCF showed similar hypocrisy regarding the support of civil rights struggles in order to gain more influence in the Third World Solidarity institutions in Soviet countries.<sup>14</sup>

The ambivalent and geopolitically changing relationship between engaged art and modernism can be graphically exemplified by the evolution and transfiguration of the iconography of peace and solidarity from the peace doves to situational exercises on otherness. Notwithstanding the Zhdanov Doctrine, prescribing socialist realism as the only acceptable art in Soviet countries, it was Picasso, the superstar of modernism and member of the French Communist Party, who was the author of the visual identity of the peace movement, which was based on the various transfiguration of his dove.<sup>15</sup> This symbolism of a dove, originating from antiquity and Christian iconography,<sup>16</sup> was for a time a successful compromise, a kind of 'popular front' strategy between the need for plain, straightforward, proudly tendentiously symbolism of the universalistic socialist humanism and the desire of the consolidated state socialisms of the 1960s to enlist Western modernist intelligentsia.

The 'Peace' series was made by Hincz during the 1950s and consists of lineal etchings combining a female profile and a dove with and without a five-pointed star – in very similar decorative, neoclassical but somewhat less cartoonist style as the peace doves Picasso made in the late fifties and early sixties.<sup>17</sup> With intriguing parallels to the diplomatic use of Picasso's *Dove of Peace*, the iconography of peace applied by Hincz was also utilised and also undermined in very different contexts from the fifties till the early eighties, again and again echoing the same dilemma existing between formalism and engaged art. This dilemma was still present as late as 1978, when Hincz's *Peace* was exhibited in Beirut at the 'International Art Exhibition for Palestine' (Beirut Arab University, 21 March – 5 April). From the perspective of this art event the story of this work gains a new significance.

## A Solidarity Exhibition

The 1978 the Beirut exhibition was organised by leftist artists in Western Europe, along with some artists living in exile from Arab and South American countries, who shared an anti-imperialist commitment to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).<sup>18</sup> It presented nearly 200 artists from thirty countries, mostly from Europe – France, Italy, Spain,

according to Cauter, *The Dancer Defects*, op cit, pp 540–553. On CCF's relation to the Third World, see Harm Langenkamp: '(Dis)Connecting Cultures, Creating Dreamworlds: Musical 'East-West' Diplomacy in the Cold War and the War on Terror', in Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith and Joes Segal, eds, *Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, University of Chicago Press, 2012, pp 219–226.

- 15 *The Dove of Peace* (1949) was initially a depiction of a real dove which Henri Matisse had given to Picasso, and it was Louis Aragon who chose Picasso's lithograph to be used for the World Peace Congress in Paris in 1949. On Picasso's participation in the peace congress see, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, 'Modernism between Peace and Freedom', op cit, pp 34–43, and on his reception in Eastern Europe see: Piotr Bernatowicz, 'Picasso behind the Iron Curtain: From the History of the Postwar Reception of Pablo Picasso in East-Central Europe', in Jerome Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, eds, *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)*, Central European University Press, 2016, pp 151–164. Up until his death in 1973 Picasso produced many variations for the posters and publications of each peace congress, held in Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Vienna, Rome and Moscow. He also combined a female face with the dove – in a similar way and at a similar time as Hincz – in the illustrations made for Paul Eluard's volume, *Le visage de la paix*, Editions Cercle d'Art, Paris, 1951.

- 16 Picasso was not the first artist to use a dove as a symbol of peace outside the Christian context and in the political realm; it featured in John Heartfield's (1891–

Denmark, the German Federal Republic, Poland, Romania, Hungary, the USSR – Latin-America, Japan and the Arab world. Whereas the artists from Western Europe and the Middle East were recruited through self-organised networks, the artworks from Eastern Europe were mediated through official cultural diplomacy. In the Beirut exhibition the expression of solidarity had two distinct pathways: one with agitational imagery depicting human suffering or the struggle for freedom – but the only peace dove and five-pointed star was by Hincz, the other by the donation of an artwork disregarding its form and theme, with only a potential to project onto it any related meaning or sentiment. The first approach was represented by many less well-known artists, with only one established artist, Renato Guttuso, the second by such figures as Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies (Spain), or Julio Le Parc (Argentina). There were a few examples of works that were less targeted at making an emotional appeal but conveyed instead a clearly political message. Joan Rabascall – originally from Barcelona, but in exile in France since 1962 from the Francoist regime – as well Ernest Pignon-Ernest, and the Coopérative des Malassis – representatives of 'Nouveau Réalisme' – participated with satirical or subversive montages of popular and press imagery, for example juxtaposing photos of nuclear bombs and advertising images of blatant sexual appeal.

The exhibition was conceived as a travelling museum in exile inspired by another artistic solidarity movement,<sup>19</sup> one supporting Salvador Allende and protesting against the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.<sup>20</sup> It had gathered valuable artworks – by artists like Alexander Calder, Lygia Clark, Pierre Soulages, Frank Stella, Victor Vasarely, Wolf Vostell, and Joan Miró who also gave work for the Palestine solidarity exhibition. Allende was also supported by travelling Ramona Parra Brigade painters,<sup>21</sup> who created several mobilising murals with expressive figurative and symbolic iconography throughout the world and also in Eastern Europe, including Hungary, addressing the ordinary passer-by with a direct artistic message.<sup>22</sup> These Chilean muralists also participated in the Belgrade Week of Latin America organised by the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) in 1977, where conceptualist 'new artistic practices' reigned. On this occasion, despite the fact that SKC embraced a self-organised version of the Yugoslav state's Third Worldism and participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, the conceptual artists defining the programme of the Centre distanced themselves from 'explicit political activism' and 'traditional pictorial expression'.<sup>23</sup>

The tension between different interpretations of artistic engagement, ie expressing solidarity with the subject matter or rhetoric, or by the donation of an artwork (of commercial value and/or by an artist of high professional reputation), was raised in the discussions and reviews connected to the Palestine exhibition in Beirut. Hincz's etching in this context in 1978 was anachronous both in its old-fashioned format and neoclassical symbolism. He elaborated an artistic language of a universalistic, not stylistically but ideologically abstract socialist humanism that lacked the specific personal commitment of genuine solidarity but the work functioned rather as a wild card that could be utilised in very different contexts (see footnote 17). This question takes us to the heart of the problem of how the socialist states of Eastern Europe related and

1968) famous photo montage *The Meaning of Geneva, Where Capital Lives, There Can Be No Peace*, in the Workers' Illustrated newspaper, *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, (AIZ), Berlin, 27 November 1932.

- 17 The prints of the series – now in the collection of the Hungarian National Gallery and the Gyula Hincz Collection, (Pannónia Ház, Vác) – bear various titles in different publications like: *Star*, *Woman with Dove, Peace!*, the same piece as the one exhibited in Beirut in 1978 was also published in 1964 as an illustration to Lajos Kassák's poem *Kívívott békeesség* (Peace Worked Out), and a similar motif was incorporated in Hincz's poster *Emlék a XXII. pártkongresszusról* (Memory of the XXII Party Congress) (1962) with a globe and a spaceship added, and was presented at the exhibition 'Hungarian Artists Against Fascism' 1965 (Galerie Nationale Hongroise, Budapest), discussed later – in this case without a five-pointed star.

- 18 The history of this exhibition was uncovered by the research of Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri and was presented in a series of exhibitions: 'Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978' by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) in 2015 (20 February – 31 May), and in 2016 (19 March – 9 May) in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, and as 'Cartography of Artist Solidarity: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978' in tranzit.hu, Budapest (2 June – 2 September) that same year. See Eszter Szakács, 'A Form of Contemporary Resistance: An interview

expressed solidarity in relation to the struggles of the 'Third World' and the proxy wars of the Cold War era.

## Second and Third World Others

Hungary, as part of the anti-imperialist movement, officially endorsed anti-colonialism and national self-determination of so called 'developing countries', as well as the Palestinian cause.<sup>24</sup> The Third World was an imperative topic for dissident intellectuals too, and this can help define our understanding of the interconnectedness of the different cultural scenes of this period. Solidarity with anticolonial movements was sometimes just a cynical pretext in order to avoid censorship, however the local New Left instead rivalled the authorities in expressing solidarity with the Third World with less bureaucratic and more revolutionary means. Dissidents either affiliated with the New Left or not, saw the Soviet power in Eastern Europe as a form of colonialisation, and identified with Third World liberation struggles on these grounds too.<sup>25</sup> From today's postcolonial perspective, it is clear that the Otherness of Eastern Europeans in relation to the West was in many cases reiterated in manifold mimicries towards the Third World.<sup>26</sup>

## Institutions of Art and Solidarity

In Hungary as well as in other state socialist countries there were several state organisations whose mission was to institutionalise the peace movement and relations with the Third World, such as the National Peace Council (1950–1990), the Solidarity Committee (1962–1990), and the Institute of Cultural Relations (1949–1990). They all co-ordinated their activities closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Patriotic People's Front (1954–1990), which was a grass roots social organisation that facilitated broad mass participation in regime policies and aimed to address fellow traveller non-party members. From the horrors of World War II and fascism the focus of the local peace movement gradually shifted to the Korean and Vietnam wars and was transformed to a sensitivity for, and solidarity with, the independence struggles of the so-called Third World, and the friendship of nations. Later they also endorsed disarmament campaigns of the seventies and eighties (not to mention micro-scale applications in political rhetoric about well-being, a safer future and private happiness).

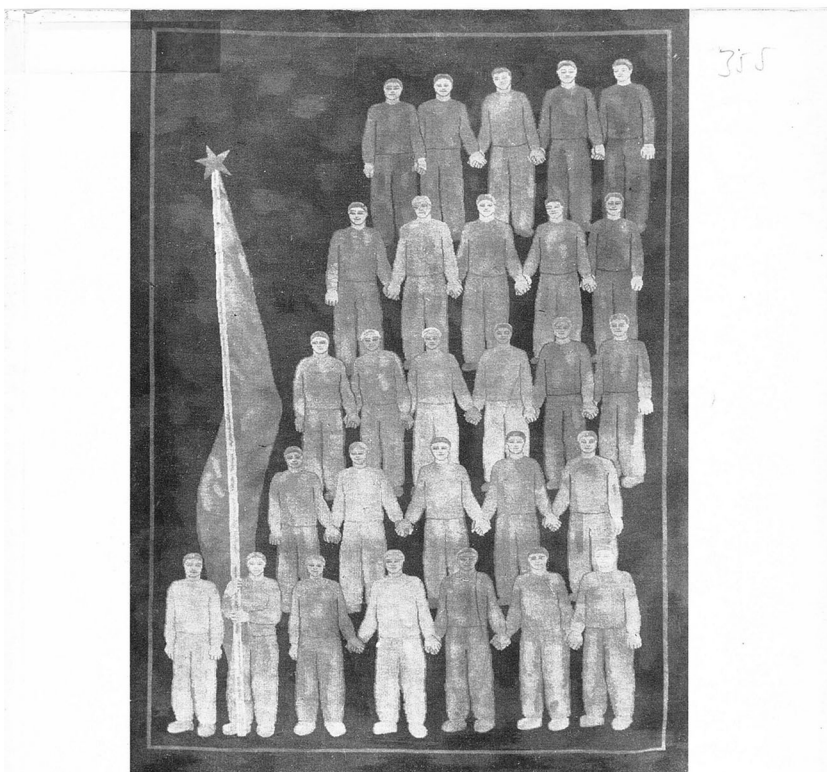
The Institute of Cultural Relations was an important and thus far under-researched example of cultural institutions established in the Soviet system.<sup>27</sup> It was established in 1949 in order to centralise, supervise and co-ordinate foreign cultural relations, in which several artist unions, state and mass organisations were involved.<sup>28</sup> It had departments for each world region as well as one focusing on organising exhibitions, trade shows and artist exchanges. The Institute was responsible for cultural co-operation schemes with friendly as well as with capitalist countries, scholarships given to foreign students, exporting 'national' exhibitions including trade shows, and participation in international congresses, such as those convened by UNESCO. It operated an exhibition

with Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti', *Mezosfera*, 22 July 2016, <http://mezosfera.org/a-form-of-contemporary-resistance/>, accessed 28 May 2018.

19 This is the interpretation given by Claude Lazar, a French participant of the exhibition, when interviewed by Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti in the context of the project *Past Disquiet* (see footnote 18). Lazar was a member of the *Salon de la Jeune Peinture* group and a close friend of Ezzedine Kalak, the PLO's representative in Paris, and one of the organisers of the 1978 Beirut exhibition.

20 The movement begun during Salvador Allende's presidency (1970–1973) when Allende sent a worldwide call to artists to support his 'Operation Truth' by donating artworks to a museum of a new democratic Chile. With the help of such figures as Mario Pedrosa and Harald Szeemann, the museum received more than 500 artworks until 1973, when a military junta led by Pinochet seized power. During the Pinochet era (1973–1990) the collection was taken abroad and functioned as a museum in exile propagating resistance against the dictatorship in Chile. Museo de la Solidaridad of Salvador Allende in Santiago has one of the most extensive collections of modern art in Latin America with 2,650 works in its collection.

21 Brigadas Ramona Parra started their activity in 1968 in Chile. Inspired by Mexican muralismo, students and workers created mural paintings throughout Chile promoting social justice and human rights. After the coup d'état Chilean exiles continued this practice across Europe, forming brigades with local artists. Brigades participated in the Venice biennial in 1974 and documenta 6 in 1977.



## A MAGYAR KÉPZŐMŰVÉSZEK A FASIZMUS ELLEN

Cover of the exhibition catalogue *A Magyar képzőművészek a faszizmus ellen / Les artistes hongrois contre le fascisme*, with Noémi Ferenczi's *Demonstrators* (1950)

space from 1955 onwards right below its offices in Dorottya street, downtown Budapest. In this small gallery there were fifteen exhibitions focussing on and in tribute to Vietnam and eight about Korea, with several others reporting on Mongolian, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Afghan, Argentine, Cuban, Chilean, Mexican and Peruvian art, every-day life and political struggles. It also presented artists from Western Europe, Hungarian artists living abroad and local artists acting within the realm of tolerated art.<sup>29</sup>

### 'Hungarian Artists against Fascism'

There were also several larger scale exhibitions that were preoccupied with the theme of peace and solidarity. Most notably, in 1965, the National Gallery presented the exhibition 'Hungarian Artists Against Fascism', with 250 contemporary and historical works, on the occasion of the Buda-



- 22 The *Heves Megyei Népiújság* (12 September 1976, p 1) and the *Petőfi Népe* (17 September 1976, p 8) – both county dailies, published reports on the visit of the Ramona Parra painter brigades in 1976 in Baja and in Eger (towns in Hungary).
  - 23 See Jelena Vesić, 'The Week of Latin America: Murals by Salvador Allende (Ramona Parra) Brigades – 'Non-Aligned' Street Art', Parallel Chronologies, tranzit.hu; see <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/the-week-of-latin-america-murals-by-salvador-allende-ramona-para-brigades-non-aligned-street-art/>, accessed 28 May 2018.
  - 24 In 1975 when the PLO established an office in Budapest. In addition to the shared anti-imperialist, anti-fascist convictions, the collaboration and engagement with the PLO instigated sophisticated and vivid debates on interpretations of communism, democracy, national self-determination, socialist economy, the emancipatory and political potential of culture and militant art. As part of this co-operation, the Budapest Museum of Ethnography hosted an itinerant Palestine folk art exhibition in 1978. Yasser Arafat, the PLO's Executive Committee Chairman, travelled to Budapest to attend the exhibition's opening and engage in diplomatic exchanges with János Kádár, the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.
  - 25 David Chioni Moore, 'Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Towards a Global Postcolonial Critique', in Violeta Kelertas, ed, *Baltic Postcolonialism: On the Boundary of Two Worlds – Identity, Freedom and Moral Imagination in the Baltics*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2006, pp 11–43.
  - 26 Larry Wolff, in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on*
- pest Congress of the Federation of International Resistance (FIR, founded 1951). This exhibition gathered many different artistic positions including Hincz's *Peace* prints from the 1950s. Another notable work by Hincz the *Friendship of Peoples*, a tapestry made in 1956, was also presented. On the cover of the catalogue Noémi Ferenczi's (1890–1957, former member of modernist interwar KUT group like Hincz) *Demonstrators* (1950) was reproduced.<sup>30</sup> From the younger generation Béla Kondor also participated as well as Dóra Maurer and László Lakner, who later became important neo-avant-garde artists of the parallel culture. Dóra Maurer participated with etchings in a rather surrealistic figurative style made (in order to make a living) on topics from the history of the Workers' Movement,<sup>31</sup> assigned by factory party-committees. Lakner presented *Saigon* a painting 'blatantly' influenced by Pop Art, (c 1968) expressing solidarity with executed Buddhist monks. None of these were reproduced in the catalogue.
- Zsuzsa D Fehér's catalogue introduction addresses the topic of artistic resistance as an emotional attitude, as a kind of fervour that unites revolutionary soldiers and artists. She does not mention any contemporary artists, but discusses the usual iconographic expressions, amongst them that of the dove. The reviews of the exhibition however did not even mention Hincz, and among the contemporaries highlighted Lakner's work as a follower of a different tradition,<sup>32</sup> not the naturalist and post-impressionist origins of social realism, but the avant-garde realism of photo-montages by, among others, John Heartfield.<sup>33</sup> Though this question was not thematised by this exhibition, Lakner's work signals the emergence of a new iconography of solidarity addressing the media-tised nature of images that reported on the proxy wars and protest movements of the sixties. This new artistic approach challenges formal neutral neoclassical humanist realism in relation to human suffering and political urgencies.

## Critique and Mimicry of State Organised Solidarity

In 1966 Miklós Erdély, writing on the war photography of Robert Capa, gave a satirical account of the aggressive voyeurism of Capa's practice.<sup>34</sup> Erdély raises a consideration, that of artistic self-awareness, absent from neoclassical socialist realism: the question of how the creator or beholder of the image personally relates to depicted workers, peasants, revolutionaries, or victims of fascist aggression; how the artist is part of the represented situation and what role they play in it, and what personal/artistic responsibility they have. Erdély acknowledges that Capa's photography, exactly by making these questions so striking, can be a vehicle that 'forces us to recognize our responsibility for ourselves'.<sup>35</sup>

In the late sixties and early seventies, the icon of the dove is replaced by portraits of the heroes of the New Left like Che Guevara and Angela Davis, as well as socio-photography, in the search for fresh methods to regain the mobilising power of artistic solidarity. Young artists associated with the self-organised, and for this very reason persecuted, Vietnam Solidarity Committee formed the Orfeo Group uniting engaged, unequivocal leftist artists looking for new artistic means to convey their social



Anna Komjáthy, (Orfeo Group), *Freedom for Angela Davis*, 1972, poster, collection of the artist

*the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 1994) elaborates on the construction of East Europe as an 'other' using similar travelogues as evidence – as Homi K Bhabha does also when he develops such concepts as mimicry in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994.

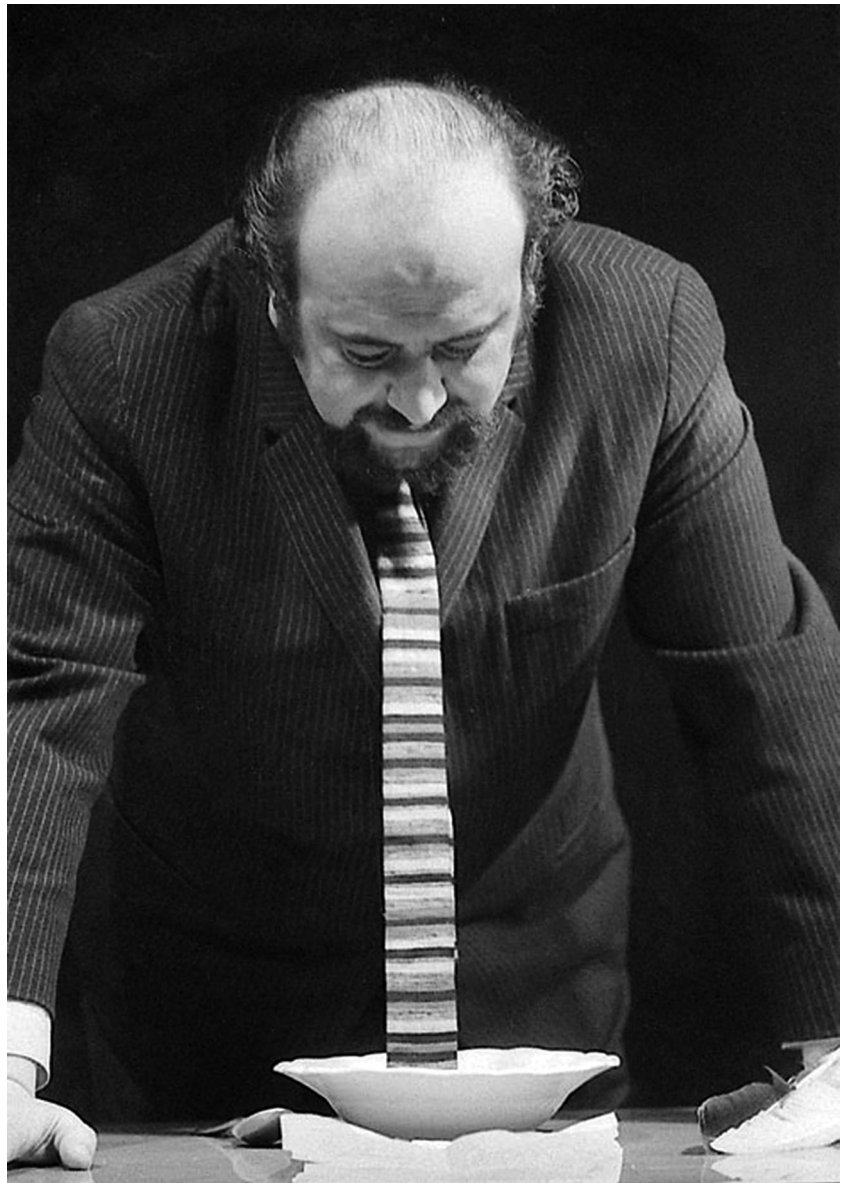
27 On the Institute of Cultural Relations in English see Anikó Macher, 'Hungarian Cultural Diplomacy 1957 to 1963: Echoes of Western Cultural Activity in a Communist Country', in Jessica C E Gienow-Hecht and Mark C Donfried eds, *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, Berghahn, New York, 2010, pp 75–108.

28 In the seventies the art department was directed by Péter Varga. In the archives of the Institute there are several letters written by him that expressed disapproval of – and required the Cultural Ministry to proceed against – exhibitions involving foreign artists organised independently from the Institute.

29 The heterogeneity of the gallery's programme was not at all an exception, as other state-run and state-sponsored cultural institutions, like the country-wide network of cultural houses and small galleries in Hungary and in other East-European countries also presented cutting-edge, interdisciplinary programmes with the involvement of neo-avant-garde artists.

30 Zsuzsa D Fehér, *A Magyar képzőművészek a fasizmus ellen / Les artistes hongrois contre le fascisme*, (preface also in French), Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 1965

31 Miklós Hernádi, 'Festőélet Magyarországon VI. – beszélgetés Maurer Dórával', *Artmagazin* 3, 2009, pp 82–85



Miklós Erdély, *On Female Viciousness*, 1971, reading action, Eötvös Club, photo, György Erdély

message.<sup>36</sup> This was twofold: solidarity with people on the peripheries of any society, and solidarity with the independence and national liberation movements in the Third World. Work by these younger artists were stylistically close to the expressive realism of Hincz but they regarded art as a political tool that should agitate for direct action; not just one that forms attitudes. They were active in poster art, performed protest songs with their music band, organised puppet theatre, socio photo-workshops, self-education circles and lifestyle experiments – which they viewed as more effective vehicles of political mission than the traditional genres of

32 His name is misspelt as 'Kakner' in the catalogue.

33 Géza Perneczky, 'Magyar Képzőművészek a Fasizmus Ellen', *Magyar Nemzet*, 12 December 1965, p 9; Sándor Lánicz, 'Magyar képzőművészek a fasizmusellen', *Somogyi Néplap*, 25 December 1965, p 11

34 Erdély (1928–1986) was originally an architect and writer, later film-maker, theorist, underground artist, and art teacher.

35 Miklós Erdély, 'A háború képei. Elmélkedés Robert Capa arcképe fölött', in Miklós Peternák ed, *Művészeti íráások*, Képzőművészeti, Budapest, 1991, pp 104–108

36 James Mark and Péter Apor, 'Socialism Goes Global: Decolonization and the Making of a New Culture of Internationalism in Socialist Hungary, 1956–1989', *The Journal of Modern History* 87, December 2015, p 875

37 Lukács' call was published in *L'Unità*, the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), in the January of 1971, a week after Angela Davis's court trial had started, and was signed by Ernst Bloch, Heinrich Böll, Jürgen Moltmann, Helmuth Plessner, the members of the Yugoslav Praxis group, and by prominent international and Hungarian writers, film-makers, and philosophers ('Appello di Lukács contro il processo ad Angela Davis', in *L'Unità*, 12 January 1971, p 10). Lukács' call was only published months later in Hungary: Lukács György, 'Angela Davis ügyéért', *Nagyvilág*, vol XVI, no 41, 1971, pp 949–950.

38 The story and documentation of operations against the group was published: Ring Orsolya, 'Alternatív művészeti mozgalmak az 1970-es években: az

high art. Their name came from an epic poem, *Orfeo Szerelme* (Orpheus' Love, 1969), which was written by leftist poet Imre Györe, and was illustrated by Hincz. It was an allegory of the life of Che Guevara. The first project of the group was a puppet theatre play they created on the basis of this poem by Györe. The Orfeo group participated in the civil rights movement, namely they also protested – among other causes – against the imprisonment of Angela Davis, philosopher, Black Panther member and human rights activist, for whom an international solidarity movement was initiated by György Lukács himself in 1971, some months before his death.<sup>37</sup> However, because of Orfeo group's self-organised commune-like working method and social criticism, their activities were regarded as dangerous by the philistine and prudish authorities.<sup>38</sup>

Neo-avant-garde artists also reflected on the case of Angela Davis and the hypocrisy of state support for overseas independence and civil right struggles, which was of course very common in the US too, for instance. In 1971 – even before Lukács's article supporting Davis was published – in the Eötvös Club, Budapest, Miklós Erdély, Tamás Szentjóbby and Jenő Balaskó organised an event entitled 'Freedom for Angela Davis'. The most detailed account of the event was only published in 2002 in an article quoting a secret police report on the mock solidarity event.<sup>39</sup> The police agent lists the dissidents gathered in the audience, and then recounts that s/he could not make much sense of Erdély's reading action. Erdély with goose feathers on his fingers and his necktie hanging into a bowl of soup read out his poem titled *Female Viciousness* (1971). The truly cryptic text contemplates the social role and challenges of new poetry. It is a montage of fragmented press news and common-place phrases, dislodging and undermining meanings with poetic puns around the key notions of poetry, its social role, freedom, happiness and viciousness. The second performance was by Jenő Balaskó (1937–2009), the dissident avant-gardist poet, and occasional participant of actionist events. Balaskó read out his, according to the agent's report 'senseless', neo-Dadaist poems with performative pathos but without clear connection to Davis, thus exemplifying one form of artist solidarity, not expressed by the subject of the work, but by placing an artwork into a political context. The third performer was Tamás Szentjóbby (b 1944, poet and proponent of happenings) who read a 'found text', the open letter to Davis by African American writer James Baldwin, which was published in a Hungarian mainstream daily paper.<sup>40</sup> The letter praised Davis as a representative of a new generation who could dispense with self-loathing, arguing that the subjugation of blacks for racial reasons equals the subjugation of authority fearing white citizens for imperial/capitalist reasons. While Szentjóbby was reading, Margit Rajczy, assisting his performance, tried to silence him by knocking the paper out of his hand, gagging his mouth, tickling him, tying Szentjóbby up, pushing him over, and finally covering him with a table. Their staged fight became an allegoric burlesque of resistance and censorship but baffled the audience. The last word of the letter was 'peace'.<sup>41</sup>

How did it come about that neo-avant-garde artists organised a mimicry of 'Free Angela Davis' events? How could they be so ironic about the cause Angela Davis was fighting for, as the agent accused them: 'he [Szentjóbby] created a tasteless allegoric scene for which he instrumentalized the name of Angela Davis and the fight of American negroes (sic!) for their human rights'.<sup>42</sup> Instead of an artwork or art event utilised





Tamás Sztjóbý, *Free Angela Davis*, 1971, action reading with Margit Rajczi, Eötvös Club, Budapest, photo, Gyula Zaránd ©IPUTNPU-Archives

Orfeo-ügy', *ArchivNet* 2, 2008. On the Orfeo group in English see Márton Szarvas, *Orfeo's Maoist Utopia*, MA dissertation, Budapest, Central European University, 2016.

- 39 István Eörsi, 'A besúgó jelentés mint kultúrtörténeti forrásmunka', *Élet és Irodalom* 46, 22 November 2002, p. 8. The other two published accounts by János Marno approached the event from the perspective of poetry and artistic language, and remembered Szentjóbý's performance as very witty, cynical and flippant: 'Kánon és hatalom – 2000-beszélgetés' (a conversation between Hungarian writers Endre Kukorelly, János Marno, István Margócsy, and Ákos Szilágyi), *2000*, vol. 18, nos. 1/2, 2016, pp. 89–101; 'Itt fű terem. Marno János és Antal

for a political cause, was it a political cause, and its public discourses appropriated, used as the raw material for a subversive artistic statement? Or was Erdély's and Szentjóbý's event simply a revival of another type of political art not based on pathos and expression but satirical montage? More specifically it can be considered a new type of political art based on irony, ambiguity, double speak, and overidentification that aims to trigger critical thinking instead of commitment.<sup>43</sup>

In 1973 Szentjóbý created another work, *Movable Remorse*, which dealt with possible political, artistic and personal attitudes towards human suffering induced by a distant war and its images. This work is also based on a 'found' press image from *Life* magazine, a photo probably taken during the Sino-Japanese War. *Movable Remorse* was realised for the international 'Tükör – Mirror – Spiegel – Mirror' exhibition organised by Beke in 1973 (5–11 August), in the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio of György Galántai.<sup>44</sup> Szentjóbý added an important element to the found image, a mirror that can be moved by the viewer with the help of a magnet; as Beke writes in his in-depth study of this work:<sup>45</sup>

the viewer looks with repulsion (and at the same time with a certain perverse curiosity) at the remains of the massacre, s/he suddenly is met with his/her own gaze. It is as if s/he had been caught peeking – s/he can no longer look at the events as an outsider, but must confront them.



Tamás St.Auby, *Movable Remorse*, 1973(–2009), action-object, press-photo on metal plate, mirror on magnet, size: 14.5 × 21 cm, multiple, edition of 24, collection of the artist/Márk Radics, photo, Virág Lődi, © IPUTNPU-Archives



István beszélgetése  
Szentjóbý Tamás  
költészetéről és még sok  
minden másról', *Holmi* 9,  
1990, pp 1024–1036.

- 40 *Magyar Nemzet*, 17  
January 1971, p 9
- 41 For another interpretation  
of the event: see Kristóf  
Nagy, 'Angela Davis Goes  
East? White Skin and Black  
Masks in the Art of Socialist  
Hungary', *World  
Literature Studies*, vol 8, no  
4, 2016, pp 77–94.
- 42 István Eörsi, 'A besúgó  
jelentés', op cit
- 43 The concept of  
overidentification  
elaborated by Slavoj Žižek  
in connection with the  
Slovenian artist group,  
NSK's practice in the  
1980s, in this sense can be  
regarded as a postmodern  
evocation of this avant-  
gardist role-playing. Slavoj  
Žižek, 'Why are Laibach  
and NSK Not Fascists?',  
*M'ARS*, vol 5, nos 3/4,  
1993, pp 3–4.
- 44 With works by Francis  
Picabia, Gábor Attalai, Ben  
Vautier, Dóra Maurer,  
Klaus Groh, Jiří H Kocman,  
Romuald Kuterá, Géza  
Perneczky, Miko Shiomí,  
Petr Stembera, Endre Tóth,  
Jiří Valoch among others.  
For more information see  
'Tükör – Mirror – Spiegel –  
Mirror', [http://www.  
artpool.hu/boglar/1973/  
tukor/index.html](http://www.artpool.hu/boglar/1973/tukor/index.html), accessed  
28 May 2018.
- 45 László Beke, 'Szentjóbý  
Tamás: Cím nélkül  
[műelemzés]' (Analysis of  
Artwork), *Magyar Műhely*,  
vol 16, nos 54/55, 1978, pp  
73–84; see in English:  
[http://www.  
vividradicalmemory.org/  
hm/workshop/bud\\_essays/  
beke.pdf](http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/hm/workshop/bud_essays/beke.pdf), accessed 28 May  
2018
- 46 Beke, *ibid*
- 47 In depth analysis of the  
work was given by  
Annmária Szőke: 'Miklós  
Erdély: Moral Algebra –  
Solidarity Action (1972)',  
Zsuzsanna Szegedy-  
Maszák, trans, a case-study

The theme of the 1973 exhibition was admittedly a cliché – in itself a reflection on the dilemmas of (social) realism and its mainstream interpretation in a similar way to the 'Cobblestones and Gravestones' exhibition also organised by Beke a year earlier, in March 1972. One year later Szentjóbý's work, *Moveable Remorse* won a prize at the 'Spring Show' of the Club of Young Artists, Budapest, which had a very progressive programme in the early seventies. The fact that a prize was awarded for this work shows that the topic addressed constituted a common ground between official cultural policies and neo-avant-garde underground art. Through an image of war turned into a board game that created an artistic play with shifting identifications, the work tests the omnipresent but still not easy-to-answer question as to how the viewer defines his/her relation and responsibility towards the other, whether they be a non-European, a political victim or an aggressor: 'In social-political terms s/he is the one who, wearing slippers and holding a glass of beer, sits in front of the TV and watches the broadcasts from Vietnam, Cambodia or Paris.'<sup>46</sup>

## Solidarity Action – Moral Algebra

Solidarity Action – Moral Algebra, a political concept invented by Erdély, is also based on a press image: of a Cambodian head hunter holding two severed heads in his hand. Erdély used this image as a formal and moral starting point for his notice-board-like montage consisting of four plus one tableaux compiled out of found images, texts and a manifesto.<sup>47</sup>

The photograph of the Cambodian head hunter was probably taken in 1970, during the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Erdély – in the manifesto, which is didactically visualised by the tableaux – makes a thought experiment: 'According to the logic of massacre, if everybody kills two persons, all of humankind can be exterminated in thirty-two moves, considering that a person cannot be killed twice.' Then on the basis of formal analogies Erdély looks for possibilities to turn this logic on its head:

When each person makes the same gesture at the same time, a form of human solidarity manifests itself which reaches beyond leaders and the led, conflicting states or groups, or guards and the guarded, a solidarity which shows that, for instance, the similarity between the prisoner and the warder is greater than between the warder and the prison, or between the prisoner and captivity.

Interestingly Erdély derives this reversal from a visual analogy established on the second tableau between the (image of) the head hunter holding two severed heads and a photo of a doctor holding the head of a new-born child from the exhibition, 'The Family of Man' (MOMA, 24 January – 8 May 1955). This exhibition was not presented in Hungary, but Erdély was familiar with its catalogue. This exhibition had a diplomatic mission that rivalled the peace movement and 'friendship of peoples' concept of the Soviet countries using impressive photographic representation of a universalistic family bond between humankind, and offered a private instead of a public/political basis for solidarity.<sup>48</sup> However, Erdély appropriates this image, making a much more radical

(Stuttgart Lecture) presented on the VRM-Workshop 28–30 September 2007, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart. Vivid [Radical] Memory (Research and database project (2006/2007). Conceptual practices from the 1960s to the 1980s under the conditions of communist regimes and military dictatorships in Europe and Latin America. (Manuscript.) See: [http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/html/workshop/stu\\_essays/szoke.pdf](http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/html/workshop/stu_essays/szoke.pdf), accessed 28 May 2018 – my interpretation is based on her reconstruction.

48 The reason for this to a large degree lay in US foreign policy; ie it could not possibly offer public/political basis for solidarity as a military aggressor.

49 Miklós Erdély, 'Solidarity Action 1972', in Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László, Emese Süvecz, Ágnes Szanyi, eds, *tranzit.hu, Art Always has its Consequences: Artists' Texts from Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia 1947–2009*, Sternberg Press, Budapest, Berlin, 2011, pp 219–222; and see 'Solidarity Action(Script of a concept realized in photo-montage and statistical tables)', 1972; [http://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/uploads/media/em\\_solidarity.pdf](http://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/uploads/media/em_solidarity.pdf), accessed 28 May 2018.

50 G M Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary*, Farrar, Straus and Co, New York, 1947, pp 278–279

51 Other participants were: György Jovánovics, László Lakner, Gyula Pauer, Tamás Szentjóby and Endre Tót who exhibited conceptual works with much less direct or non-political intent.

52 On the exhibition at Foksal Gallery see Piotr Piotrowski, 'Nationalizing Modernism: Exhibitions of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian Avant-garde in Warsaw', in Bazin

bond, by proposing the interchangeability between the killer and the victim, or the one who 'gives' life.

In the third tableau Erdély, who often reflected on his own Jewish origin – makes an embarrassing proposal for self-organised defence against institutionalised murder, inverting the method of Hermann Göring, the Nazi military leader:

The means of defence is the following: each man is to warn two other persons in case of emergency. According to the principle that a man cannot be killed twice, they have to be individually marked (as Göring recommends in the case of the pacifists). In this way, it is avoidable that a person is informed twice while others are kept in the dark.<sup>49</sup>

writes Erdély in the manifesto, while on the tableau he quotes a sadly still very relevant passage from Gustave Gilbert's *Nuremberg Diary*:

Göring: Why, of course, the people don't want war. Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia, nor in England, nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship.

Gilbert: There is one difference. In a democracy the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only the Congress can declare wars.

Göring: Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.<sup>50</sup>

The work was created in 1972 for an exhibition presenting Hungarian artists at the Foksal Gallery, Warsaw which was run by the state organisation the Workshop of Plastic Arts (Pracownia Sztuk Plastycznych, PSP), but was directed by progressive artists and critics (Wiesław Borowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Edward Krasiński among others).<sup>51</sup> The participants were invited by János Brendel, a Hungarian art historian living in Warsaw, a kind of underground cultural diplomat. Since the Foksal Gallery usually presented thematic rather than country-specific international exhibitions the artists were featured as a group of conceptual artist rather than as Hungarian artists.<sup>52</sup> Still this puzzling gesture, in which Erdély reverses the logic of a Nazi leader, was 'too much' even for Brendel and Borowski, who exchanged letters with Erdély suggesting self-censorship in order to avoid the actual one, which Erdély refused. Polish translations finally omitted this problematic passage, and in the accompanying catalogue Erdély's page was left almost empty bearing the caption 'everyone, everywhere, at the same time' in Polish.<sup>53</sup> The work was presented again at CAYC, Argentina in 1973 or 1974 then disappeared.<sup>54</sup> It was reconstructed only in 2004 on the occasion of the 'Holocaust' exhibition (Kunsthalle, Budapest), the first direct discussion of Holocaust in the Hungarian art scene.



et al, eds, *Art Beyond Borders*, op cit, p 209.

- 53 *st.jauby – jovanovics – lakner – miklós – pauer – tot* (May 1972), exhibition catalogue, Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, 1972

- 54 *Festival de la Vanguardia Hungara*, CAYC (Centro de Arte y Comunicación), exhibition catalogue, Buenos Aires, 1974

- 55 Erdély together with Dóra Maurer led an amateur course called 'Creativity Exercises' between 1975 and 1977. Later, the students attending this course, together with Erdély, formed InDiGo (Inter-Disciplinary-Thinking) Group (in Hungarian InDiGo Csoport) and participated in several important exhibitions.

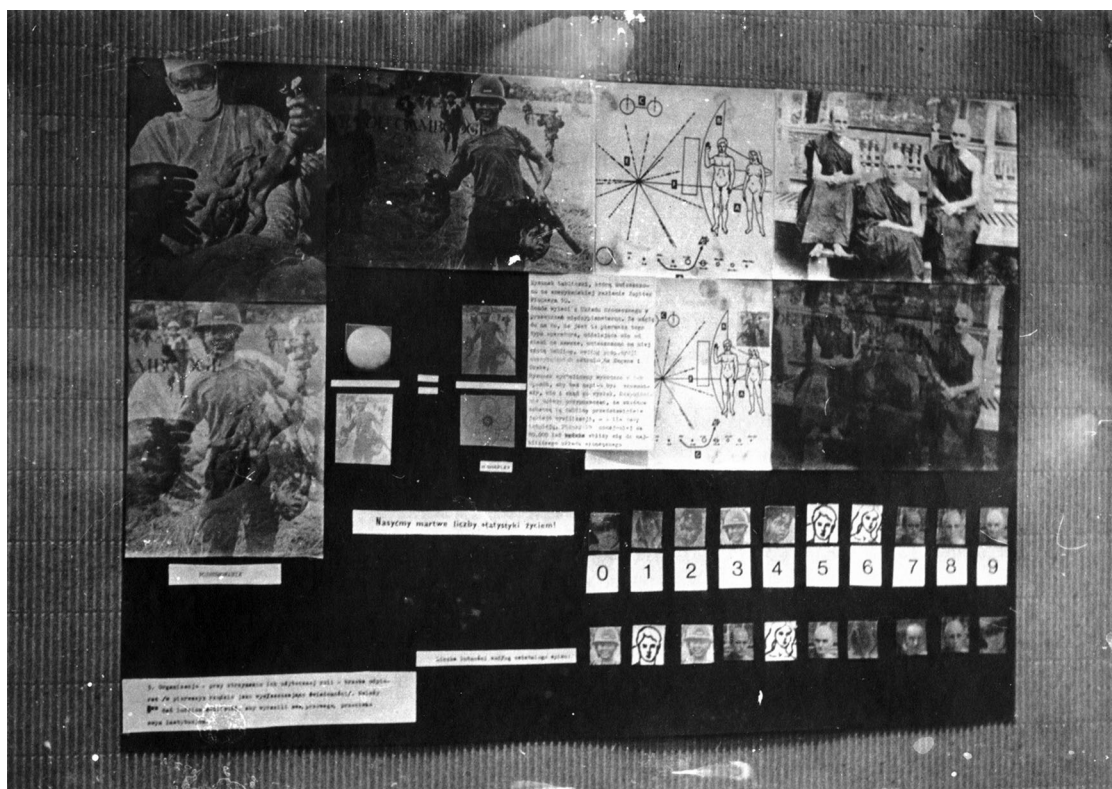
- 56 The logo of Dialogue Group was designed by Dániel Erdély, member of Indigo Group, it is based on the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) peace sign, the 'Western' rival to the dove of peace, which in Eastern Europe had a strong association with counter-culture.

## 'International Antifascist Poster Exhibition'

In the nineteen seventies antifascism was still a keyword of cultural politics in Hungary, but gained new spheres of reference which extended its outdated iconography. As a result of the Helsinki process that introduced the discourse of human rights not just outside but also within Europe, the international disarmament campaigns, wars and dictatorships in the Third World, 'fascism' became equivalent to all kinds of reactionary attitudes, but not necessarily to imperialism. The National Gallery organised an 'International Antifascist Poster Exhibition' in 1975 with the participation of artists from Western Europe (Switzerland, Austria, France, FRG, Italy, Belgium, Greece and the Netherlands) and Yugoslavia in addition to 'Friendly' countries. The exhibition took place at the height of the conservative turn in cultural politics, described in the introduction, with a foreword in the catalogue written by Éva Bajkay that repeated the old slogans: peace, friendship, solidarity, and the exhibition itself created a continuity between the art of the resistance movement in the thirties and forties, fighting against fascist regimes, and artistic solidarity expressed from a distance in connection with the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, the Vietnam War, the Cuban revolution and general support for anti-war campaigns. Concerning the artistic means, in parallel to the suggestive and expressive pathos of social realism, the other tradition based on avant-gardist montage, a shrewd, satirical, journalistic symbolism, almost only appears in the historical works, for instance by John Heartfield, Tadeusz Trepcowski and Rudolf Bunk. Hincz also participated with a 1968 poster *For Hanoi*, and Picasso with the poster designed for the 1962 'Peace and Disarmament Conference' in Moscow, both in a tepid decorative style. The cover of the catalogue was designed by László Sós, member of the prolific commercial and political poster-designer duo, So-Ky, who used a witty modernist agitprop style that was close to pop art. It depicts a dove of peace that appears as a rather historical ghost with a small red star placed brashly as its eye hovering before and above a barren ground from which a hardly recognisable swastika is elevated.

## Artist Solidarity: From Subversion to Social Agency

Erdély remained sensitive to the topics of war, peace, solidarity and disarmament in the early eighties when he worked with the Indigo Group – formed together with his students who previously attended his 'creativity' courses – but approached it from a cosmological and philosophical perspective.<sup>55</sup> The Group collaborated with both the National Peace Council and the self-organised Dialog Group too.<sup>56</sup> They first addressed this topic in 1981 at the 'Hard and Soft – Postconceptual Tendencies' exhibition curated by Beke, as part of the 'Tendencies' exhibition series that aimed to give an overview of the art of the 1970s. For this exhibition that focused on the dynamics of direct or brutal (hard) and sophisticated or ironic (soft) reinterpretations of conceptual art, the group created the *Temporary Sculpture Made of Cotton Wool* (1981), that formed a monumental nuclear cloud. The choice of this motif was intended as a provoca-



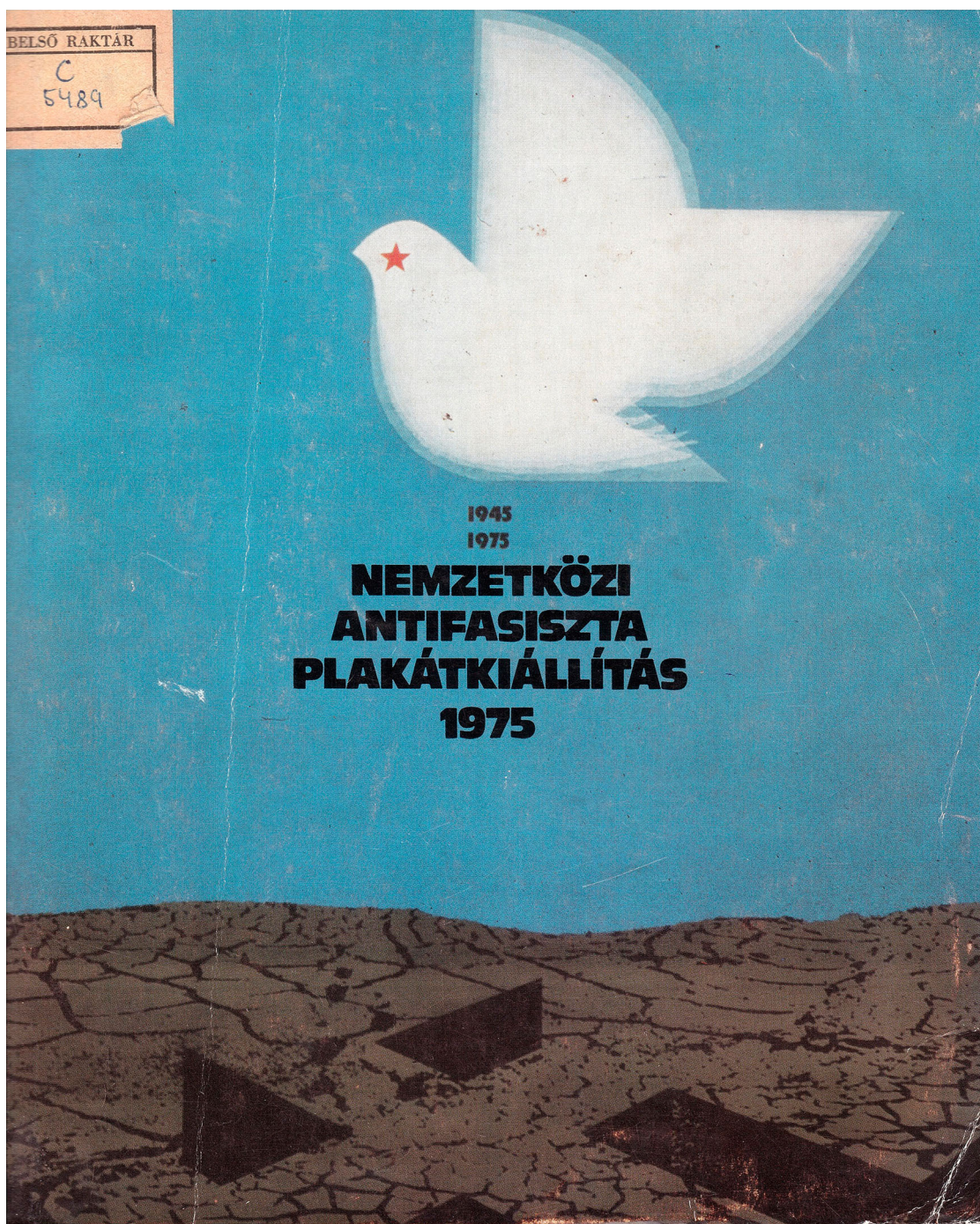
Miklós Erdély, *Moral Algebra. Solidarity Action* (Script for a concept realised in photomontage and statistical charts), 1972, detail, photo, László Beke

57 'The calls and statements on the nuclear threat to humanity are mere quotidian phrases. Their form and wording are of no effect: instead of making the masses in dangers aware of the character and extent of the threatening catastrophe, it lets their attention slacken. (...)'; 'Az Országos Béketanács és az Indigo csoport NEMZETKÖZI KÉPZŐMŰVÉSZETI PÁLYÁZATOT hirdet a NUKLEÁRIS VESZÉLYEZTETETTSÉG tárgyában', in Sándor Hornyik and Annamária Szőke eds, *Kreativitási gyakorlatok, fafej, indigo: Erdély Miklós művészetpedagógiai tevékenysége 1975–1986*, MTA Művészettörténeti Kutatóintézet, Gondolat, 2B Alapítvány, Erdély Miklós Alapítvány, Budapest 2008, pp 384–385.

tion targeted at the exhibition concept of Beke – as proved by the recollection of the participants as well as Beke. On the one hand, they smuggled a topic, peace, and its blatant imagery, the mushroom cloud, into an exhibition that aimed to focus on immanent artistic developments. It also perfectly encapsulated Beke's concept with the ironically verbatim translation of the proposed key-words. However, as the call that the Indigo Group drafted in collaboration with the National Peace Council indicates, it was not simply a gag.<sup>57</sup> This text, which also tackled the question of enduring fascism, displays a sincere preoccupation with the question of how engaged art can reinvent itself on the ruins of the exhausted iconography of peace and solidarity. Indigo's call suggests an understanding of engaged art not as a kind of poetics but rather as an audacious and critical way of thinking, claiming that art should be a creative social agent, a realm for exercising social responsibility.<sup>58</sup>

As we have seen in the Cold War era exhibitions and the institutions of culture functioned as vital means to mobilise people and advocate for mostly abstract and sometimes more specific ways to practice solidarity and 'struggle for peace'. These themes could not be ignored by dissident artists either, whose critical readings of the official culture and Cold War confrontation itself aimed to create events – in Alain Badiou's sense – that can 'change the rules of a situation'. The subversive approach introduced by art events of the parallel culture aimed to overcome the





Cover of the catalogue *International Antifascist Poster Exhibition*, Budapest, 1975, designed by László Sós





Indigo Group, *Temporary Sculpture Made of Cotton Wool*, 1981, photo, György Erdély

58 As stated in Erdély's 1981 'Optimista előadás' (Optimistic Lecture, 1981) (and more precisely his 'Some Characteristics of Post-Neo-Avant-Garde Behavior'), and also inspired by Szentjóby's concept of Parallel Course, artistic agency meant to employ artistic thinking and creativity to abandon dysfunctional social institutions and to imagine better ones, to empower intellectuals and artists to comment on and propose solutions for social injustice on both micro and macro levels. Miklós Erdély, 'Optimista előadás' [1981], in *Tartóshullám: A Bölcsész Index Antológiája*, Budapest, 1985, pp 143–149. In English in Annamária Szőke, 'Miklós Erdély', op cit.

bipolar worldview of the era making a distinction between: 'solidarity as the identification with 'humanity as such' – on the one hand – and as the self-doubt... about their own sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives', as Rorty concluded in 1989.<sup>59</sup> This self-doubt makes these artistic practices relevant still today since they can pose the question how we position ourselves and how *we* relate to the *other* in need, if solidarity can rise above the necessity of having anything – class, gender, ideology, ethnicity, kinship, identity or culture – in common.

59 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p 198



# Amateurism Under Socialism

## The Politics of Art Education in the Work of Milan Adamčiak, Július Koller and Jiří Valoch

Daniel Grůň

### Alternative Art Education

If art is teachable, it follows that the elitist establishment power structure that rules taste and the market can be demolished. If it isn't teachable, then the primary function of art institutions is to skim off the talented cream and make it serve a consumer society.<sup>1</sup>

Luis Camnitzer poignantly expressed the potentiality for social change that lies in teaching practice and at the same time pointed to its willing (or unwilling) servility to ruling power structures. This prompts us to ask what the conscious decision not to become a professional artist means and what social and cultural shape does it take in a given historical paradigm? This article sets out to explore some of the ambivalent practices of individual artistic expression within the centrally-controlled state apparatus of socialist art, and to reflect on the role of amateur art linked with alternative art pedagogy as a kind of 'in-between zone' between official culture and free time activity that arose in the aftermath of the so-called cultural revolution of the 1960s.

The status of amateur art between official and unofficial culture, and its distribution apparatus, disturbs the image of 'two adjacent zones' within the Czechoslovak art scene.<sup>2</sup> The late Piotr Piotrowski, in his famous book *In the Shadow of Yalta* describes the unofficial, parallel cultural sphere as having its own information distribution channels and its own hierarchies of value. Working outside the context of professional art venues led representatives of the Czechoslovak unofficial scene to defend the ethical and inherently artistic values of 'true' modernist art, together with the notion of innate freedom, against the ideological distortions imposed

1 Luis Camnitzer, 'In Latin America. Art Education Between Colonialism and Revolution', in Steven Henry Madoff, ed, *Art School: Propositions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2009, p 208

2 Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, Reaktion Books, London, 2009, pp 248–249

by the Socialist regime. However, as explored in this article, between the 'official' and 'unofficial' culture there lay zones of interaction and infiltration, not to mention cases of direct engagement of artists in non-art movements and the formation of so-called free zones of participatory creativity under socialism – a prime example of which was the widely accessible domain of amateur art. Following the thesis of Piotrowski's horizontal art history, one could track progressive instances of alternative pedagogy in former Eastern Europe. Among those most prominent would be the Open Form of Oskar Hansen, who employed his architectural theory in the field of art education at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts from 1952 to 1983 and had an enormous impact on artists such as KwieKulik and subsequently on those who graduated from the sculpture studio of Grzegorz Kowalski. Another example of an unconventional educational workshop was the course organised by Miklós Erdély and Dóra Maurer who initiated the Creativity Exercises in 1975–1977 at the Ganz-Mávag factory's cultural centre in Budapest. The deconstruction of the teacher/learner relationship as well as the authoritarian methods of conventional pedagogy led to 'a novel definition of creativity, which abolishes the distinction between expert and dilettante and refuses to acknowledge the omnipotence of the artist-persona.'<sup>3</sup> What these two models of alternative art pedagogy have in common is that their goal was to investigate the relation of the individual and the collective, to stimulate improvised imagination and to develop mental capacities to think art in spatial and intersubjective relations. These courses altered the limited range of official art education, the main goal of which was to reinforce the ideological order. They also functioned as an improvised means of knowledge distribution and provisional laboratories for innovative forms of collective creativity.

## Opacity

My understanding of amateurism stems from the analysis of work by three distinctive artists – Július Koller (1939–2007), Milan Adamčiak (b 1946) and Jiří Valoch (b 1946) – and it is grounded in a new reading of the term opacity coined by the late Martiniquan cultural theorist and poet Édouard Glissant. In his collection of essays *Poetics of Relation* Glissant introduced this concept, arguing for a right to opacity that is not merely the right to difference but, as he puts it, subsistence within an irreducible singularity: 'The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.'<sup>4</sup> According to Glissant, this same opacity is also the force that drives every community. Amateurism and its 'right for opacity' plays a crucial role here in unfolding the idea of anti-art and its justification as a tool of cultural critique. The artists mentioned above incorporated amateurism into their artistic practice giving it an amateurish accent and educational mission. Framing positions and attitudes of these artists with the term opacity means here that their work is far from transparent; rather it is difficult to grasp their work either as an open critique to the socialist regime or as a form of service to the communist ideology carried out in exchange for profitable institutional positions. In turn, what these artists have in common is their endeavour to invent, test and radicalise unconventional artistic forms

3 These pedagogical projects were reactivated in the exhibition entitled 'Creativity Exercises – Spaces of Emancipatory Pedagogies' (17 September – 31 October 2015). See, Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László, eds, *Creativity Exercises – Spaces of Emancipatory Pedagogies*, exhibition catalogue, tranzit.hu, Budapest, 2015, pp 12–13.

4 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, [Gallimard, 1990], Betsy Wing, trans, University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 1997, p 191

and attitudes, bringing the work closer to everyday life situations. The work of these artists and their commitment to the politics of art education stems from the progressive culture of the 1960s in Czechoslovakia.<sup>5</sup>

As a young artist Július Koller engaged critically with the entire panorama of modern art and also with the artificiality, hypocrisy and conservatism of the official political ideology. In a spirit of proletarian modesty, he responded to the then current avant-garde trends (Pop Art and Happening), especially their modishness and calculated arrangement, with actions directed towards everyday life and the immediate surroundings. Milan Adamčiak was one of the first Czechoslovak artists to systematically research intermedia overlaps. As a musicologist he conducted his research in the field of so-called 'new' music. In the second half of the 1960s, he created typographic poetry in which graphic and semantic realisation overlapped with the acoustic rhythmisation of the text. One aspect of his work has its premise in experimental poetry, taking the form of directions and instructions for various activities. Another opens the way toward visual music with unconventional notations and graphic scores, while a third links inspirations from the two preceding parts in performative presentation: game-playing experimentation and the non-completion of the compositional process, significantly opening up the possibility of perfecting the musical work using both classical and non-classical instruments and unusual settings. Valoch, like Adamčiak, also had a double identity. He was principally known as a theorist and curator based in The House of Arts in Brno (Dům umění města Brna) where he realised numerous exhibitions of the key personalities of Czech and Slovak art. Since the mid-1960s he created visual poetry, and at the beginning of the 1970s his work transformed itself under the influence of concrete poetry and conceptual art.

## Amateurism

The etymological kinship of the word *amateur* with the Latin *amator* (one who loves again and again) makes it possible to view art as a widely accessible cultural practice. Without seeking perfection or competitive status, the amateur takes prolonged delight in the chosen activity, thus giving substance to the idea of the anti-bourgeois artist.<sup>6</sup> Koller trained as a painter but his activities also included investigation into the technological imagery of late modernism, which at the same time becomes the sphere of his activities. Culture in its entire 'cosmohumanistic' breadth is indicated as the field of operation, which is related to the negated sphere of art in such a way as to show possible alternatives to it. In 1965 Koller published his first manifesto, *Antihappening (System of Subjective Objectivity)*. Contrary to the genre of the happening, which is a way of putting an artistic act into action, an *Antihappening* aimed at a personal reshaping of the subject, of awareness and of the surroundings and real life. Using the means of textual announcement ('making known'), the demarcation of the artist's diverse activities became part of the cultural context.

*Antihappening* was developed concurrently in two modes, those of textual announcements and of actions (both private and public) that

5 Daniel Grůň, *Archeológia výtvarnej kritiky: Slovenské umenie šesťdesiatych rokov a jeho interpretácie* (Archaeology of Art Criticism: Slovak Art of the 1960s and Its Interpretations), Slovart and VŠVU, Bratislava, 2009, pp 125–132

6 Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes [1975], Czech translation, Roland Barthes o Rolandu Barthesovi, Josef Fulka, trans, Fra, Prague, 2015, p 63

had the goal of naming a critical activity and defining what an artist does within time. Koller declared activities from various segments of his life to be *Antihappening*: his work as a painter, his military service, his sports activities, life with a partner, his work as a teacher. In a number of further variations Koller resorted to the regular repetition of defined actions, so that *Antihappening* genuinely becomes a personal formation of the culture of life (*Acad. Painter, Artwork, Games, Confrontations, Question Mark, Contact, Cosmohumanistic Culture*). In the *Antihappening* designated *Acad. Painter* (the abbreviated title of the academically qualified painter), Koller gave a practical exposition of the social determination of the artist in socialist society. He periodically had himself photographed with paintings created for the purpose of sale or submission to the official exhibitions of socialist art. The piece *Artwork* is an *Antihappening* representing a project of intervention in the system of the institutional state monopoly of commerce. Aside from investigating the social practice of an academic painter, Koller collected surfaces with random paint stains and drips and textiles with marks from the rub of brushes; he was fascinated by the structures and imprints that remained after the upper layers were torn away. He tirelessly discovered a sensibility for materials and artistic processes in junk. Collection and accumulation made it possible for him to have a distinct mode of framing the painting process, where he amassed what was otherwise found on the margins or entirely outside the space defined for depiction.



Július Koller-Kveta Fulierová, 'They Painted in the Painted Village of Čičmany', *Život* 28/39, 1978, magazine article, 50 cm x 35 cm, Július Koller Society



7 Cited according to the manifesto *Július Koller 1968, Konfrontácia (Antihappening)* [Confrontation (Antihappening)], handwritten text card in the collection of the City Gallery, Bratislava. Koller refers to the officially utilised term 'kultúrna osveta' (cultural enlightenment) rather than more general notion 'art pedagogy' also due to the introduction of his counter-project *Univerzálnokultúrna Futurologicko-kozmohumanistická Osveta (U.F.O.)* (Universal-Cultural Futurological-Cosmo-Humanist Enlightenment [U.F.O.]).

8 Július Koller gave some press interviews. In one of these, with Dagmar Gazdíková, he openly criticised the moral decline of professional art; see Dagmar Gazdíková, 'Farebné mesto' (Colourful City), *Kultúra* 84, vol XVI, no 8, 1984, p 19. For further research see Dagmar Gazdíková, 'Nielen o výstave z Čičman' (Not Just About an Exhibition from Čičmany), *Výstavníctvo, fotografia, film, Mesačník pre záujmovú umeleckú inštitúciu*, vol XVII, no 7, 1979; Květa Fulierová, 'Malovali v maľovaných Čičmanoch' (They Painted in Picturesque Čičmany), *Život*, vol XXVIII, no 39, 1978, pp 24–25.

9 Koller devoted a number of texts to the methodological aspect of leading non-professional artists. Július Koller, *Životokolónás a v nás: Výstava tvorivých konfrontácií* (Life Around Us and In Us: An Exhibition of Creative Confrontations), Obvodné kultúrne a spoločenské stredisko, Bratislava III, Bratislava, 1981, manuscript text for an exhibition catalogue.

Július Koller's programmatic amateurism is not merely a departure from the affirmative and conjunctural art of late modernism; rather, Koller bases the continuum of the culture of life on a qualitatively different level, as compared with his avant-garde colleagues of the 1960s. The concept of 'permanent revolution', championed by Trotsky, which influenced several Czechoslovak artists via the French critic Pierre Restany, lost its justification after 1968. Hence the continuum of educational activity which Koller called *Confrontations (Antihappening)*, is not revolutionary and indeed it is not even entirely oppositional. The reason is that Koller identified with the task of the cultural-enlightenment worker. Unobtrusively he thus penetrated the state system of cultural enlightenment, aiming to realise within it his own programme of cultural synthesis and 'confrontation with contemporary popular amateur work in visual art'.<sup>7</sup> Thus Koller's engagement with amateur art must be understood as a political gesture neither on the side of official culture nor on the side of its dissident opponents.

As a lecturer Koller conducted consultations with amateur artists, organised summer gatherings, presided over selection committees, took part in symposia of amateur artistic work, prepared exhibitions and wrote texts about the work of 'non-professional' artists. 'It is necessary to support amateurs so that they develop their unprostituted artistic talent independently of the consumer and political market, and so that they create truthful images of subjective-objective reality.'<sup>8</sup> The City House for Culture and Enlightenment (MDKO) and the District Cultural and Social Centre for Bratislava III (ObKaSS III), for whom Koller worked, gradually extended opportunities for self-fulfilment through art as a free-time activity: 'Confrontations' (from 1967), 'Amateur Artists' Summer Gatherings' (from 1974), 'Symposia of Amateur Art' (from 1976) and 'Creative Confrontations' (from 1979). Koller was convinced of the social importance of free-time activities and he believed that raising the creativity level of non-professional artists contributed to the development of culture and awareness of social relations.<sup>9</sup>

Potentially, anyone who was interested in mastering art and painting in the open air might be a participant in the summer gatherings. It follows that these gatherings were not as tightly controlled ideologically as the official art of the communist regime, and they created a space for developing individual expression and collective creativity. Thus, a diverse group of amateur artists from various professions – scientists, doctors, lawyers, manual workers, engineers – began to develop around Koller. The summer gatherings were conducted in collaboration with local cultural centres throughout the entire republic. These temporary communities of non-artists gave a stimulus to situational games which were bound up with selected localities and the local milieu. Apart from offering an exceptionally creative atmosphere for non-professional artists, they also notably enriched the topological spectrum of Koller's actions: the 'cultural situations' recorded in Květoslava Fulierová's photographs. During all the years that he worked as a lecturer in the field of amateur art education (1967–1992), this activity was a committed realisation of Koller's attitudes and ideas towards art and its institutions. Hence, he saw the sphere of amateurism as having key significance in the binary dialectic of art and anti-art.



Július Koller, 'Universal Fictive Orientation (U.F.O.) 1', 1978, b/w photograph, image: courtesy Květa Fulierová), Július Koller Society

## Notation

It is, above all, Adamčiak's creative participation in happenings and concerts between 1969 and 1970 that has led art historians to characterise his practice as a parallel phenomenon to the Fluxus movement.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Milan Knížák, whom George Maciunas appointed director of Fluxus East, Adamčiak had no direct personal contacts with the movement during that period. Adamčiak was a professional musicologist. He took a job with the Slovak Academy of Sciences and joined the Communist Party at the beginning of the period of normalisation (1972–1989). To have continued with the activities he had launched earlier would have had unacceptable implications for his career. While he worked publicly as a scholar, columnist, and populariser of so-called contemporary music, in private he created for a narrow circle of recipients.

In 1970 Milan Adamčiak together with Róbert Cyprich (1951–1996) and Jozef Revallo (1944–1993), performed the legendary concert entitled *Vodná hudba* (Water Music) in Bratislava. It was no coincidence that the happening bore the identical name to John Cage's *Water Music* (1952) and through its manner of presentation, literally under the surface of the water, it radicalised the performative component. The musical happening took place in the covered swimming pool area in a student hostel. Casually seated on the floor in immediate proximity to the public, they allowed the traditional division of stage and auditorium to vanish. Subsequently a further part of the concert took place right in the swimming

<sup>10</sup> Zora Rusinová, 'Milan Adamčiak a Robert Cyprich' ('Milan Adamčiak and Robert Cyprich'), in Zora Rusinová, ed, *Umenie akcie 1965–1989* (*Action Art 1965–1989*), Slovenská národná galéria, Bratislava, 2001, pp 89–93; Andrea Bátorová, 'Alternative Trends in Slovakia during the 1960s and Parallels to Fluxus', in Petra Stegmann, ed, *Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe*, exhibition catalogue, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2007, pp 165–166



Július Koller, 'Universal Fictive Orientation (U.F.O.) 2', 1978, 3 b/w photograph, image: courtesy Květa Fulierová), Július Koller Society

pool, where the water united the performers with the public. Wearing diving goggles and carrying oxygen cylinders and violins, the musicians dived to the very bottom of the pool, followed by curious members of the audience, some of whom also used diving gear. The last of the series of documentary photos shows the enthusiastic applause of the participants, while in the background swimmers look on from a distance and another group of students are leaving the swimming pool area. What cannot be conveyed by the photographs are the acoustic qualities of the covered swimming pool area with its natural echoes bouncing off the water surface and the smooth tiles. These specific qualities of the chosen space unquestionably played their part in the happening. It is well known how significantly Cage's work influenced the artists associated with the Fluxus movement, and in this connection we may be reminded of the so-called 'event' scores by George Brecht, Yoko Ono and Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi.

In *Water Music*, in contrast to the works mentioned, Adamčiak does not use a written text as a method of notation, but his work is nonetheless premised, as we can see in the photographs, on a musical composition recorded in a graphic score. However, in other works which preceded *Water Music*, such as *Labours of Sisyphus* (Sizyfovské roboty, 1965–1969), we find unambiguous parallels with the event scores produced by the Fluxus artists. Unlike the latter, Adamčiak never published these works, nor did he realise them as actions in concerts. Rather, in the form of verbal instructions he allowed them to circulate among friends





Július Koller, 'Universal Fictive Orientation (U.F.O.) 3', 1978, 3 b/w photograph, image: courtesy Květa Fulierová), Július Koller Society

and randomly selected partners. They were transcribed in typewritten form on sheets of paper in 1969–1970. One of the recurring motifs is the triangle of performer–instrument–public:

Solo Per Gran Cassa

- someone brings a large drum onto the stage
- sets it up and goes away
- the public gazes on the large drum

jama 1968

From the mid-1960s the ideas of the international Fluxus movement were making their way into Czechoslovakia and Adamčíak could have found them published in certain magazines or books, or he could have picked them up second-hand from artists in Prague. Jiří Kolář applied very similar principles in his cycle of exhortatory poems *Instructions for Use* (Návod k upotřebení [1965], 1969) as did Milan Knížák in the directions for his actions.<sup>11</sup> What is of interest to us here is not so much finding a solution to the problem of delayed development, dependency, or derivation from Western or other models. My concern is rather to show what part was played in these records by writing as an autonomous sphere, inviting the author and the recipient to enact a performative unity, a potential presentation in action

11 Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art behind the Iron Curtain*, Daniel Morgan, trans, Karolinum Press, Charles University, Prague 2014, pp 42–43 and pp 60–61





Milan Adamčiak and Róbert Cyprich in collaboration with Jozef Revallo, *Vodná hudba* (Water Music), 1970, documentation of musical happening in the covered swimming pool area 1, The Juraj Hronec student hostel, Bratislava (photo Juraj Bartoš), image: courtesy Juraj Bartoš



Milan Adamčiak and Róbert Cyprich in collaboration with Jozef Revallo, *Vodná hudba* (Water Music), 1970, documentation of musical happening in the covered swimming pool area 2, The Juraj Hronec student hostel, Bratislava (photo Juraj Bartoš), image: courtesy Juraj Bartoš

of the given piece. What Adamčiak managed to capture in *Labours of Sisyphus* was not merely a disjunction of the classical relationship between performer and public. His situations, staged in a minimal number of words, also allowed the utterance of emotions evoked by the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

Since 1964, when he first heard John Cage's works on the radio (in that same year Cage visited Czechoslovakia and together with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company appeared in Prague and Ostrava), Adamčiak's work had, on numerous occasions and at numerous levels, encountered the principles and procedures which that great inspirer brought into music and musical notation. It was only in 1992 that he first met Cage personally during his visit to Bratislava, when he organised an exhibition of his scores at the Slovak National Gallery.<sup>12</sup> One of Milan Adamčiak's favourite and frequently repeated bon mots went something like this: 'Cage's aim was to have no aim. My aim, on the contrary, is to have as many aims as possible.' As Jozef Cseres notes, this statement reflects Adamčiak's polemical character, never content with the status quo, and there is also the multidimensional mode of artistic distribution of ideas which, under the conditions of marginal existence, is proceeding in many, often mutually conflicting, spheres of application.<sup>13</sup> At this point we might cast doubt on the originality of his work as 'art', since he created many of his works as paraphrases, pastiches of the work of world-renowned artists. *Hommage* for him was a conscious principle: he appropriated and adapted, polemicised, paraphrased and recontextualised.<sup>14</sup> Counting two composers among his teachers in graphic notation,

12 Milan Adamčiak, 'A few Words about J.C.', *John Cage*, Slovenská národná galéria, Bratislava, 1992, unnumbered pages

13 Jozef Cseres, 'John Cage in US: On John Cage's Influence among Czechoslovakian Artists', Katalin Székely, ed, *The Freedom of Sound: John Cage behind the Iron Curtain*, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2013, pp 80–81; published in conjunction with the exhibition (23 November 2012–17 February 2013) on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Cage at the Ludwig Museum, Budapest.

14 Ibid, p 80

Milan Adamčiak, *Sign'ings*, ink drawing on paper, 1968, 32.5 cm x 45 cm, image: courtesy Slovak National Gallery





Jiří Valoch, *Hommage à Che*, 'not even for sex should we forget about revolution', 1969, photograph, newspaper, collage, 19 cm x 15.4 cm, Marinko Sudac Collection



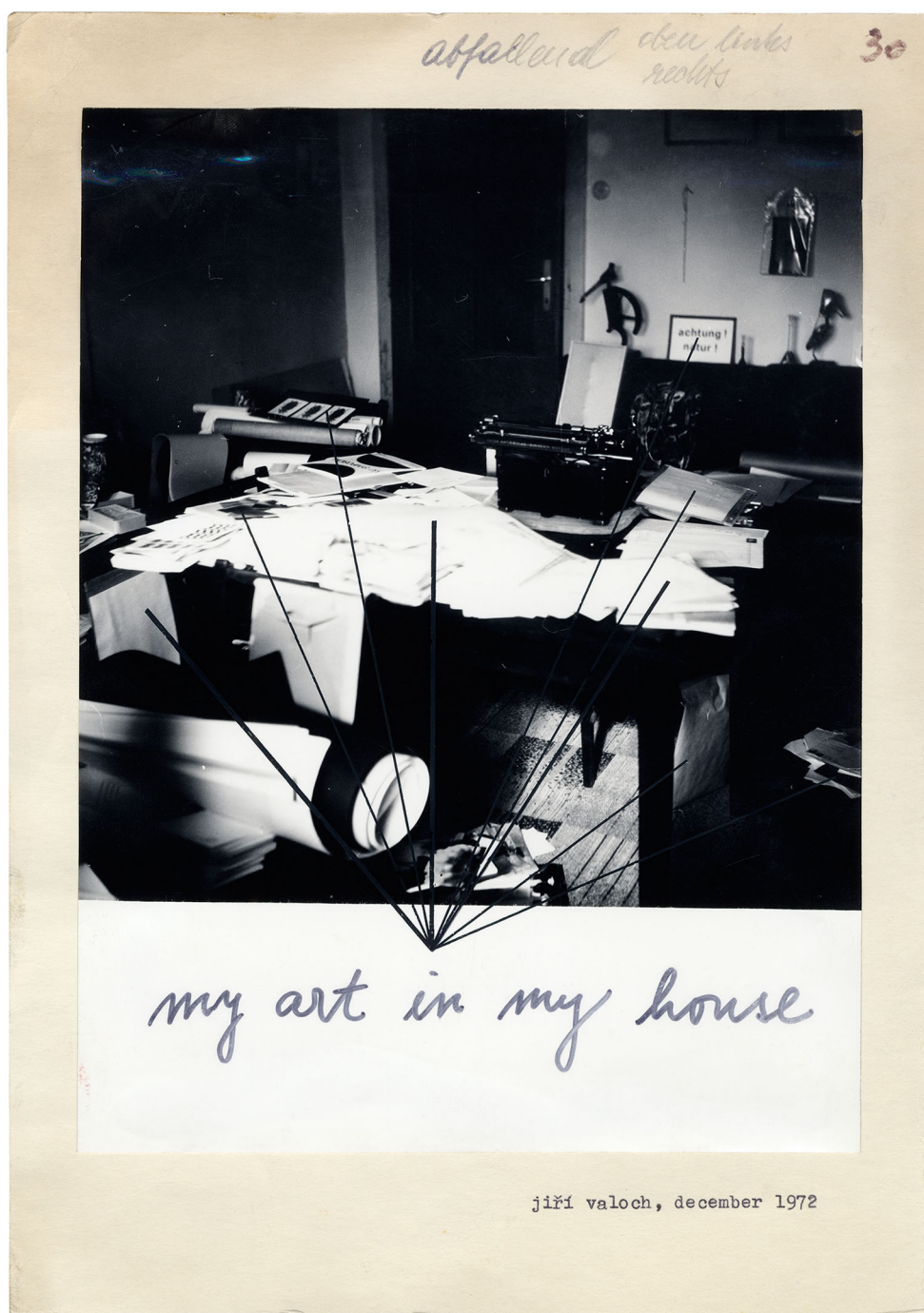
Bogusław Schaeffer and Mauricio Kagel,<sup>15</sup> it was Shaeffer's scores that gave substance to the idea of polyversional music, whose ambition was the equalisation of composer and performer. Based on the principle of unpredictability and potentiality his compositions leave open possibilities for the performance of the score: hence Adamčiak's graphic scores also placed considerable demands on the performance, above all at the moment of improvisation. Although most of them can be played and often also contain verbal instructions for the performer, their visual resolution is sufficient for the reader simply to imagine the recorded auditory processes. For Adamčiak the graphic score was a field of permanent conflicts, movements and collisions. Hence this field is like a battery charged with a dynamic energy. The meeting of graphic signs in the score emits a stimulus which in reading triggers acoustic associations according to the suggested instructions and sketched spatial relationships. Many of these imitate and paraphrase electrical circuits, mechanical engines, or machines for playing (beginning with chess and ending with the gramophone or hi-fi tower), and hence they correspond with the principles of invention, playfulness and improvisation. In all spheres of his work the creative potential of the reader/performer/viewer was emphasised. Poetry represented an active (performative) engagement of the reader in the completion of variations of the text units. The reader, consumer of a linguistic expression, is made equivalent to the author in the text; Adamčiak also used the designations 'programmer' and 'realiser'. Since the nature of Adamčiak's musical works is based on improvisation and openness he often engaged musicians, interpreters and non-artists to play with him, to realise or just to imagine his compositions.

## Desubjectivised Poetry

Besides working as a curator at Dům umění in Brno, writing extensively about new tendencies in Czechoslovak art, Jiří Valoch was a theoretician for his own work. Under the fictive name of Jan Pavlík he wrote a text for the first volume of his visual poems published in Rome in 1975 titled *Poesia Visiva*. At the end of the 1960s Valoch significantly expanded the field of visual poetry by extreme reduction of textual material and its semantic context. At that time he was a proponent of conceptual poetry, in which he generated the meaning of the work by setting the relation between word – written, painted or typed – and selected environments. Valoch worked with words not only as an artist, but also as a critic, theoretician, curator and collector in the field of contemporary art from the late 1960s.

As a theoretician he followed the rise of new artistic tendencies – concrete, geometric and computer art and soon afterwards also conceptual art, land art and minimal art. In the early 1970s Valoch opened Dům umění in Brno to progressive experimental art. Besides that, concrete poetry and conceptual art based on the use of minimal formats enabled him to communicate with a broad network of artists worldwide. In the first half of the 1970s Valoch expanded his work in the field of visual poetry into the photographic medium and participatory artistic modes. He documented semantic and verbal interventions on the human body, in semi-public environments or in the countryside with a photo camera.

15 Michal Murin, 'S Milanom Adamčiakom o grafických partitúrach, hudobných projektoch a muzikologickej tvorbe' (With Milan Adamčiak on Graphic Scores, Musical Projects and Musicological Work), in Michal Murin, ed, *Milan Adamčiak Archív III (Nôty): Notácie a grafické partitúry* (Milan Adamčiak Archive III (Notes) Notations and Graphic Scores), Dive Buki, Košice, 2013, p. 66



Jiří Valoch, *My Art in My House*, 1972, marker, b/w photograph, typewriter text, paper, 29.7 cm x 21.2 cm, Marinko Sudac Collection



Jiří Valoch, 'Shadow Event', 1971, 4 x b/w photographs, 4 x (23.9 cm x 18.1 cm), Marinko Sudac Collection

Using the camera to document actions was not the ultimate goal for Valoch. Works such as *My Art in My House* (1972) or *Shadow Event* (1972) develop a distinctive methodology of reduced poetic speech expanding beyond its traditional usage and exploring new formats in everyday living environments. Here Valoch is invading everyday life situations by minimal expressions such as words like 'stone', 'love' or 'shadow', independent from their creator, autonomously producing meaning in relation to immediate surroundings. Valoch's works, as is the case of many other Czechoslovak artists, was not openly political, rather these works have a great semantic potential to be read and interpreted as desubjectivised poetry freed from any schemata of written language. In 1973 Valoch was forced to collaborate with the State Secret Police (StB) as a person who carried out multiple cultural activities, communicating with artists on a local as well as international level. He stated that he did not believe in the possibility of change in terms of political affairs and also that he was afraid of persecution. As a cultural worker and passionate art lover he was not able to do any other work than dealing with art and organising art exhibitions. It is striking that most of his artistic work was preserved by his friend J H Kocman who received and archived it.<sup>16</sup> His work remained unappreciated by other art critics and Valoch despite his personal dedication to art education remained to a great extent unknown as an artist. His role is defined in the extension of the field of contemporary art, in his tireless agency in favour of spreading information and presenting progressive art.

## Legitimacy

My intention here is to introduce and compare three figures whose artistic work is notably interrelated with their profession and public appearance but who at the same time, especially after 1972, disguised their creative activities to a great extent and shared them with limited audiences. They fostered public activity in neighbouring fields, such as art education at a

<sup>16</sup> Barbora Klímová, *Navzájem: Umělci a společnost na Moravě 70.–80. let 20. století*, tranzit.cz/FaVU VUT, Praha/Brno, 2013, p 199



17 However: 'Koller originally used the initials to mean 'Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations', but created many variations: the 'U' has stood for 'universal' or 'universal-cultural'; the 'F' has become 'futurological', 'fantastic', 'functional' or 'fictional'; the 'O' has stood for 'object', 'question mark' ('otazník' in Czech) or 'revival' ('ozivenie' in Czech). The critic Jan Verwoert has commented on the significance of this constantly shifting reference.' See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/koller-universal-futurological-question-mark-a-d-u-f-o-t12441>

18 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, op cit, p 194

local cultural centre of Bratislava city in Koller's case, a Slovak academic research institute in Adamčiak's case, and as a cultural worker and curator at Brno House of Arts in the case of Valoch. At the level of his artistic practice Koller declared his engagement with amateur artists to be part of his concept of *Universal Futurological Operations* and tirelessly processed photographic documentation within his own systematic records.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Adamčiak very rarely used photography as a means of communicating his concepts. Adamčiak often did not even sign his works, which was not the case with Valoch, who was obsessed with the author's signature. My point here is that their artistic practices were based on various modes of participative activities which often led to the formation of temporary communities. What all three artists have in common is that their role in spreading information and activating others for a stake in the avant-garde vision took place at the level of personal engagement. Amateurism is, however, understood here as an individual subversive political act within the frame of official culture and as a kind of unifying platform between author and ephemeral – sometimes even random audiences – and as a practice that was always unfinished, never revolutionary and indeed not even entirely oppositional to the given political system. Nevertheless, being contradictory to educational transparency, amateurism lay the foundations for its legitimacy through the 'respect for mutual forms of opacity' among the artists' circles, while opacity in the work of Koller, Adamčiak and Valoch becomes the basis from which, according to Glissant, lies the possibility of 'having entered into a political dimension'.<sup>18</sup>

# Sibylle

## An Alternative Venue for East German Art Photographers in the 1960s

Candice M Hamelin

As part of her final project at the Berlin Weißensee Kunsthochschule, where she studied fashion design between 1956 and 1961, Dorothea Bertram was asked to write about *Sibylle: die Zeitschrift für Mode und Kultur* (Sibylle: The Magazine for Fashion and Culture).<sup>1</sup> Neither fond of the East German women's magazine nor one to mince her words, she described it as 'an irrelevant, quite old-fashioned magazine with conventional indigenous fashion alongside articles on Parisian *haute couture* – an absurd thing during a time in which ration cards were given, serious housing shortages prevailed, and many women worked in the three-shift system'.<sup>2</sup> She also claimed that it failed to be the 'highbrow magazine for fashion and culture implied by its title'.<sup>3</sup> After reading these statements along with the rest of Bertram's thesis in the fall of 1961, Margot Pfannstiel, a former journalist and *Sibylle*'s then Editor-in-Chief, invited Bertram to the publication's headquarters in East Berlin to discuss the future of the magazine.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after their meeting, Pfannstiel, who shared the recent graduate's sentiments but was unable to change the magazine on her own, appointed Bertram as the magazine's new fashion editor and asked her to recruit 'like-minded people', individuals 'who together [with Bertram and Pfannstiel] would want to transform *Sibylle*, to make it into a contemporary magazine'.<sup>5</sup>

To fulfil this task, Bertram looked no further than to her alma mater. Founded in 1946, the Berlin Weißensee Kunsthochschule was staffed by numerous artists and professors formerly associated with the Bauhaus and offered its students courses in the visual and plastic arts as well as in graphic, fashion, textile, stage and costume design.<sup>6</sup> Within weeks of taking on her new role at *Sibylle*, she offered Arno Fischer, her former professor, a position as fashion photographer. Despite regarding the

1 Hereafter referred to as *Sibylle*.

2 All translations are by Candice M Hamelin; Dorothea Melis, *Sibylle: Modelfotografien 1962–1994*, Lehmann, Leipzig, 2010, p. 5.

3 Ibid, p. 5

4 Pfannstiel was the Editor-in-Chief of *Sibylle* from 1958 to 1968.

5 Melis, *Sibylle: Modelfotografien 1962–1994*, op cit, p. 6

6 On this school, see Jens Semrau, *Was ist dann Kunst?: Die Kunsthochschule Weissenhof 1946–1989 in Zeitzeugengesprächen*, Lukas, Berlin, 2004.

bimonthly as 'a terrible magazine' at the time, the East German art photographer – who had been responsible for developing the Weißensee school's photography department in the late 1950s and who had photographed Bertram's final collection, designs that she presented together with her written thesis – accepted her invitation.<sup>7</sup> She also hired Elisabeth Meinke, a fashion designer-turned-photographer, to photograph accessories in 1962 and *Gruppe 4* (Group 4), a student group trained by graphic designers Klaus Wittkugel and Werner Klemke, to oversee the magazine's layout in 1963.

In addition to hiring photographers and graphic designers affiliated with the Berlin Weißensee Kunsthochschule, one of the four main art academies in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Bertram began to change the kinds of designers and fashion featured in *Sibylle*. Prior to appointing Bertram as its new fashion editor, the magazine, which was founded by the German Fashion Institute in 1956 (formerly known as the East German Institute for Clothing Culture) in order to educate East German women on how to dress, promoted French haute couture above all other types of fashion on its pages.<sup>8</sup> This was in large part due to the personal tastes and influence of Pfannstiel's predecessor as Editor-in-Chief, Sibylle Gerstner. An affluent German Jew who studied fashion and textile design at the Universität der Künste Berlin in the 1930s, she reported on the collections of the few French houses that remained open in Paris during World War II.<sup>9</sup> As Editor-in-Chief of *Sibylle*, Gerstner travelled frequently to the French capital with a small group of illustrators, designers and photographers; while there, they saw collections by Hubert de Givenchy, Christian Dior, Pierre Cardin, Coco Chanel and Jeanne Lanvin, among other prominent French designers. Upon returning to East Berlin, the designers typically copied French prototypes in small quantities and sent them either to East German factories to be mass produced or to the Sibylle boutique, a large showroom located on the corner of Unter den Linden and Friedrichstraße in East Berlin that catered to a wealthy clientele. With these designs either in production or on display, Gerstner and the remaining members of her team set about promoting them, designing photo-heavy fashion spreads and crafting articles on French fashion. Regarding this near-exclusive emphasis on French haute couture as detached from the realities of everyday life for most East German women, Bertram decided to instead focus on content that brought attention to East German fashion designers and ready-to-wear clothing made domestically in the GDR, starting with 'Jugendmode im Examen' (Youth Fashion in the Final Exams), a three-page illustrated article on the thesis collections of the fashion design students at her former school.<sup>10</sup>

Pfannstiel, for her part, also hired new people and made changes to the content of *Sibylle*. For instance, in 1962, she included features on photographers in the magazine's cultural section, which up until that point had covered almost exclusively the work of painters, sculptors, film-makers, dancers, musicians, playwrights and novelists. The first such feature was 'Das Porträt: zu fotos von Arno Fischer' (The Portrait: Photos by Arno Fischer) (no 5, 1962), a four-page article that included six portraits taken by Fischer and a short text on his photographic practice written by East German playwright and documentary film-maker Günther Rücker.<sup>11</sup> Soon after the publication of 'Das Porträt' and before the maga-

7 Arno Fischer, interview with Candice M Hamelin, Gransee, Germany, 12 July 2011

8 Elli Schmidt, 'Das Institut für Bekleidungskultur und seine Aufgaben', *Die Bekleidung* 1, January 1954, p 4; and Djurdja Bartlett, *FashionEast: The Spectre that Haunted Socialism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010, pp 118–120, p 142

9 On Sibylle Gerstner, see Anja Maier, 'Die Namensgeberin: Porträt Sibylle Boden-Gerstner', in Ute Mahler and Uwe Neumann, eds, *Sibylle: Zeitschrift für Mode und Kultur, 1956–1995*, Hartmann Books, Stuttgart, 2017, pp 290–291.

10 See Dorothea Bertram, 'Jugendmode im Examen', *Sibylle* 1, February 1962, pp 11–13

11 Rücker took an ardent interest in Fischer's photographs in the 1950s and gave the photographer a monthly stipend of 300 DM to work on his series 'Situation Berlin' between 1955 and 1960. On this, see Ulrich Domröse, 'A Crack in the Wall', in Domröse, *Arno Fischer – Situation Berlin: Fotografien 1953–1960*, Nicolai-Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für moderne Kunst Photographie und Architektur, Berlin, 2001, p 26.



- 12 The series 'Frauen fotografieren' was published in the August, October and December issues of 1964 and featured Bertha Beckmann, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Gertrude Käsebier, respectively.
  - 13 *action fotografie's* exhibitions were held at the Hause der Filmbühne 'Capitol' in 1956 and the Handelshof in 1957. On this, see Jeannette Stoschek, 'action fotografie: ein kurzer Aufbruch', in Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, et al, 60, 40, 20: *Kunst in Leipzig seit 1949* (4 October 2009 – 29 January 2010), Museum Der Bildenden Künste Leipzig and E A Seemann, Leipzig, 2009, pp 88–94.
  - 14 See photographs in Gisela Steineckert, 'Der weibliche Arbeitsplatz', *Sibylle* 4, August 1964, pp 50–51 and in Fritz Henneberg, 'Pianistinnen spielen Bach', *Sibylle* 6, December 1964, pp 13–15.
  - 15 On the ZKF, see Friedrich Herneck, 'Vor neuen Aufgaben', in Herneck, et al, *Fotografie und Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Entwicklung einer sozialistisch-realistischen deutschen Lichtbildkunst*, VEB Fotokinoverlag, Halle, 1961, pp 14–17.
  - 16 Fischer, interview with Hamelin, op cit
  - 17 See Arno Fischer, 'Herbstmode in Berlin', *Sibylle* 4, August 1962, pp 29–43
  - 18 Altendorf, Fieweger and Rössler worked at the magazine between 1956 and 1961, 1957 and 1982, and 1958 and 1985, respectively.
  - 19 See Willi Altendorf, 'So entsteht "Sibylle": Der Modelfotograf (Mäntel)', *Sibylle* 5, October 1961, pp 44–45; Helmut Fieweger, 'Complete und Composé', *Sibylle* 6, December 1961, pp 4–5; and Gunter Rössler, 'Sportlich und Jung', *Sibylle* 3, June 1962, pp 76–77
- zine began to print 'Frauen fotografieren' (Women Photographing), a short-lived series that focused on nineteenth- and twentieth-century female photographers in three separate issues in 1964, Pfannstiel hired Evelyn Richter to work on a contract basis.<sup>12</sup> Richter, a friend of Fischer's and former member of *action fotografie* (action photography), a group of professional and amateur photographers who organised their own exhibitions in Leipzig in the 1950s, became responsible for photographing travel destinations for the magazine.<sup>13</sup> With Pfannstiel's encouragement, Richter also began to use the bimonthly to advance her independent practice, circulating photographs of musicians and female workers and their work environment in its cultural section.<sup>14</sup>
- In acting on her newfound interest in photography, Pfannstiel offered photographers a great deal of autonomy, something that the East German state and its cultural organisations, notably the Central Commission for Photography (Zentrale Kommission Fotografie der DDR, or ZKF), attempted to deny them at the time.<sup>15</sup> Aside from assigning them specific subject matter to photograph for the magazine – clothing made for a particular season or an artist whose work was gaining a lot of attention in East Germany – she placed few restrictions on photographers. Neither interested nor qualified in dictating *how* and *where* they could photograph, Pfannstiel granted them the freedom to make these and other decisions by themselves.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, photographers working at *Sibylle* – Fischer, in particular, as I will argue – not only helped to transform the fashion and culture magazine, but also used the magazine's imprimatur as encouragement to explore new themes in their work. As a number of these themes fell outside the realm of what the ZKF considered permissible to photograph, it was through and with *Sibylle's* support that photographers came to publish images that would have been excluded from most East German photography exhibitions and journals during the 1960s.
- Both the new direction of *Sibylle* and the independence its photographers experienced as a result became readily apparent as early as the summer of 1962, when Fischer's first fashion series, 'Herbstmode in Berlin' (Fall Fashion in Berlin) (no 4, 1962), was published.<sup>17</sup> Before printing this series, which the East German art photographer was given almost one year to complete, the magazine relied primarily on the work of Willi Altendorf, Helmut Fieweger and Gunter Rössler to fill its eighty pages every other month.<sup>18</sup> Though they produced a handful of features on fashion congresses that took place in cities throughout the Eastern Bloc and a few fashion series that used urban settings as their backdrop, these photographers worked in the studio, on the streets of small towns and villages and in natural settings, including the lakes and forests around Berlin and along the coast of the Baltic Sea.<sup>19</sup> On several occasions, their studio photographs were printed in the magazine together with images and illustrations of the city. Irrespective of locale, their models were almost always photographed standing rigidly, with their legs either ajar or with one foot in front of the other and their hands placed by their sides or on their hips. With Fischer's series, however, the precedents set by these photographers were all but disregarded.
- Fischer, who had studied sculpture at the Käthe-Kollwitz-Kunstschule in West Berlin and the Hochschule für Bildende und Angewandte Kunst in East Berlin before becoming a professional photographer, learned how to

20 Jeannette Stoschek, 'Gehaltene Zeit: die Bilder von Ursula Arnold, Arno Fischer, und Evelyn Richter', in Patricia Werner and Stoschek, *Ursula Arnold, Arno Fischer, Evelyn Richter: Gehaltene Zeit* (Museum Der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, 3 July – 3 October 2016), Kettler, Dortmund, 2016, p 29; Together with his wife, Zabel raised Fischer after the untimely death of his mother in 1938 and father in 1941.

21 On this exhibition and the history of Fischer's photobook, which came to fruition only in 2001, see Domröse, 'A Crack in the Wall', op cit, pp 22, pp 24–30.

photograph on the streets of Berlin during World War II. Encouraged by his uncle, Franz Zabel, a fervent amateur photographer, he purchased his first camera, a Voigtländer Bessa 6 x 9, and photographed Berlin after the air raids in 1943 and 1944.<sup>20</sup> In 1953, well after the war had ended and the two German states had been established, he returned to the streets of Berlin, this time with a 35mm Leica, and photographed everyday life. He would spend the next seven years working on 'Situation Berlin' (1953–1960), a series of carefully composed black and white photographs of East and West Berliners alike. More often than not, his subjects are seen on the sidelines of major political and social events, evidently waiting for something beyond the photographic frame to unfold. After exhibiting 'Situation Berlin' at a small gallery run by the Kulturbund der DDR (Cultural Association of the GDR) in Weißensee in 1959 and working on a book project for the series between 1960 and 1961, Fischer returned once more to the streets of Berlin, now incised by the Berlin Wall, to photograph 'Herbstmode in Berlin'.<sup>21</sup>

Comprised of fifteen photographs taken with black and white and colour film, 'Herbstmode in Berlin' was unlike any other fashion series previously printed in *Sibylle*. This was in part due to the unprecedented decisions made by Fischer in the months prior to photographing his first assignment: not only did he choose to set his series in an urban environment, but, with the exception of using one model who regularly appeared in the magazine, he decided to dispense with the haute couture models photographed by his predecessors. Inspired by the more 'natural'



Arno Fischer, *Ostberlin* (East Berlin), 1957, from *Situation Berlin*, gelatin silver print, © Arno Fischer Estate



Arno Fischer, *Westberlin* (West Berlin), 1957, from *Situation Berlin*, gelatin silver print, © Arno Fischer Estate

22 Arno Fischer, 'Wir haben erst einmal die Puppenposen abgeschafft' ['We first disposed of the mannequin poses'], in Dorothea Melis, ed, *Sibylle: Modefotografie aus drei Jahrzehnten DDR*, Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, Berlin, 1998, p 79

23 Fischer, who often travelled outside East Germany, kept apprised of trends in Western photography, including fashion photography, on his trips to West Germany and at *Sibylle*, which had subscriptions to many Western fashion and cultural magazines. On the latter, see Jana Duda, 'From the Family of Man to Waffenruhe: International Influences on Photography in the GDR', in Ulrich Domröse, ed, *Geschlossene Gesellschaft: künstlerische Fotografie in der DDR 1949–1989 – The Shuttered Society: Art Photography*

looking models that began to appear on the pages of French *Elle* in the late 1950s, when Peter Knapp became the magazine's art director, Fischer approached young women on the streets and in East Berlin's cafés and university libraries, asking them to model for him.<sup>22</sup> Recruiting three in total, he then took these women, together with *Sibylle*'s regular model, to Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain. In these districts of East Berlin, he photographed them in front of the Rotes Rathaus, the Weidendammer Brücke, and the towers at Frankfurter Tor, sites well known to both East and West Berliners at the time. He also photographed them together with pedestrians, city workers, apartments buildings, commercial spaces, mopeds, bicycles, taxis and buses.

While the settings and models seen in 'Herbstmode in Berlin' were enough to set the East German art photographer's work apart from that of Altendorf, Fieweger and Rössler, it was the manner in which Fischer photographed his models that marked the real departure from earlier fashion series in *Sibylle*. Instead of capturing his models posing like *Sibylle*'s stilted haute couture models of the 1950s and early 1960s, Fischer – aware of current trends in Western fashion photography – photographed them in motion, making their way through the East German capital.<sup>23</sup> In one photograph, for instance, he pictures a model, whose body is aligned with the vertices of an angular building in the background and two sidewalks that run along Pappelallee and Schönhauser Allee, walking, as her raised left foot makes evident, toward the camera and the edge of the photographic frame. In another, Fischer photographed a model running toward the photographer and away from a large gas-





Arno Fischer, 'Herbstmode in Berlin' (Fall Fashion in Berlin), 1962, gelatin silver prints, courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, © Arno Fischer Estate

in the DDR 1949–1989,  
(Berlinische Galerie, 4  
October – 28 January  
2013), Kerber and  
Berlinische Galerie,  
Bielefeld and Berlin, 2012,  
p 315; Fischer, interview  
with Hamelin, op cit.

ometer, formerly located in what is now Ernst-Thälmann-Park, her shoulder-length hair blowing behind her in the wind. Unlike the previous photograph in which the model's entire body is seen in the foreground, this photograph, which spans two entire pages of the magazine, cuts its subject off at the knees in the same location. Together with the size of the printed image, 36 x 52 cm, this cropping gives the impression that the model is about to enter the space of the viewer.<sup>24</sup>

More than picturing his young models as urbanites on the move, Fischer began to stray from the aesthetics of 'straight' photography while working on his first fashion series. No longer interested in only taking clear, sharply defined images, as he was in the 1940s and 1950s, Fischer started to experiment with camera settings and lenses, either isolating his models from or merging them with their surroundings. When taking the opening image of the series, for instance, Fischer increased the aperture of his camera, thereby allowing more light to enter the lens and creating a shallow depth of field. This resulted in his model, who stands in the foreground looking at the camera, appearing in sharp focus, while the three pedestrians walking in various directions to her right in the middle ground and the Rotes Rathaus in the background are blurred and difficult to discern. In addition to selecting a small f-stop number on his camera lens, Fischer also used a telephoto lens to

24 The format of *Sibylle* was 36 x 26 cm.



Arno Fischer, 'Herbstmode in Berlin' (Fall Fashion in Berlin), 1962, gelatin silver print, courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, © Arno Fischer Estate


photograph his models. This is most evident in the colour photographs that appear mid-way through the series: in particular, in an image of the same model who is now photographed on the street together with two children playing with the handle of a water pump. Here the distance between the background and foreground is compressed, and the model, from the waist upward, seems to reside on the same plane as the water pump, car and building behind her. With respect to the children to her right she also appears out of proportion: not only is her body similar to the water pump in terms of scale but her head reaches the level of the windows on the first storey of the building.

According to Fischer, when he submitted these photographs together with the rest of his series, the magazine's editorial staff were shocked and initially refused to print 'Herbstmode in Berlin'. Pfannstiel, however, who recognised the beneficial implications of its publication for the future course of *Sibylle*, went ahead and included it in the August 1962 issue.<sup>25</sup> Soon after 'Herbstmode in Berlin' was published, photographers at the magazine began to follow Fischer's example, photographing models as they traversed the streets of East German cities. Meanwhile, Fischer, who would repeatedly return to the streets of East Berlin to photograph, decided to take his models to new locations and to address themes other than the latest fashion trends in his work.

In 1963, for instance, after Fischer travelled to Bitterfeld on an assignment for another magazine, the photographer, appalled by what he saw,

<sup>25</sup> Fischer, interview with Hamelin, op cit





Tweed mit Nutria, eine schöne und anspruchsvolle Kombination für einen klassischen Mantel – schmale Revers und sportliche Leistentaschen. Modell: VEBVogtländisches Bekleidungswerk. Arno Fischer fotografierte diese Serie

# HERBSTMODE IN BERLIN





Arno Fischer, 'Herbstmode in Berlin' (Fall Fashion in Berlin), 1962, colour print, courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, © Arno Fischer Estate

decided to use his position at *Sibylle* to draw attention to the state of this small industrial town.<sup>26</sup> Located in an area of East Germany known as the Chemical Triangle (Halle-Bitterfeld-Böhlen), Bitterfeld had been mined for brown coal since 1894, when Elektrochemischen Werke (AEG Berlin) and Elektron AG Frankfurt am Main built two large chemical plants in its vicinity.<sup>27</sup> Between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of World War I, these factories processed brown coal to produce chlorine, fertilisers and plastics. In the interwar period, they expanded and were joined by other chemical complexes in the area that made aluminium, magnesium and caustic soda. Then, in the mid-1950s, long after the Soviets had dismantled more than 2,500 chemical plants in the Soviet Occupation Zone and had relocated their personnel twice (first to the Soviet Union and then to East Germany), the plants were rebuilt and, again, joined by new plants constructed nearby.<sup>28</sup> By November 1958, when Walter Ulbricht claimed at a conference in Leuna that ‘Chemistry gives us [East Germans] bread, prosperity, and beauty,’ these factories began to exceed wartime production levels. However, they did not, contrary to the General Secretary’s assertion, bring ‘beauty’ to the people of Bitterfeld: instead, as Fischer experienced first-hand, they brought severe pollution and environmental ruin.<sup>29</sup>

Even though pollution and environmental ruin were taboo subjects for East German photographers, Fischer returned to the Chemical Triangle, both alone and in the company of his models, and photographed the impact of the chemical industry on Bitterfeld in the spring and early summer of the following year.<sup>30</sup> Using black and white and colour film, he photographed fashion models against an industrial landscape littered with heavy machinery, cooling towers, power plants, chemical factories and smoking chimneys that released the harmful by-products of processed coal into the air: sulphur dioxides, particulates, nitrogen oxides and halogenated hydrocarbons. He also documented scenes of everyday life on the streets of Bitterfeld. Together these photographs make up the visual component of ‘Industriestadt Bitterfeld’ (no 4, 1964), a fifteen-page feature that was published two years after his first assignment for *Sibylle*.<sup>31</sup>

To underscore the damage being done to Bitterfeld, Fischer not only pictured his models against an industrial landscape, but he also photographed them standing near equipment used to transport lignite to nearby factories and plants, and along mining sites, where the devastating effects of coal extraction were unmistakable. In one black and white image, for instance, the photographer depicts a model walking on a well-trodden path in a vacant plot of land. Directly behind her a freight train passes along an elevated structure that cuts between a row of houses and is, as the exposed surfaces along its edges and vertical supports reveal, sheathed in a dark grime; an acidic residue that escapes the chimney stacks, owing to their inefficient filters and scrubbers, and coats the entire town.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, in another image, Fischer photographs two models standing on the edge of an open cast mine where greenery once flourished – as the sporadically located weeds and shrubs around their feet make evident. In the background, a dark brown coal bed that matches the colour of their coats and extends both across and beyond the photographic frame lies exposed, already mined for its carbon and hydrocarbons and no longer of any agricultural or financial use. And located in the middle ground are a large extractor, railway tracks, coal

26 Ibid; Fischer did freelance work for *Das Magazin*, *Freie Welt*, *Sonntag* and *Forum* in the 1960s.

27 Rainer Karlsch, ‘Capacity Losses, Reconstruction, and Unfinished Modernization: The Chemical Industry in the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ)/GDR, 1945–1965’, in John E Lesch, ed, *The German Chemical Industry in the Twentieth Century*, Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht, 2000, p 369

28 Ibid, pp 369–386

29 On the Chemistry Conference and first Chemistry Program, see Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2008, pp 23–33.

30 On forbidden subject matter for photographers, see Rudolf Wedler, ‘Fotografieverbote’, *Die Fotografie* 3, March 1962, pp 82–83 and p 96.

31 See Arno Fischer and Peter Brefeld, ‘Industriestadt Bitterfeld’, *Sibylle* 4, August 1964, pp 35–49

32 See Daniel Charles, ‘East German Environment Comes into the Light’, *Science*, vol 247, no 4940, January 1990, pp 274–276





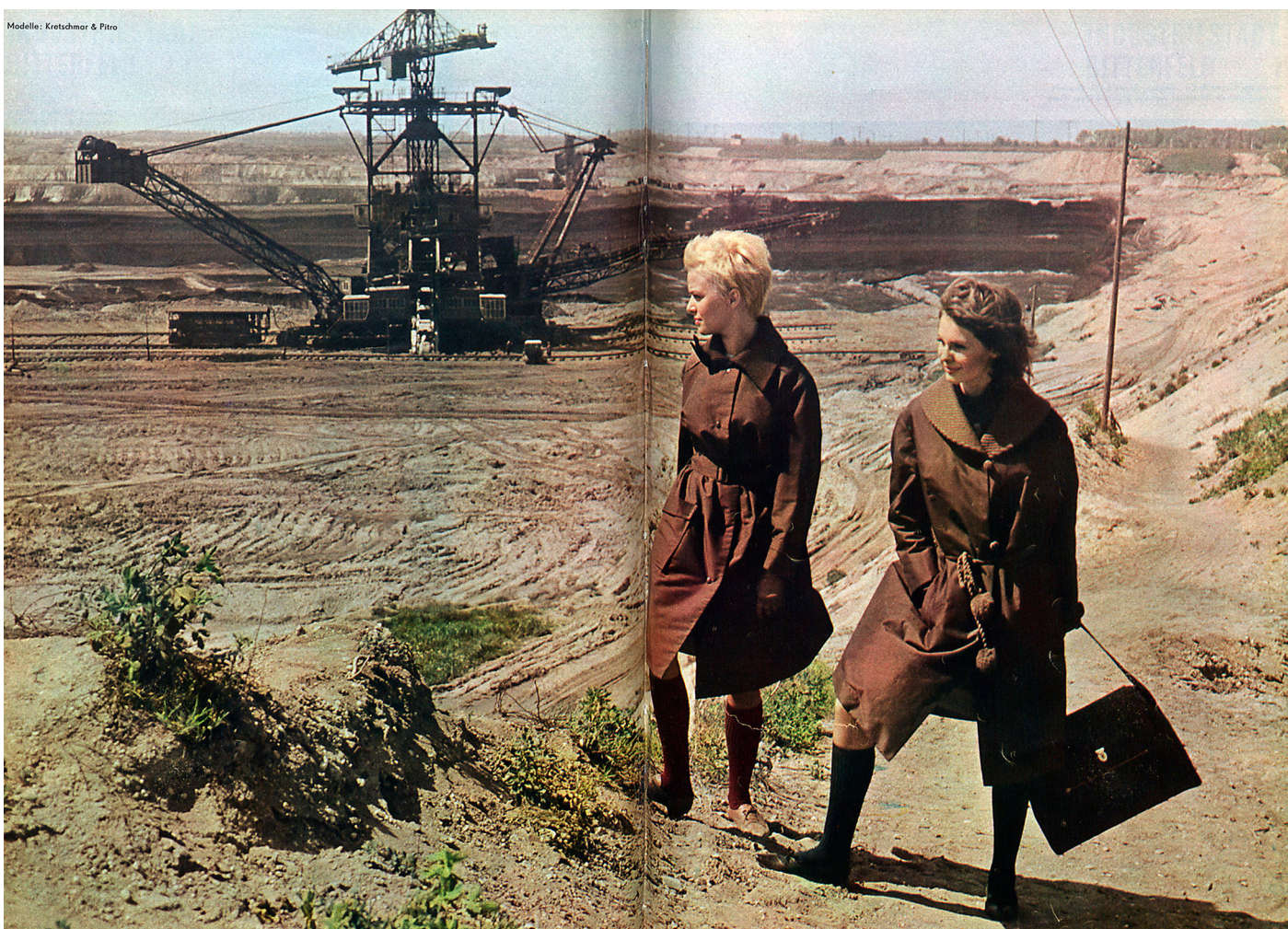
Arno Fischer, 'Industriestadt Bitterfeld' (Industrial Town Bitterfeld), 1964, gelatin silver prints, courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, © Arno Fischer Estate

trains, vehicles and two workers, who, detectable only when the image is magnified, pale in comparison to the massive colliery that simultaneously surrounds and overwhelms them.

Together, these and other images in the series expose the devastation that resulted from the SED's initial drive to modernise East Germany's economy through chemistry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, given the nature of Fischer's work and the venue in which it circulated, they also aestheticise environmental ruin. They do so through their rich tonal contrasts, striking plumes of white and dark grey smoke and beautiful subjects, young East German women wearing the latest fashions. Moreover, in their attempt to abstractly represent and sell commodities made in the GDR – chemical products and fashion – they pay little heed to the individuals and social relations behind the production of such goods.<sup>33</sup> To counter this, Fischer framed his fashion photographs with black and white documentary images. Appearing on the first and last pages of 'Industriestadt Bitterfeld', the latter were taken as the photographer walked the streets of Bitterfeld with a hand-held camera and document children playing, couples holding hands, and people talking, riding bicycles and waiting in the centre of the town. Neither carefully framed like his images in 'Situation Berlin' nor bearing any resemblance to his polished photographs of models taken with a large format camera, these photographs complicate the fashion series by calling attention to the individuals who work for and suffer from

33 On what is known as commodity fetishism, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, pp 11–54.



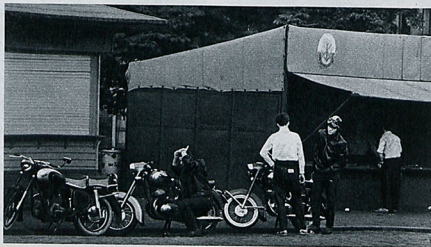


Arno Fischer, 'Industriestadt Bitterfeld' (Industrial Town Bitterfeld), 1964, colour print, courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, © Arno Fischer Estate

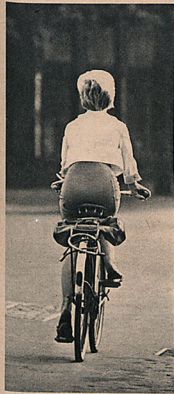


# INDUSTRIESTADT BITTERFELD

Modell: VEB Damenbekleidungswerk Gera



48



49



Dächern in Aktion gesetzt. Die Motorisierten und Wanderlustigen ziehen mit der ganzen Familie in die berühmte Heide der Umgebung, die Vergnügungssüchtigen und Unverheirateten fahren in die nahen alten Großstädte ... Und wenn sie zu dunkler Stunde heimkehren, halten sie die Nase aus dem Zug- oder Autofenster und wissen: Ich bin zu Hause.

Peter Briefeld



Fotos (Seiten 35-49): Arno Fischer

Arno Fischer, 'Industriestadt Bitterfeld' (Industrial Town Bitterfeld), 1964, colour print, courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, © Arno Fischer Estate

the chemical industry. That is, Fischer's documentary images, which appear out of place in the series and, for that matter, in the fashion and culture magazine, disrupt the consumption of his fashion photographs by reminding the viewer of the individuals who live, work, and raise their children in this toxic environment.

Despite its sensitive subject matter, Pfannstiel agreed to include 'Industriestadt Bitterfeld' in the August 1964 issue of *Sibylle*; however, to ensure that she would not encounter any problems with members of the SED, whom she regularly met with to discuss the contents of the magazine after its two hundred thousand copies were already printed, she paired Fischer's photographs with a lengthy text written by Peter Brefeld.<sup>34</sup> Echoing the content of Fischer's images, Brefeld describes a town haunted by a 'terrible stench' and 'covered in a gigantic veil of haze and smoke', and justifies the theme and location of the feature by arguing that Bitterfeld's residents not only long for, but deserve 'beauty, freshness, and lightness' – all things that *Sibylle* could provide for as little as 2.50 DM, the cost of a single issue.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to changing the kinds of fashion spreads that appeared in *Sibylle* and using his latitude at the magazine to bring attention to the environmental damage that resulted from the SED's industrial policies in Bitterfeld, Fischer began to explore photography as a subject matter. In his series 'Regentage' (Rainy Days) (no 5, 1964), for instance, a ten-page fashion spread that pictures models in East Berlin and along the Baltic Sea, the photographer used the first three of his eleven photographs to address the nature of the photograph and his role in the photographic process.<sup>36</sup> He opens this series with an image of a model standing in a field of dirt behind Berlin Cathedral. Dressed in a long green coat, matching hat and black gloves, she is seen leaning against a Wartburg (brand of East German car) with one arm behind her back and the other holding a plastic raincoat casually draped over her right shoulder. The car, which is placed at an angle almost perpendicular to the picture plane, at once appears to extend into the space of the viewer and recedes toward the middle ground of the photograph. Its strategic position in relation to Fischer's camera permits the photographer to capture the reflection of the model and the cathedral in its windows, in effect duplicating their image within the photograph. In the following image, a different model is seen standing alongside a car located in front of the Berlin Cathedral, a position made evident by the portico of the Altes Museum in the image's upper left-hand corner. Again, through the careful positioning of the model and car, Fischer is able to include the model and the Berlin Cathedral twice within a single frame, underscoring, together with the previous image, the fundamental characteristic of the photograph: it, too, doubles its subject.

This photograph of a model before the Berlin Cathedral is paired with one of a model standing in front of a car parked along Große Hamburger Straße on the series' second double-page. Wearing a loose-fitting coat and leather gloves, the model in the latter photograph assumes a familiar stance for the camera: her left hand is placed in her coat pocket, while her right hand holds an open umbrella that rests on her shoulder. Distinct from the series' previous two images in which the photographer stood outside the car, Fischer takes this photograph while standing between the car's interior and its open door. By working from this position, he is

34 Unlike other print material, such as books and plays, magazines were vetted after they were printed in the GDR. On this, see Josie McLellan, "Even under Socialism, We Don't Want to do Without Love": East German Erotica', in David Crowley and Susan E Reid, eds, *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2010, p 224.

35 Brefeld, Fischer and Brefeld, 'Industriestadt Bitterfeld', op cit, p 35

36 See Fischer, 'Regentage', *Sibylle* 5, October 1964, pp 2–12; two photographs in this series, which appear on its second page, were taken by Günter Rössler.





Arno Fischer, 'Regentage' (Rainy Days), 1964, gelatin silver prints, courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, © Arno Fischer Estate

able to capture the model along with the street and buildings behind her, and, through the mirror located between the camera and the scene photographed, the inverse side of the photographic plane, where Fischer and his camera reside. In doing so, Fischer draws attention to the other side of the photograph (a play on the converse locations of his models in the series' opening images), implicating himself in the production of the image. More than this, as writer, curator, and artist David Company argues in the context of Lee Friedlander's self-portraits, Fischer 'invites [the viewer] to identify with the camera position, or more abstractly with the making of the photograph'.<sup>37</sup> In other words, by including the mirror in the foreground of his image, Fischer points to the making of the photograph and his own involvement in the process.

Either offering a self-reflexive critique of photography or underscoring the impact of the chemical industry on the environment, series like 'Regentage' and 'Industriestadt Bitterfeld' would have never been published in East Germany in the 1960s had it not been for *Sibylle*. Fischer's images would have been, as curator Ulrich Domröse describes the countless photographs by East German artists unable to exhibit or publish their work, 'proverbial pictures for the bottom drawer'.<sup>38</sup> This was largely due to a shift in how photography and photographers were treated in the previous decade and the wavering support art photographers received from official channels after 1959.

37 David Company, "'A Theoretical Diagram in an Empty Classroom': Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women*", *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 30, no 1, 2007, p 15

38 Domröse, 'Reality, Engagement, Critique', in *Geschlossene Gesellschaft*, op cit, p 300

In the 1950s, the East German state made several attempts to influence photographic culture in the GDR. It recognised early on that photography could be used to assist in the building of socialism and called on photographers to take straightforward photographs that highlighted the progress being made in the GDR and the hardworking citizens responsible for the country's developments.<sup>39</sup> Under this pressure, some photographers produced images of socialist achievements in architecture, industry, and sports, the reconstruction of East German cities, and tireless workers in factories, mines and agricultural settings; others did not. A small group of photographers, which included Fischer, Richter, and Ursula Arnold, used their cameras to document everyday life as they saw and experienced it and often challenged the idealised images that circulated in the mainstream media. Despite doing so, some of them were offered commercial assignments, permitted to coordinate their own group shows and invited to exhibit their work in galleries run by the Kulturbund.

The East German state and its cultural organisations thus initially supported different kinds of photographic practices. This began to change, however, in the late 1950s. This was in part because the state, in an attempt to democratise the medium of photography and, as art historian Sarah James accurately argues, to 'destroy the last vestiges of its formerly bourgeois aesthetic', began to encourage workers to rival the output of professional photographers and to actively promote amateur photography in photography publications, such as *Fotojahrbuch* (Photo Yearbook), and recurring exhibitions that ranged from the *Berliner Internationale Fotoausstellung* (Berlin's International Photo Exhibition) to the *Fotoschau der DDR* (East German Photo Show).<sup>40</sup> It was also in part because the Kulturbund, having no single organisation to oversee the activities of photographers, established the ZKF in May 1959 and immediately tasked it with organising all photography exhibitions in the GDR, providing photographers with artistic and political guidance, lending support to photography groups and monitoring the contents of *Die Fotografie* (Photography), a photography journal that featured the work of amateur and professional photographers from the Eastern Bloc and abroad.<sup>41</sup>

In June 1959, one month after it was founded, the ZKF published its first newsletter in *Die Fotografie*. In a section dedicated to photography groups, its vice chairman, Friedrich Herneck, argued that photography had to help 'lead [East Germans] to victory in the struggle against imperialist and fascist ideology and bourgeois decadence that invades [East Germany] from the West through artistic means' and that 'photographers, like writers, must help with the great task of building socialism through their specific artistic means'.<sup>42</sup> Put into practice this meant that photographers were supposed to continue to capture the GDR not as it was, but as it could be and to motivate East Germans to continue to assist in the building of socialism. Photographers interested in having their work printed in *Die Fotografie* and included in official photography exhibitions took photographs that expressed the organisation's needs. Meanwhile, those wanting to capture something other than the orthodox scenes and figures promoted by the ZKF found other venues to show their work. In Fischer's case, he accepted a position at *Sibylle*.

Viewed as a means to promote fashion and culture rather than as a platform for the development of art photography in the GDR, *Sibylle*

39 See Herneck, et al, *Fotografie und Gesellschaft*, op cit

40 Sarah James, *Common Ground: German Photographic Cultures Across the Iron Curtain*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013, p 121; Made in April 1959, the SED's decision to encourage workers to produce cultural artefacts led to a movement known as the *Bitterfelder Weg* (Bitterfeld Way). On this, see *Greif zur Feder, Kumpell! Protokoll der Autorenkonferenz des Mitteldeutschen Verlages, Halle (Saale), am 24. April 1959 im Kulturpalast des Elektrochemischen Kombinats Bitterfeld, Mitteldeutscher, Halle, 1959*; On these and all other exhibitions overseen by the ZKF, see Rainer Knapp, *Chronik der Gesellschaft für Fotografie (GfF): eine Zeitgeschichte zur Fotografie im Kulturbund der DDR, 1945 bis 1990*, Kulturbund e.V., Berlin, 2008, pp 11–80.

41 Herneck, 'Vor neuen Aufgaben', in *Fotografie und Gesellschaft*, op cit, p 14

42 Friedrich Herneck, 'Über die grundsätzlichen Aufgaben der Fotogruppen der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik', *Mitteilungsblatt der Zentralen Kommission Fotografie in Die Fotografie* 6, June 1959, unpaginated

was not monitored to the same degree as ZKF magazines and exhibitions, and Pfannstiel had the freedom to publish what she thought would help modernise the magazine in the 1960s. She was therefore able to print fashion series that would have been excluded from other venues not only in the latter half of the Ulbricht era, but also in the 1980s, when photography was finally accepted as an autonomous artform in the GDR and art photographers saw their work included in the IX. *Kunstaussstellung der DDR* (Ninth National Art Exhibition), published in *Die Fotografie*, and exhibited in the hundreds of galleries that either opened or began to exhibit photography for the first time.<sup>43</sup>

One germane example amply demonstrates how tighter control over particular venues persisted into the GDR's final decade. In 1983, Helga Paris began to document the city of Halle/Saale and its residents. Part of East Germany's Chemical Triangle, the city's outskirts housed two large factories, Leuna-Werke and Chemische Werke Buna, which provided jobs and new apartments for thousands of workers and their families between the 1960s and late 1980s. While these factories caused the city to thrive, Paris neither captured Halle/Saale's modern concrete housing towers nor its bustling streets; instead, she spent her time photographing pedestrians on quiet streets and the city's neglected pre-war architecture, heavily stained by soot and often surrounded in a haze of contaminants.

Despite calling attention to Halle/Saale's severe pollution problem, Paris's photographs were met with enthusiasm by the Association of Visual Artists of the GDR (Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR, or VBK). In 1986, the organisation decided to sponsor an exhibition of her work at the Galerie Marktschlösschen Halle. However, on 24 June 1986 – a few weeks before the show's opening, but *after* its poster, invitation card and catalogue, which included fifty-six full-page illustrations, had already been printed – local SED officials asked the VBK to postpone the exhibition until the following spring. Their explanation was that the exhibition gave a 'false impression' of Halle/Saale and should not coincide with the 1,025th anniversary of the city.<sup>44</sup>

In the months leading up to the new exhibition date, several unfavourable events took place. In February 1987, Günter Kuhback, a member of the local cultural committee, argued that Paris's catalogue was still too negative and the VBK was forced to ask contributors to revise their texts – changing descriptions such as 'grey' into 'occasional grey' and 'dark river' into 'rather dark river' – and the photographer to replace sixteen photographs and to rewrite the foreword.<sup>45</sup> Though Paris and her collaborators agreed, the show was postponed again, this time until June 1987, and the cultural committee refused to print the second edition of the exhibition catalogue, even after it was approved by the VBK on 20 May 1987. The SED also decided to stop the second installation of the exhibition and to confiscate all catalogues and posters advertising the show. Frustrated from these delays and the indecision of officials, Paris demanded the return of her photographs and, unlike Fischer who was able to publish his photographs of Bitterfeld in 1964, did not exhibit *Häuser und Gesichter* at the Galerie Marktschlösschen Halle until 1990.

Owing to Pfannstiel's desire to transform *Sibylle* and her newfound interest in photography in the 1960s, Fischer was able to explore new themes and to publish images that had no place in East Germany's

43 On this shift in photography's status in the GDR and the treatment of art photographers in the 1980s, see Candice M Hamelin, 'The Diversification of East Germany's Visual Culture', in Jennifer Evans, Paul Betts and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, eds, *The Ethics of Seeing: Photography and Twentieth-Century German History*, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2018, pp 227–249.

44 Bernd Lindner, 'Ein Land – zwei Bildwelten: Fotografie und Öffentlichkeit in der DDR', in Karin Hartewig and Alf Lüdtke, eds, *Die DDR im Bild: zum Gebrauch der Fotografie im anderen deutschen Staat*, Wallstein, Göttingen, 2004, p 198; and Helmut Brade, 'Häuser und Gesichter: Halle 1983–85', in Inka Schube, ed, *Helga Paris: Fotografien: Photographs*, Holzwarth, Berlin, 2004, p 286

45 Brade, *ibid*



visual culture at the time. Not only did his work play a significant role in modernising the publication, it also attracted the attention of other East German art photographers, who, unable to circulate their photographs in exhibitions and publications overseen by the ZKF – unless, of course, they met the organisation’s requirements – began to work at the magazine alongside Fischer.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the ZKF, which would continue to restrict and monitor the activities of photographers, albeit to varying degrees, up until the fall of the Berlin Wall, *Sibylle* offered East German art photographers the opportunity to earn an income and, more importantly, to circulate their work in the GDR.

<sup>46</sup> Jochen Moll, Roger Melis, Michael Weidt and Sibylle Bergemann, for instance, began working for the magazine in the second half of the 1960s.

# Infiltrating the Art World through Photography

## Petr Štembera's 1970s Networks

Hana Buddeus

- 1 The sale of artworks was only permissible under the supervision of government-controlled organisations. In Czechoslovakia, art was bought and sold through the organisation Dílo (The Work); the Slovak equivalent was Dielo. Since 1964, all sales and promotion of Czech art abroad, including the production of exhibitions and audio-visual projects and issues of copyright, was handled by the organisation 'Art Centrum: Czechoslovak Visual Arts Institute', which later became subsumed under the Ministry of Foreign Trade. For more information about Art Centrum and the economic context of art in socialist Czechoslovakia see Daniela Kramerová, 'Art Centrum', in Milena Bartlová and Jindřich Vybíral, eds, *Budování státu: Reprezentace Československa v umění, architektuře a designu* (Building a State: The Representation of Czechoslovakia in Art, Architecture and Design), exhibition catalogue, Academy of Arts, Architecture

The research into artists who actively worked to create Czechoslovak performance art in the 1970s reveals the importance of photography for these endeavours. From today's perspective, it is clear that the commercialisation and institutionalisation of so-called dematerialised art is not a contradiction, but rather the consequence of the fact that photography helped this type of creativity to be understood as visual art. It might have seemed paradoxical that so-called dematerialised artworks eventually entered the market and the institutions thanks to various forms of documentation, including photography. The initial impulse behind Czech performance art of the 1970s was not so much about freeing art from its dependency on the market or institutions. Historically, after all, a great number of traditional artworks, paintings, drawings or sculptures were created without the prospect of being sold or shown to the public.<sup>1</sup>

While the need to question the commodity status of the artwork through performance art might not have been a major concern, the ease with which it was able to cross borders through photographic documentation is a crucial characteristic. In the early 1970s Petr Štembera surveyed the photographic medium, searching for ways to visualise his exploration of the world. He eventually abandoned this use of the medium later in the 1970s; yet photography as a means of communication continued to be an important part of his time-based art works.<sup>2</sup>

Given that performances in Prague were rarely seen by more than a few close friends, photographic documentation enabled them to reach a wider audience abroad. With the discontinuation of two important Czech journals of contemporary art *Výtvarné umění* and *Výtvarná práce* in 1971, contemporary performance art lost one of its avenues for reaching secondary audiences through reproductions. Writing about Jiří Kovanda, Klara

- and Design, UMPRUM, Praha, 2015, pp 343–350.
- 2 For detailed information on Czech performance art see Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, Karolinum Press, Charles University, Praha, 2014.
  - 3 Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art*, I B Tauris, London and New York, 2014, p 199
  - 4 'Strom' (Tree, October–November 1978), Kabinet fotografie J Funka, Brno; *Haruyama – Kovanda – Langer – Miler – Mlčoch – Pliva – Richtr – Steklík – Ström – Štembera – Valoch*, exhibition catalogue, Vysokoškolský klub Hradec Králové, Hradec Králové, 1977; 'Příroda' (Nature, June–July 1976), Institut průmyslového designu, Jeruzalémská 8, Praha 1
  - 5 Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, Reaktion, London, 2009, p 249
  - 6 See Bożena Stoklosa, 'Authors Galleries in Poland in the 1970's: A Description of a New Artistic Movement', manuscript, in the library and archive at De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam
  - 7 Lawrence Alloway, 'Network: The Artworld Described as a System' [1972], in Lars Bang Larsen, ed, *Networks*, Series: Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, London and Cambridge Massachusetts, 2014, pp 46–51
  - 8 Klaus Groh, *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa: Jugoslawien, Polen, Rumänien, Sowjetunion, Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn*, Du Mont Schauberg, Köln, 1972, unpaginated, see <http://www.artpool.hu/2015/Groh/index.html>, accessed 2 May 2018

Kemp-Welch aptly describes this situation as the 'double absence of a conventional audience'. She points out that under the conditions of the Czechoslovak 1970s, there was no primary audience on the streets or secondary audience in the galleries to speak of.<sup>3</sup> There were of course exceptions to this too, and in the second half of the 1970s a few exhibitions were actually put up in flats, galleries, or other accessible places, and sometimes included a catalogue, as was the case with the exhibition 'Strom' (Tree), prepared by Jaroslav Anděl in Brno (1978), or the group exhibition in Hradec Králové (1977), which consisted of a few performances, or the 'Příroda' (Nature, 1976) exhibition at the Institute of Industrial Design in Prague.<sup>4</sup> As Piotr Piotrowski stated when describing the 1970s Czech art scene: 'Unconventional locations encouraged unconventional actions.'<sup>5</sup> Performances often took place in spaces such as studios, flats, attics, or the basements of public institutions where a number of performance artists were employed as depository workers. All that is left of these performances today is again their photographic documentation, and in the pictures, we always recognise the same tiles, the same walls, and especially the same (or slightly alternating) tiny audience, who are often drawn into active participation.

On both sides of the Iron Curtain, there were attempts to describe the change in how the art world operated as *networking* – albeit for very different reasons. Networking was not only part of the efforts to liberate art from the vicious circle spun by the market and institutions; it was a way of freeing art from official structures ('to create freely') without isolating it. In Poland, Jaroslav Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostolowski wrote the NET manifesto, which reads: 'The network is outside any institutions and it is made up of private flats and other places where artistic proposals appear... They are accompanied by publications whose form is discretionary (manuscripts, typescripts, tapes, films, slides, photographs, etc) and they can be simultaneously presented in all the points.'<sup>6</sup> On the other side of the curtain, Lawrence Alloway of *Artforum* describes art as a non-hierarchical system, the product of which is not art itself but the distribution of art (texts about art, reproductions, exhibitions, etc).<sup>7</sup>

In the seventies, Petr Štembera began and continued to maintain correspondence with many artists, curators and collectors who helped him to negotiate his participation in projects abroad. It is significant that it was from him that Klaus Groh learned about a practice resembling conceptual art taking place in Eastern Europe, outside of Western capitalist countries, and decided to publish the book *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* (Current Art in Eastern Europe).<sup>8</sup> In the autumn of 1970, Štembera sent Josef Kroutvor's text titled 'Possibilities', to Groh, together with photographs and records documenting contemporary art in Czechoslovakia, and he also raised the prospect of a publication. Further, Štembera exchanged letters with Chris Burden, Terry Fox and Tom Marioni, among others. Tom Marioni and Chris Burden came to Prague, while Štembera and Terry Fox met in Los Angeles. Štembera found himself in a situation which Jindřich Chaloupecký describes as follows: 'Abroad they are well-known; at home their names won't ring a bell, save for a modest circle of very close friends.'<sup>9</sup> While it may appear that Czech art became isolated and very 'authentic' during the so-called normalisation period, Štembera in fact participated in dozens of exhibitions abroad, and his works were reproduced on the pages of magazines such as *Flash Art*, *Heute Kunst*,



TOM MARIONI

# real social realism

ART IS A POETIC RECORD OF THE CULTURE, AND PEOPLE UNDERSTAND the culture of the past by studying the art and products of past civilizations. The development of technology in the 20th century has speeded up time; this creates rapid changes in the atmosphere of society and in art. It is now possible to find in art accurate records of the very recent past, encompassing the style of a particular region of the world. In this way, Andy Warhol—a personality and producer of a body of work emphasizing mass-production, and repetition—exemplifies the United States of the 1960s, an era we can now recognize as different from today.

Conceptual art, an art of the '70s, as it was developed in America, was a reaction against the materialism of the '60s, and records our country's swing away from that frame of mind. Intelligent people in America, and in the world, have become less oriented to personal goods and more aware of the frailty of our world.

We can now see the world from a distance, from the moon in photographs, which gives us a new sense of scale. To be able to see in one picture one-half of our world affects our consciousness in the same way that we were affected by Copernicus when he brought it to our attention that the earth moves around the sun. We began 500 years ago to question that we were made in the image of God when we realized we might not be the center of the universe. Now, we know we are not. Our world seems to get smaller and smaller.

The artist spends his time taking in information. The artist spends more time looking and listening than the layman, and is a trained observer, a private investigator. The artist translates what he sees around him into a form, which in turn becomes part of the culture it defines. The work of art communicates for the artist his intelligence through the visual craftsmanship of the activity or the object. The work of art is not the object; the work of art is the information that is communicated, a stimulating experience that awakens the intellect through the senses.

Since the end of the 1960s, many artists, not only in America but all over the world, have begun to develop an art of theory, of aesthetic activity, of proposition and study as the form, rather than the production of objects as the aim and purpose of the art.

This art is very strong in Eastern Europe in relationship to object-oriented art, although its development there seems to be for different reasons than its development in the west.

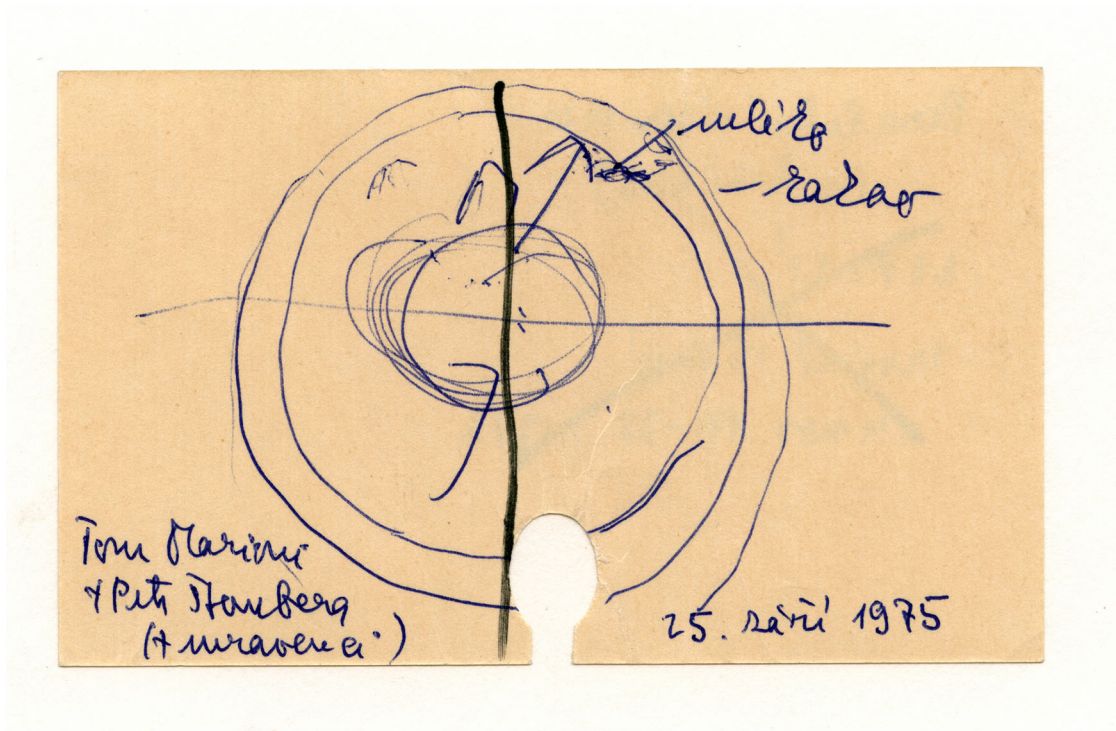
To varying degrees in Eastern European countries the political system, through the control of money, does not allow the manipulation of the art object as a product that can be merchandized and re-sold, increasing in value and fitting into a supply and demand system. So the art object is automatically less important than in the west. And since the making of art objects is scrutinized and often controlled by political forces, an artist who wishes to explore philosophic ideas may be more free to do so in making actions. These may not be understood by those enforcing repressive political ideas, yet the point will be made to the art community, and so, perhaps, find its way into the culture.

The fact that conceptual art is strong in Eastern Europe as well as in the west shows how small the world has become. The individual works being done by artists show how clearly their culture differs from other cultures in the world.





Petr Štembera and Tom Marioni, *Connection*, documentation of a performance, black and white photograph, 1975, Archive of the National Gallery in Prague



Petr Štembera, *Connection*, sketch, 1975, Archive of the National Gallery in Prague

9 Jindřich Chaloupecký, 'Příběh Petra Štembery a Jana Mlčocha' (The Story of Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch), in Jindřich Chaloupecký, *Na hranicích umění* (On the Borders of Art), Prostor, Praha, 1990, p. 134

10 For the list of exhibitions in which Štembera participated, see for example Karel Srp, ed, *Petr Štembera: Performance*, Situace 11, Jazz bulletin supplement, Jazzová sekce, Praha, 1981; Karel Srp, ed, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch: 1970–1980*, (25 November 1997–25 January 1998), exhibition catalogue, Prague City Gallery, Praha, 1997.

11 Petr Štembera, 'Events, Happenings, Land-Art, etc., in Czechoslovakia', quoted in Lucy R Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Praeger, New York, 1973, pp. 169–170, (originally published in Petr

*High Performance*, and others.<sup>10</sup> This was possible thanks to a number of contacts, some of which were Czechs living abroad (as for example Charlotte Kotik or Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro), and others who were foreign curators and artists interested in performance and Eastern European Art. One of the key contacts abroad was Helena Kontová: before leaving for Italy she had shared an office in the National Gallery in Prague with another performance artist, Karel Miler, and she belonged to the circle of friends who attended the Prague-based performance artists' events. The photographs, reprinted in *Flash Art* 76, from the wedding of Helena Kontová to Giancarlo Politi, the Editor-in-Chief, thus work as a symbolic confirmation of cultural relations directly on the pages of the magazine, which regularly published 1970s Czech art. Between 1973 and 1977, both Petr Štembera and Karel Miler were each represented in five different issues of the magazine (not including the in-text illustrations). Štembera and Mariononi's *Connection* (1975) appears alongside a photo story by John Stezaker, while *Measuring* (1974) by Miler appeared next to *Duration Piece* #31 (1973/1974) by Douglas Huebler. That Štembera was becoming a household name in the emerging networks is also evidenced by the very fact that he is included in the renowned *Dematerialization* book by Lucy Lippard.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, it is significant that throughout the 1970s, Štembera used the metaphor of contact in several works. For example, from Jan Mlčoch's memories and his description we know about one undocumented performance by Petr Štembera in which he was joined by the Hungarian artist Tamás Szentjóbby.<sup>12</sup> As Mlčoch stated, the event revolved around the two performers shaking hands and symbolically affirming the act by



Štembera, 'Events, Happenings and Land-Art in Czechoslovakia: A Short Information', *Revista de Arte*, Puerto Rico, May–June 1970.) This time was an exception in that it was *not* on Štembera's own initiative, Petr Štembera, personal communication, 18 July 2012, Prague.

- 12 Jan Mlčoch, personal communication, 26 July 2012

- 13 Participating artists: Imre Bak, Peter Bartos, László Beke, Miklós Erdély, Stano Filko, György Galántai, Péter Halász, Béla Hap, Ágnes Háy, Tamás Hencze, György Jovánovics, J H Kocman, Péter Legény, János Major, László Méhes, Gyula Pauer, Vladjimir Popovic, Petr Štembera, Rudolf Šikora, Tamás Szentjóby, Anna Szeredi, Endre Tót, Péter Türk, Jiří Valoch. The event took place on 26 August 1972 in Balatonboglár. See Filip Ceněk, Daniel Grůň, Barbora Klímová, eds, *Nauzájem: Umělci a společenství na Moravě 70.–80. let 20. století* (Mutually: Artists and Communities in Moravia in the 1970s–1980s), exhibition catalogue, Tranzit/Dům umění města Brna, Praha/Brno, 2013, pp 32–34

- 14 Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', in Paul Schimmel and Russell Fergusson, eds, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, (MOCA at the Geffen Contemporary, 8 February–10 May 1998), Thames and Hudson for MOCA–Los Angeles, London 1998, p 306

- 15 In October 1975 he also had an exhibition entitled 'Myśląc głośno' at Foksal Gallery in Warsaw.

- 16 Tom Marioni, 'Real Social Realism', *Vision* 2, January 1976, p 7

wrapping the handshake in barbed wire. The description of this performance brings to mind the photographs from the gathering of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian artists organised by László Beke, namely the collective 'Shaking Hands' event, which has been preserved as a photographic tableau (*Handshake Action, Balatonboglár, 1972*), and during which all participants (Štembera included) shook hands in order to fulfil the aim of the meeting – establishing contact.<sup>13</sup> We might assume that the event Mlčoch remembers is the very same one: upon closer inspection, one of the photographs clearly shows that in the handshake between Petr Štembera and László Beke (and not Szentjóby), both artists' hands were wrapped with barbed wire. Moreover, Štembera considered the difficulties he faced when trying to keep in contact with the artworld in his piece *Connection* (1975), when the American performer Tom Marioni visited Prague. On 27 September 1975, Štembera and Marioni met in the attic of an apartment building on Mařákova Street to do a performance together, and so to reaffirm symbolically the connection between Californian and Czechoslovak art. Kristine Stiles interprets *Connection* as a portrayal of 'brotherhood within the conflict of East and West'.<sup>14</sup> At the same time it was one of a direct realisation of Marioni's idea that an artwork is above all a communicated unit of information.

Marioni's trip to Europe was made in order to prepare for the second issue of the magazine *Vision*, which was dedicated to Eastern European art and was published in January 1976.<sup>15</sup> The introductory text called 'Real Social Realism' is accompanied by reprints of the shot of the Earth taken from the Moon. With this example, Marioni illustrates how photography helps us see the world differently.

We can now see the world from a distance, from the moon in photographs, which gives us a new sense of scale. To be able to see in one picture one-half of our world affects our consciousness in the same way that we were affected by Copernicus when he brought it to our attention that the earth moves around the sun... Our world seems to get smaller and smaller.<sup>16</sup>

On the one hand there is the artist's experience as such, which is more or less incommunicable, but on the other there is the statement in the shape of a photograph and a brief description of the situation, which can be transmitted freely around the globe through reproductions. Apparently, Štembera was also aware of this when he decided to print one of the photographs taken during his event in postcard format so that it could be easily reproduced and sent in envelopes as a report that the performance happened. The photograph chosen by Štembera to represent the *Connection* piece indeed aptly captures his original idea, which has been preserved thanks to a little drawing he made, showing concentric circles resembling a target with a written description saying 'milk', 'cocoa' and 'Petr Štembera + Tom Marioni (+ ants)'. Apart from photographs, which tell the course of the event like a story, the formally perfect and unique photograph printed as a card thus works as an apt illustration of the idea which is at the core of the performance; that is, the metaphor of a connection embodied by hungry ants trapped in circles of a sweet, sticky substance on the bodies of the Czech and Californian performers. What counted was the physical presence and the uncomfortable position of the East-West contact, amplified by the hungry ants: not who the par-



Reproduction of a painting sent to Hans Oiseau by Petr Štembera within his *Perform this Gesture* piece (from 1971), collection of Hans Oiseau

ticipants were. That is why Štembera chose a photograph abstracting the real situation and showing only the detail of the performers' bodies. This photograph bears visual resemblance to the reproduction of a work by Dennis Oppenheim, which must have been known to Štembera from the Lucy Lippard book<sup>17</sup> (the same picture was also reprinted in the first issue of *Avalanche*). It was in fact a still from Oppenheim's film *Arm & Wire* (1969) which is composed in a similar manner, showing the abstracting detail without any context: the documentation records the shape of the painful physical merging – not of two performers' bodies, but of flesh and wire.

Štembera's co-operation with the Belgian New Reform Gallery serves as a good example of how he used extensive correspondence and documentation photography to penetrate the international art scene in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> The New Reform Gallery, a space for performance and conceptual art, experimental music, film and theatre, operated in the Belgian town of Aalst, and in Antwerp, in the years 1970–1979.<sup>19</sup> Its founder, Roger D'Hondt, aimed to create a platform for live art, and to free art from the necessity to follow the traditional exhibition model as supported by institutions and the market. From the very beginnings of the gallery's activities, D'Hondt established a partnership with Štembera, thanks to which his name appeared regularly in international exhibitions he organised. The co-operation was carried out through intensive correspondence, and exhibitions and publications were made based on the instructions Štembera sent. In 1972, Roger D'Hondt even visited Štembera in Prague, and before that, he included him in his 'Informatie Concept Art' (Information Concept Art, 22 August – 15 September 1971) exhibition, followed amongst others by 'Concept Makers' (21 January – 27 February 1972, Aalst), 'Tendenzen van een nieuwe kunst' (Tendencies of New Art Forms, 13 December 1972 – 15 January 1973, Aalst), 'Wij hebben ook Ideeën' (We Also Have Ideas, 17 March – 8 April 1973) or 'Kreatieve Prentbriefkaarten' (Creative Postcards, 19–25 May 1973). In the first half of the decade he even organised two solo exhibitions of Štembera's work (6–28 May 1972 and 24 April – 3 May 1974). Thanks to the instructions which Štembera sent to D'Hondt, we have a complete list of the works exhibited at the first solo show, including *Action Schutzgebiet* (with Klaus Groh, sixteen photos 18 x 24 cm), *Concept-book* (twenty-seven pages) *Transposition of 2 Stones* (six photos 30 x 24 cm and Map of Prague, 1971); *Handpieces: Sewing machine's work* (six photos 18 x 24 cm); *Handpieces: Typewriting* (thirteen photos 18 x 24 cm); *Handpieces: Buttons sewing* (eight photos 18 x 24 cm) and 'all materials to Perform (circa 30 photos etc)', as Štembera puts it, by which he means the collective mail art piece *Perform this Gesture* initiated by him in 1971.<sup>20</sup> For this piece, he sent each participant a reproduction of a different painting and asked them to adopt the same gesture or to interpret it, and to send back its photographic documentation.<sup>21</sup> He also presented *Meteorological Informations* (1971–1972). Simultaneously, a limited edition of five black and white photographs from Štembera's *Transposition of Two Stones*, signed by the author, was sold as part of the 'Edition New Reform', the gallery's publishing endeavours. An issue of a gallery monthly *New Reform Nieuws* states that the price for one set was five hundred francs.<sup>22</sup> In Štembera's letter to D'Hondt informing him that the said photographs had been sent, he specifically tells him not to sell them at

17 Lippard, ed, *Six Years*, op cit

18 I am grateful to Roger D'Hondt for his help with the search for information, and for granting me access to his archives.

19 See Roger D'Hondt, ed, *New Reform Retrospektief 1970–1979*, Erembodegem, 1988

20 Letters from Petr Štembera to Roger D'Hondt, 3 March and 14 April 1972

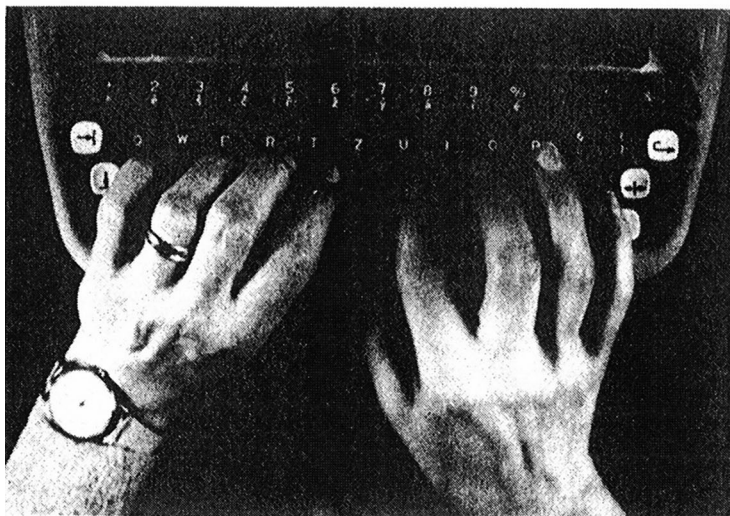
21 Artists who participated in this piece include: H W Kalkmann, Janos Urban, Peter Kennedy, Julius Koller, Rudolf Sikora, J H Kocman, Gábor Attalai, Tamás Szentjóby, Julien Blaine, Eric Andersen, Bogdanka Poznanovic, Udo Breger. Letters from Petr Štembera to Roger D'Hondt, 3 March 1972. I am grateful to Emese Kürti who sent me a reproduction of the original postcard from the archive of Tamás Szentjóby; and to Hans Oiseau (H W Kalkmann) who provided me with his contribution to the collective piece.

22 *New Reform Nieuws*, 8 March 1972



group—Milan Knížák, Soňa Šveceová, the Mach brothers, Robert Wittman, Jan Trtílek—entered the public eye in 1964, at a time when non-socialist-realist art activity was permitted officially in Czechoslovakia. . . . In early 1966 they realized a "Topical Event for One House" in Prague-Dejvice. They sent the inhabitants of this house, chosen quite at random, large numbers of bulky parcels . . . and secretly decorated the various floors of the apartment building. . . . Robert Wittman's best-known project was the "Exhibition of Street Reality" in which a little street in Prague was hung with empty picture frames in such a way as to present scenes from life itself. . . . A similar atmosphere was achieved in his "Panel," where he placed a panel with a view-square cut out on the busy crossroads on Jungmann Square in Prague, through which many spectators were able to view the life of the city. Also well known are his "Landscape Frames" from the same period. [In 1964 Mel Ramsden, in Australia, constructed a huge open rectangular "frame" outdoors, as a sculptural viewing framework; Richard Long, unacquainted with the former, made a similar piece in England some years later as did Jan Dibbets in Holland; Marjorie Strider did a series of street and slide works in New York in 1969, utilizing empty frames. (See p. 91.)]

Eugen Brikcius founded the Presentological Society with Rudolph Němec in 1968. The first public meeting of this society was realized on a town square in Prague in May, 1968, and during this event Němec outlined the shadows of the participants onto an enormous roll of paper that was spread over the whole area of the square. Eva Kmentová arranged a one-day exhibition in April 1970 in the Prague Špálova gallery—an event called "Footprints." There was a trail of the artist's footprints that led from the entrance of the gallery onto the first floor—plaster casts—followed by all exhibition participants. In the evening the artist gave the footprints away. Zorka Ságlová arranged her first event in the summer of 1969—with a group of friends she threw a great number of balls onto the water of the Pruhonice pond near Prague. . . . In the autumn of 1969 Ságlová placed mounds of hay and straw in the Špálova gallery, with which the spectators could play according to their own wishes. Her third large event was "Hommage à Gustav Obermann" near Humpolec in Bohemia, where she lighted 19 great bonfires on a snow-bound plain. . . . Petr Štembera stretches out sheets of polyethylene between trees in a snow-covered landscape, stretches textile ribbons in a single color, paints rocks, etc." (Rep.)



Petr Štembera. *Handpieces, Daily Activities, Typewriting* 1971–72.

'Petr Štembera, *Handpieces: Daily Activities, Typewriting*, 1971–1972', reproduced in Lucy Lippard, ed, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, Praeger, New York, 1973, p 170

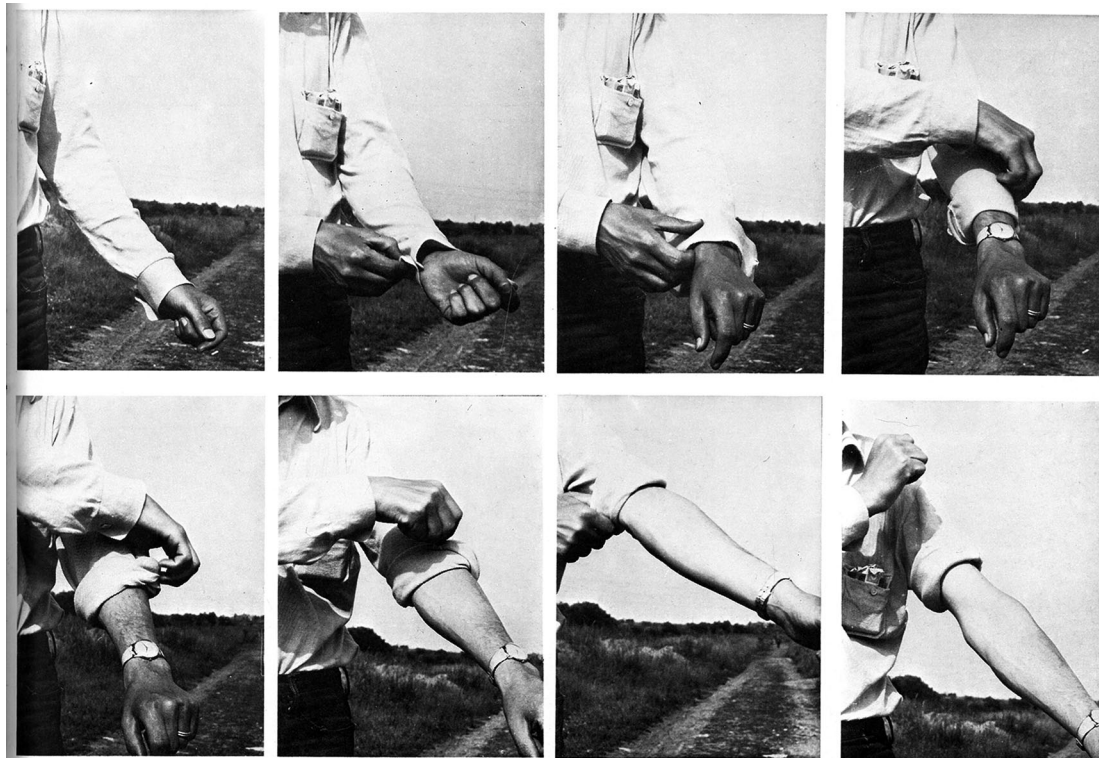
an expensive price and that he did not want to make money from them: the publication of the limited edition was clearly not made for profit. He specifies the same information again in his next letter, emphasising once again that the photographs are to be as reasonably priced as possible, or free, in order to ensure they get to the people who would be interested in them.<sup>23</sup> In April 1974, on the occasion of Štembera's second solo exhibition at the New Reform Gallery in Antwerp, D'Hondt published Štembera's book *Ascetical Pieces* (250 copies, thirty pieces signed by the author).<sup>24</sup> The book includes textual descriptions of the ascetic activities Štembera undertook between 1973 and 1974.

By 1974, one period of Štembera's extensive use of photography as a medium was completed – and, with a few exceptions, he has not presented these works again. Yet those were the works Štembera sent around the world in the early 1970s and which also established his reputation. For example, in her well-known book Lucy Lippard includes Štembera's *Handpieces* cycle, on which he worked between 1971 and 1972, namely a photograph from *Typewriting*.<sup>25</sup> Four photographs documenting different phases of typewriting are also reprinted on the flyer for Štembera's exhibition in the Hungarian town of Pécs, organised by the artist group Pécs Workshop in 1973. The original *Typewriting* photographs can also be found in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Apart from *Typewriting*, LACMA holds other works from his *Daily Activities* cycle from the early 1970s – *Button Sewing* (1971), and the aforemen-

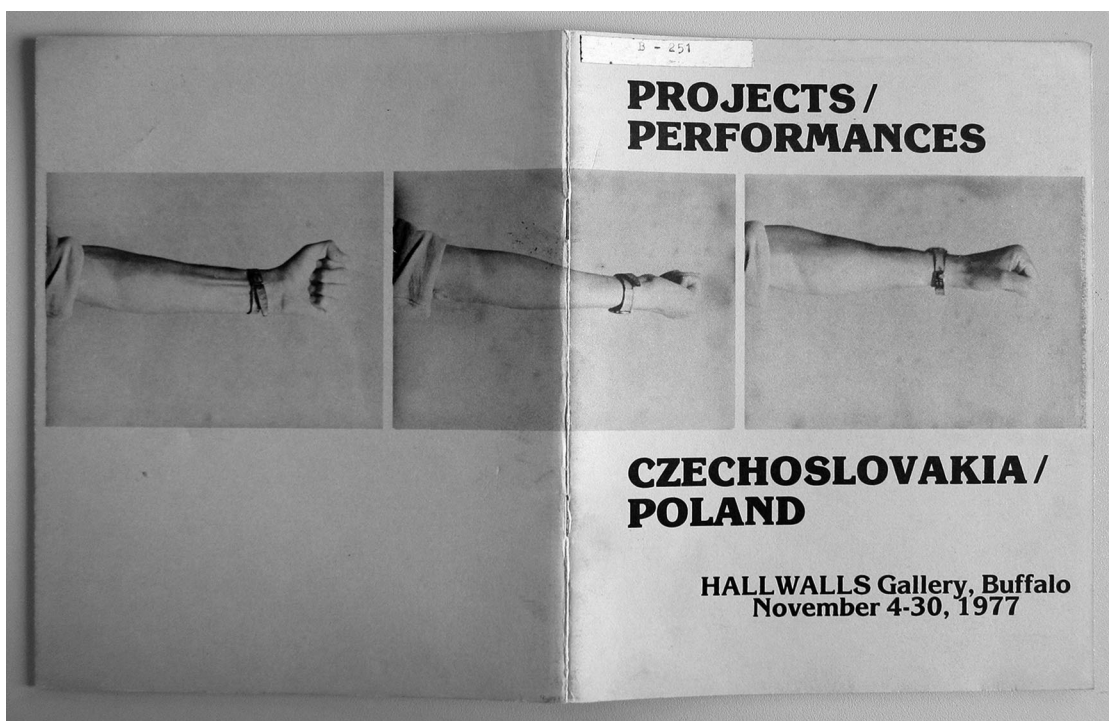
23 Letters from Petr Štembera to Roger D'Hondt, 23 December 1971 and 21 January 1972, Roger D'Hondt personal archive

24 Geneviève Bénamou calls the publication the 'Catalogue of Petr Štembera' in her book *L'Art aujourd'hui en Tchécoslovaquie* (Art in Czechoslovakia Today), 1979.

25 Štembera, 'Events, Happenings', in Lippard, ed, *Six Years*, op cit



Petr Štembera, *Sleeves Piece* (1972), reproduced in *Flash Art* 46–47, June 1974, p 85



Petr Štembera, *Hand* (1972), reproduced on the cover of Charlotta Kotik, *Projects/Performances. Poland/Czechoslovakia*, exhibition catalogue, Hallwalls Gallery, Buffalo, 1977

tioned *Transposition of Two Stones*. It is obvious that these works were of special importance to Štembera, as evidenced by the fact that he sent a very similar selection to his solo exhibition in the Belgian New Reform Gallery, and to the special issue of *Flash Art* focusing on Eastern Europe, which came out in 1974, namely *Transposition of Two Stones*, *Sleeves Piece* (1972), and *Hand* (1972).<sup>26</sup> *Hand* also appeared on the cover of the catalogue of the exhibition 'Projects/Performances – Czechoslovakia/Poland' (4–30 November 1977), prepared by curator Charlotta Kotik for Hallwalls Gallery, Buffalo. At the end of the catalogue's introduction, she notes, 'These works exist in and of themselves, regardless of the structure of the society, the state or the government out of which they came.'<sup>27</sup> There was a strong need to show that Eastern European artists speak the same language as their colleagues from the former West. It is true that Štembera's *Hand* might be compared to Terry Fox's *Opening My Hand As Slowly as Possible*, (1970) or an older film by Richard Serra, *Hand Catching Lead* (1968).

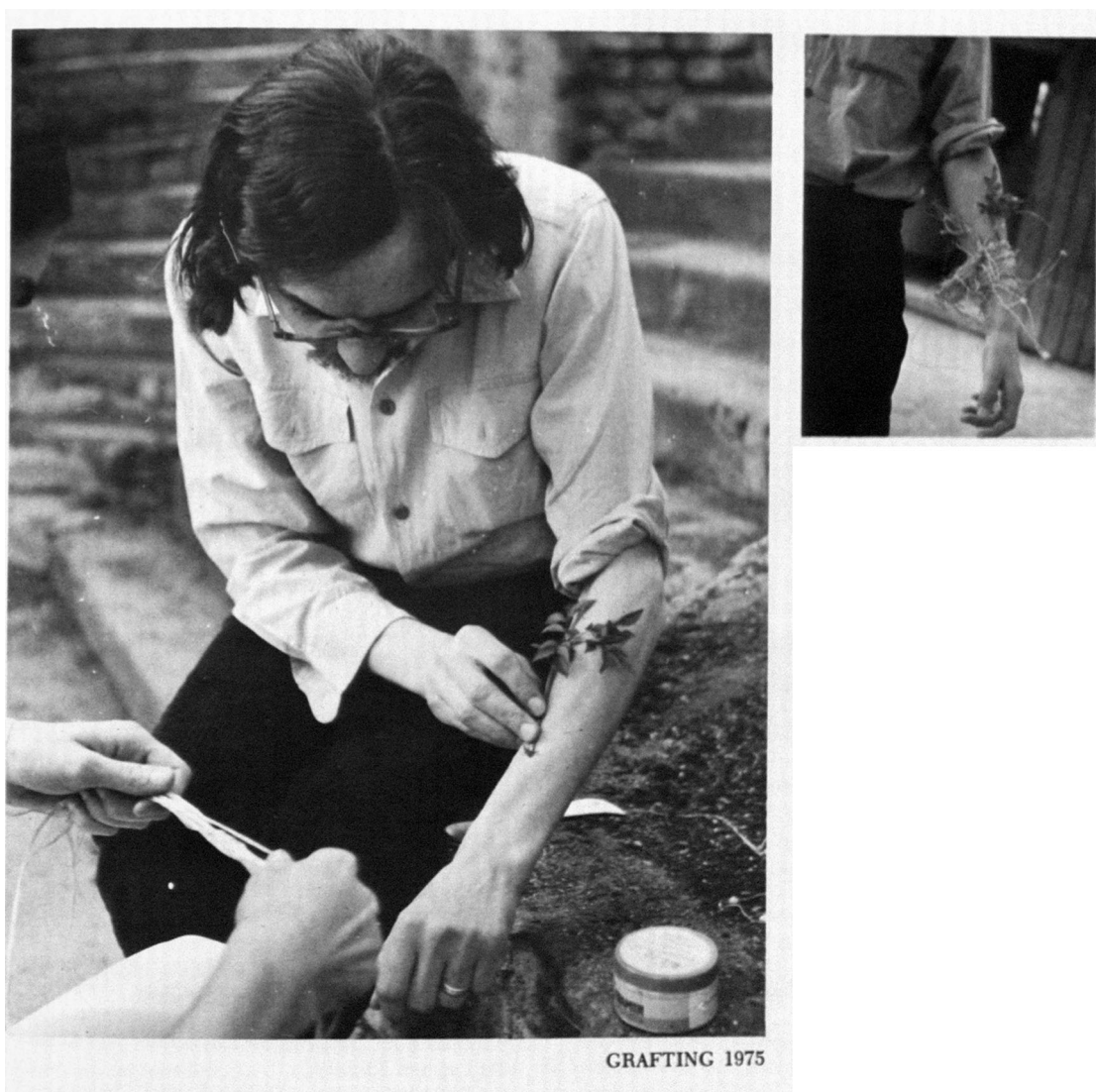
In these works from the early 1970s, Štembera explored the ability of photography to represent reality and to bring attention to the present moment. He photographed utterly banal activities such as the tying of shoelaces, buttoning up, or the rolling up of sleeves, and explored the possibility of raising these everyday activities to the level of art.<sup>28</sup> The performative aspect is an important part of the work (in the photographs, the author is always the performer), however this does not overshadow the photographic concerns of the work. The performance was not meant

26 *Flash Art* 46/47, June 1974, p 85

27 Charlotta Kotik, *Projects/Performances: Czechoslovakia/Poland*, exhibition catalogue, Hallwalls Gallery, Buffalo, New York, p 2

28 Compare Petr Rezek and his answer to the question 'If I bake buns and call it art, is it art?' – 'Why do you not bake buns as art?!', in Petr Rezek, 'Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění' (Body, Thing, and Reality in Contemporary Art), *Jazz petit* 17, Praha, no 17, 1982, p 124.





Petr Štembera, *Grafting* (1975), reproduced in *Vision 2*, January 1976, p 41

for an audience but for the camera. This research into the possibilities of the photographic sequence, and of the visual representation of reality, was apparently a necessary prerequisite for further development. As was already stated, following Štembera's shift to performance in 1974, he ceased to present these photographic works in exhibitions and magazines.<sup>29</sup>

However, Štembera's previous experience with photography found its way into his later performance works. An example of non-incidental co-operation with a photographer can be found in the performance *5–10 minutes* (1977), where the audience are separated from the performer by a closed door, which means that all they know is that something is happening behind it. That 'something' is only evident when a member of the audience opens the door, to which Štembera is tied to from the other side. The photographs were evidently taken in the room where Štembera was hidden, ie, the photographer was given a specific spot within the performance and was not merely a member of the audience. The photograph does not mediate the primary experience of the viewer; it rather describes the action through the neutral eye of the photographer, who is neither an ordinary viewer nor the author of the work, his role resembling mainly that of a narrator. There is further evidence suggesting that Štembera was aware of the role that photography would play in the documentation of the event and consciously worked with it when planning the performance: for example, he made a sketch for the documentation of his performance *3:1 Possibilities* (1976), where every object used during the performance has its designated place, including the precise location of the camera. The photographic aspect of his practice is also evident in other works. One example would be *Grafting* (1975), which he chose to represent with a composition resembling a shot from Chris Burden's famous performance, *Shoot* (1971), also *Extinction* (1975), or the aforementioned *Connection*.

Štembera's co-operation with D'Hondt illustrates how extensive correspondence and the sending of photographic and textual documentation were instrumental in the early 1970s in extending his contact with the rest of the world. His later presentations and communication with curators and artists drew on this experience: his name appeared in exhibitions all around the world. For example, he participated in an exhibition of three European performers in Los Angeles and San Francisco, organised by Chris Burden in 1978 ('Polar Crossing', with Richard Kriesche, Gina Pane), and he also took part in the biggest manifestation of performance art in the late 1970s – an exhibition and related activities which took place in Amsterdam in 1979 under the name 'Words and Works'; besides these, he also participated in exhibitions and festivals held in Warsaw thanks to the connections he kept with the Polish artist and curator, Henryk Gajewski.

Gajewski states he first learned about Štembera thanks to the *Art Diary*, published regularly from 1975 by the then Editor-in-Chief and co-founder (with Helena Kontová) of *Flash Art* Giancarlo Politi, a vital networking interface in the 1970s with its listing of artists' and curators' contact details<sup>30</sup>. According to Politi himself, for many major figures of the performance art scene it acted as an address book. In the years 1972–1979, Gajewski ran Remont Gallery, which was listed as part of the Warsaw Technical University's student club of the local Socialist Union of Polish Students (Socjalistyczny Związek Studentów Polskich. Centrum Klubowe Politechniki Warszawskiej Riviera – Remont). In 1974, Gajewski prepared a solo exhibition for Štembera<sup>31</sup> and in 1976 a group exhibition of Czech performance

29 With the one exception of *Transposition of Two Stones* (1971).

30 Henryk Gajewski, personal communication, 14 May 2014. I am grateful to Gajewski for granting me access to his archives.

31 'Petr Štembera', solo exhibition, 2–8 December 1974, Remont Gallery, Warsaw



Exhibition view from 'Petr Štembera' (Remont Gallery, Warsaw, 2–8 December 1974), black and white photograph, collection of Henryk Gajewski

32 Karel Miler, Jan Mlčoch, Petr Štembera, exhibition catalogue, Remont Gallery, Warsaw, 1976, unpaginated

33 Łukasz Ronduda, 'Remont, or the Renovation of Art', in Piotr Uklański, editorial concept, and Łukasz Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, Centre for Contemporary Art – Ujazdowski Castle, Warszawa, 2009, p 364

34 During the preparations for 'I AM' the idea of a publication was raised, and later realised in 1978, but it was only published six years later due to financial difficulties. Its neglect might be due to the fact that it was written in Polish. However, it is one of the first works that attempted to collectively define performance art. Once

artists (Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch and Karel Miler) took place in the same gallery, with a catalogue listing all the works exhibited, and containing three black and white reproductions.<sup>32</sup>

Gajewski's biggest organisational endeavour in the field of performance was 'I AM' ('International Artists' Meeting'), which took place in Warsaw in 1978 (29 March – 6 April), and was, as Łukasz Ronduda pointed out, the biggest festival of performance to take place in Poland in the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> The festival comprised discussions, conferences, presentations of documentation and various performances (sound, body, video etc). Guests included over fifty artists and authors from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Holland, East and West Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, the UK, Belgium, Canada, USA, Colombia, Mexico, Japan and Poland. According to the available photographic documentation, Petr Štembera was among the artists who were physically present and the event was very well attended.<sup>34</sup> Even though the conditions for such activities were more favourable in Poland than in Czechoslovakia, it would be foolish to assume the event went off without a hitch. For example, Henryk Gajewski has stated that he purposefully invited Yoko Ono and John Lennon because they were so famous that nobody would dare to ban an event they were attending. All it took was the forging of a telegram confirming their attendance, and the event was given the go ahead. In



again Petr Štembera's name was among the art historians, authors, curators and artists invited by Henryk Gajewski to share their thoughts on performance. See Grzegorz Dziamski, Henryk Gajewski and J S Wojciechowski, eds, *Performance*, MAW, Warsaw, 1984. In the late 1970s Gajewski also prepared a project titled 'Other Child Book' (1977–1981) and invited over two hundred artists from all over the world.

another purposefully sent telegram the artists regretted to say they were not able to come due to illness, but by then the festival was no longer in danger of being cancelled.<sup>35</sup>

The ten-day international meeting 'Works and Words', which took place in 1979 in Amsterdam's De Appel gallery (20 – 30 September 1979), can be seen as the climax of international co-operation in the field of performance. Aggy Smeets, one of the gallery's curators, visited Prague as part of the exhibition preparations.<sup>36</sup> Artists as well as critics and theorists from East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia participated in the event. Tomáš Štraus and Petr Štembera are listed in the organiser's notes as the named contacts for Czechoslovakia.<sup>37</sup> The organisers knew Tomáš Štraus because he had attended the aforementioned 'I AM' event in Warsaw, and they also drew information from Groh's book. Petr Štembera could not attend the meeting but Jiří Kovanda's name is listed in the schedule of performances. However, it is probable that he did not attend after all; in a letter dated 2 August 1979 he thanks the organisers for installing the work in his stead and gives them the instructions they required. The situation faced by Czech artists after the repression of Charter 77 is eloquently implied in the letter Piotr Olszanski wrote to Petr Štembera in October 1979:

Dear Petr Štembera,

Thank you very much for your contribution to the manifestation WORKS AND WORDS. It was a pity that you couldn't come, during the time of this event. We exposed your works as a kind of 'substitution' of your presence in 'de appel'.<sup>38</sup>

All the artists from Czechoslovakia – Jan Mlčoch, Karel Miler, Jaroslav Anděl and others – were only able to participate through correspondence and received similar letters from the organisers. The photographic documentation thus worked as a substitute for the artists' physical presence. An extensive exhibition catalogue was published, with texts dealing with the development of art in each of the countries through the 1960s and 1970s. In the introduction, the editors mention the absence of Czech and Slovak artists, and even write,

Of the invited artists from Czechoslovakia not one artist was able to come. We, and especially the Dutch artists, regretted this very much. As a result, we have not been able to give a clear image of whatever is going on within the field of visual arts in Czechoslovakia; even more so as the photo works sent in by Czech artists were often not of recent date.<sup>39</sup>

For the catalogue, Jaroslav Anděl and Tomáš Štraus put together a chronological overview of Czech visual arts (1956–1979), focusing mainly on conceptual and process art; both also contributed short texts for the catalogue. In his article Anděl wonders whether it is still relevant to approach art in the context of national borders and like Tom Marioni refers to Marshall McLuhan's global village:

The contemporary artist seems to be a resident of a global art village with no borders: works of art in cognitive spirit appear everywhere, and it

35 Henryk Gajewski, personal communication, 14 May 2014

36 See Jiří Kovanda's letter, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, where he mentions the visit. Josine van Droffelaar and Piotr Olszanski, eds, *Works and Words*, exhibition catalogue, De Appel, Amsterdam, 1980, p 26.

37 Manuscript, library and archive of the De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam

38 Piotr Olszanski's letter to Petr Štembera, 19 October 1979, library and archive of the De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam

39 Van Droffelaar and Olszanski, eds, *Works and Words*, op cit, p 1

40 Ibid, p 69

41 Marshall McLuhan, 'Média jako přetvořitelé' (The Media as Translators), *Výtvarná práce* 8/9, 1969, p 4

42 Interview with Petr Štembera, 18 July 2012. Compare also Tom Marioni, 'Real Social Realism', op cit, p 7

43 Srp, ed, Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, op cit, p 69

44 See Petr Štembera, 'Pár poznámek k článku Mezi San Franciscem a Prahou Tomáše Pospiszyla' (A Few Notes on the Article Between San Francisco and Prague by Tomáš Pospiszyl), *Ateliér* 4, 1997 (20 February 1997): 'Those who lived through the 1970s know that very few things were more complicated than going West, especially to the country of the Socialist Bloc's greatest, deadliest enemy. Several things coincided to help me get my "papers" – a friend in the office which distributed foreign currency to tourists (no point in presenting my invitation), a messy police station – had the Comrades asked around for me at No. 7, same street, at the so-called Tilehouse, they'd hardly let me go.'

45 Chris Burden, ed, *Polar Crossings: Three Europeans* – Richard Kriesche, Gina Pane, Petr Štembera, exhibition catalogue, LAICA, Los Angeles, 1978

46 Petr Štembera, *Pár vět pamětníka 70.let* (Remembering the 1970s in a Few Words), typescript, prewritten for *Sborník umění 70. let* (Omnibus of 1970s Art), Bratislava 1997

47 See Sven Lütticken, 'Progressive Striptease: Performance Ideology Past and Present', in Lütticken, *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art*, NAI, Rotterdam, 2005, pp 165–180

happens that some artists living far apart seem sometimes to be more akin to each other than others living in the same town... The public will however find that the present pieces created in the socialist countries appear to be very well at home in the western art scene.<sup>40</sup>

Marshall McLuhan's texts were well known in Czech circles – in 1969, the first translation of his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, appeared in *Výtvarná práce*.<sup>41</sup> That same year, Jiří Valoch even thematised McLuhan's famous adage in a performative/photographic work *Médium je masáž* (The Medium is the Massage, 1969).

In 1977, Chris Burden came to Prague to undertake research for the exhibition 'Three Europeans' (September – October 1978) he was preparing for San Francisco and Los Angeles and he left Prague with Petr Štembera's photographic documentation.<sup>42</sup> Karel Srp points out that 'Petr Štembera received an official invitation (3 March 1978) from the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.'<sup>43</sup> On this occasion, Štembera was eventually able to travel abroad and to participate in the Californian exhibition, which included live performance art.<sup>44</sup> Štembera's room was set up as a retrospective, presenting photographic documentation of his performances from previous years. Some of the photographs – *Narcissus 1* (1974), *For Future Users* (1976), *Untitled* (1973) and one photograph from the LA performance – were reprinted in the exhibition catalogue.<sup>45</sup> If Štembera's Prague performances took place in the basements of museums and in the attics of apartment buildings for small circles of invited friends, in San Francisco and in Los Angeles he would perform in the space of a gallery exhibiting modern art. It might seem contradictory that in hindsight, Štembera did not consider this in a positive light. He later described his Californian experience as one of 'the reasons [he] quit art'.<sup>46</sup> This above all proves that the context in which these works emerged substantially shaped their meaning. Art was being produced because of the need to communicate; however, it seems that Štembera wanted to determine in what circumstances this communication would take place, and with whom.

Photography was one of the important media outlets that provided information and enabled communication across the world, and also guaranteed the functionality of the emerging artist network. At the same time this is a direct contradiction of the traditional definition of performance as 'live' art, as something which takes place *here* and *now*. Emphasising the authenticity of performance and understanding it as a possible way for art to oppose different kinds of domination, is all part of a specific discourse which saw performance as independent of documentation, and as an art which never conceded to the status of artwork as commodity.<sup>47</sup> Peggy Phelan writes, 'Performance in a strict ontological sense is non-reproductive. It is this quality which makes performance the runt of the litter of contemporary art. Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital.'<sup>48</sup> However, we cannot really talk about subversion of market mechanisms in the context of 1970s Czechoslovakia. Photographic documentation therefore served the important purpose of presenting the performances to a larger audience.<sup>49</sup>

Correspondence networking and the sending of envelopes with photographic documentation was a way of crossing the borders, a substitute for the lack of direct contact, and a compensation for non-existent insti-

- 48 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p 148
- 49 For the specificity of the Eastern European performance art see Amy Bryzgel, 'Continuity and Change: Performance Art in Eastern Europe Since the 1960s', *Idea* 45, 2014, <http://idea.ro/revista/?q=en/node/41&articol=835>, accessed 18 May 2018.
- 50 This is by no means an extensive list of all the exhibitions outside of Czechoslovakia to which Petr Štembera sent his documentation, or of those he attended in person; yet it is hoped that the present selection has succeeded in demonstrating how this Czech performer worked, as well as the network of foreign contacts that helped him establish himself as an artist.
- 51 For other possible reasons – the frustration with the political situation after the suppression of the Charter 77, the personal exhaustion and his dissatisfaction with the artworld see Maja Fowkes, 'Embodied Environmental Awareness in the Performative Practice of Czech Artist Petr Štembera', in Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Central European University Press, Budapest and New York, 2015, pp 239–240. See also Tereza Stejskalová, 'O odcházení v současném umění. Pokus o analýzu jednoho fenoménu' (On Dropping Out in Contemporary Art: An Attempt at Analysis), *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny* 8, 2010, pp 41–56.
- 52 Reprinted in the foreword to Lippard, ed, *Six Years*, op cit, p 9
- 53 Lippard, ed, *Six Years*, op cit, p 263
- 54 English translations by Elizabet Kovačeva and the author

tutional support. Czechoslovak art spoke an intelligible language – the basics of photographic documentation of performances were comparable with those in Poland, Hungary, or the United States and reproductions in foreign magazines, as well as photographs that were sent to exhibitions abroad, possibly made up for the missing institutional context. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Petr Štembera created a network – an alternative to institutions – which secured his work the status of art.<sup>50</sup> Based on this interpretation it is possible to explain why he counted his participation at events such as at the Californian exhibitions and at the Warsaw international meeting 'I AM', or rather, the moment when the network became a real part of the international art scene, among the reasons he quit art.<sup>51</sup> Even though Štembera worked consciously with photographic documentation, he also held strongly to his conviction that performance was capable of surviving outside of institutions and the market. He clearly refused to abandon the original idea connected to the dematerialisation of art as outlined by Lucy Lippard in an interview from 1969, where she highlighted the idea of creating an 'alternative information network' and the possibility of making inexpensive exhibitions that could take place at several places around the world at the same time.<sup>52</sup> In the afterword to her book, written a few years later, she is already much more sceptical and has to acknowledge that 'whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object... art and artist in capitalist society remain luxuries'.<sup>53</sup> It is tempting to conclude that Štembera's decision to quit art shows the limits of artistic strategies. When he realised how it felt to be a part of the international art scene (and possibly the international art market), he concluded it was better for him to stay in charge of who he spoke to, what he showed, and how.<sup>54</sup>

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# Sigma Group

## Negotiating New Spaces for Art

Alina Șerban

- 1 Konrad Fiedler, 'On Judging Works of Visual Art (1876)', in Joshua C Taylor, ed, *Nineteenth-Century Theories of Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1987, p 524

- 2 In the case of the Sigma group, we discover methodological similarities with other international and East European movements that engaged in pro-scientific approaches to art, exploring new representational possibilities of translating visual systems and structures utilising principles originating in Constructivism, lumino-kineticism, cybernetics, psychology and the philosophy of language. Dwelling on the relationship of contiguity between art and technology, such neo-avant-garde movements (eg the New Tendencies international network, Zagreb, of which the Group de Recherche d'Art Visuel from Paris and the Zero group from Düsseldorf among others were part; Group 143 from Belgrade; Dvizhenie group from Moscow) proposed an active repositioning of art in the public sphere, providing, directly or not, reflections in the margin of social, human (ist) issues.

What art creates is no second world alongside the other world which has an existence without art; what art creates is the world, made by and for the artistic consciousness.

Konrad Fiedler<sup>1</sup>

If you navigate the history of Romanian art in the second half of the twentieth-century, an analysis of the artist group Sigma, established around 1969 in Timișoara, a city in the western part of the country, prompts in retrospect some of the most intriguing cultural coincidences and questions for the re-examination of the inherited concept of art. At the time, the group's name became associated with an innovative analytical practice, pioneering, simultaneously with then-current international debates, a scientific and research-based attitude which moved interest from the medium condition of art toward alternative cognitive models for understanding society and life. At the border of conceptual art, Sigma's work encompassed a range of aesthetic experiences and experiments that interact with other contemporaneous artistic movements.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it imbricated various traditions of historical avant-gardes with contemporary informational aesthetics, structuralist and semiotic theories, adopting the belief that the street, city and urban environment are not just 'indirect givens of a reality independent' of art, but quite the opposite.<sup>3</sup> According to art critic Octavian Barbosa, 'the activity of the Sigma group... cannot in itself be judged as purely artistic activity'.<sup>4</sup> Overstepping the strict boundaries of the aesthetic and preoccupied with the social meaning and finality of the artistic act taken as a 'dynamic structure [that acts] in ferment as a spiritual coagulant in the socio-objective reality',<sup>5</sup> the members of Sigma came together in this utopian project to trigger the social function of art, which led to

3 Octavian Barbosa, 'Despre Grupul Sigma' (On Sigma Group), *Arta* 10–12, 1971, p 75

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

the 'development of new sensibilities and aptitudes...creative behaviours capable of intervening in the socio-human space'.<sup>6</sup>

The theoretical, scientific and constructivist principles that were at the heart of Sigma's practice speak of a radical turn away from an academic understanding of the artistic process, away from the rigid formalist conventions of defining art in socialist Romania. A significant role in delineating the group's artistic paradigm was played by the progressive pedagogical programme initiated in basic design education at Timișoara Arts Lyceum and the experiential learning environment stimulated there, centred on a 'process of thinking and understanding the genesis of highly rigorous and at the same time free form',<sup>7</sup> on 'introducing new modalities of analysing the processes that generate visual signs and research through comparison between the visual apparatus and technical-optical extensions of recording'.<sup>8</sup> The overlaps between artistic practices and learning strategies, both in the activity of the group and in the school curriculum, put forward a nurturing space for experimentation, research and creativity, consequently provocative and self-reflective, where the habitual hierarchies between educator and artist, teacher and student, institutional space and informal space, authorial intentions and socio-cultural context, became flexible. Thanks to the unusually complex interplay between two authorial positions – that of the *artist-researcher* and that of the *artist-pedagogue* – which were determinative for the inner logic and dynamics of the group, Sigma provoked a unique experiment in Romanian art education and contributed towards a specific epistemic and exploratory stance in art which has been acknowledged since its debut as one of the seminal moments of the Romanian neo-avant-garde.

This article primarily sets out to provide a condensed examination of the Sigma's *modus operandi* and to trace its genealogies and lines of artistic development between 1969 and 1978, years considered traditionally as one of collective commitment. Acting under different historical circumstances that coincided with the demise of Soviet influence in Romania and with a process of 'rehabilitation' of a nationalist-orientated ideology that banked on the country's technological measures of modernisation and industrial growth, the group advocated a new objectivism in art which aimed at producing synthetic propositions that would challenge the spatial and perceptual experience of the viewer.

The discussion on how Sigma's work negotiated the unexpected entanglements between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' spaces, the cross-currents between art, pedagogy and scientific theory, and the encounters between various social milieus and intellectual practices, must restrict its gaze to the particular forces at work enabled by the socialist realities in Romania at that time. The particular socio-political space-time situation from which the group emerged at the end of the 1960s was characterised by the power succession of communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu and the short-term international consolidation of his position due to the adoption of an autonomous foreign policy and the earliest attempts to make the political system open to reforms. The way in which this political space-time construct came to be experienced, tackled and translated at the level of different cultural and social registers can provide a productive lens through which to trace the way Sigma succeeded in having a leading position within the Romanian artistic milieu and enjoyed official encourage-

6 Constantin Flondor documentation, archive of the International Centre for Contemporary Art (ICCA), Bucharest, compiled by art historian Ileana Pintilie.

7 Ștefan Bertalan, 'Fragmente dintr-un program posibil' (Excerpts from A Possible Programme), *Arta* 8, 1970, p 34

8 Doru Tulcan, 'Educația artistică sistem de conștientizare' (Artistic Education: A System of Bringing to Awareness), *Arta* 9, 1979, p 25

- 9 Alexei Yurchak, 'Conclusion', in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2005, p 286
- 10 See 'Preface', in Nele Bemong, Pieter Borghart and Michel De Dobbeleer, et al, eds, *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, Academia Press, Gent, 2010, p IV
- 11 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist, ed, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans, University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1981, p 254
- 12 Yurchak, 'Deterritorialized Milieus', in Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, op cit, p 157
- 13 Armin Medosch, 'Art in a Third Space: New Tendencies and the Nonaligned Avant-gardes', at *The Next Layer: Art, Technology and Social Change*, <http://www.thenextlayer.org/node/1384>, last accessed on 20 August 2016
- 14 The distancing from the traditional image of the artist and the greater proximity of art to the new possibilities provided by optics, mathematics, information technology and design opened a new working direction in Romanian art of the 1970s, while at the same time taking advantage of the brief thaw in the political context. In 1974 the Goethe Institute in Bucharest showed the *Stuttgart Impulse Computer Art* exhibition from 1969, presented by Herbert W Franke. Galeria Nouă (New Gallery), whose alternative curatorial programme was conceived by art critics from *Arta* magazine held a wide-ranging thematic exhibitions with an interdisciplinary character: 'Art and Energy' (1974); 'Art and the City.

ment for a short period of time, without being either 'necessarily supportive of nor necessarily opposed to the values and ethics of socialism'.<sup>9</sup> One can invoke here Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope that can be an illuminating tool in mapping 'the spatial and temporal embedding of human action in order to offer a better understanding of how humans act in their biotopes and semiospheres'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, if we set out from the presumption that 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' worlds were 'nevertheless indissolubly bound to each other and [found] themselves in continual mutual interaction'<sup>11</sup> and that 'the supposed spatial and temporal linearity' of the socialist system 'became de-territorialised from within' by means of specific forms of agency,<sup>12</sup> considering the arguments of Alexei Yurchak, then we may also inquire into Sigma's art and learning programme from the viewpoint of fluid interactions and mutual exchanges that existed between more progressive attitudes in art and the regulated framework of the official culture. The enthusiasm it aroused among artists, writers and architects occurred at a specific historical time when local cultural policies attempted to promote subjects that addressed the latest developments in society (in industry, design, technology and science). The brief normalising shift meant new possibilities for relatively uncontrolled activities and niches for initiatives to manifest themselves in varied micro-social registers, blurring the classical distinction between official and alternative culture. In this respect, Sigma belongs to what art historian Armin Medosch explains as 'a climate of modernity developed in Latin-American, Western, Southern, and South-Eastern Europe where a "constructive nexus" in art was linked to a modernization project in politics and social development'. This nexus 'adopted the visual vocabulary of modern art to formulate a "project", a modernistic projection of a utopian but attainable future'.<sup>13</sup>

Forming a network of cultural producers that met in their idealism and utopian vision of a cybernetic future,<sup>14</sup> Sigma's new sensibility and model of knowledge production responded to the dawn of a new era in industry, science and technology in Romania, which proved to be a fertile ground for testing their dreams and aspirations. The rich texture of ideas driven by the intersection between art and information theories, between individual interests and common expectations, enabled the artists to pursue new ways of thinking about art, society and the way in which mathematical forms and structures determine our relations with the real world. Stimulated by the belief that 'interdisciplinary collaboration... becomes a general problem of society' and that it is important to 'bridge the gulf between science and art, between art and the consumer',<sup>15</sup> artists Ștefan Bertalan, Constantin Flondor, Ioan Gaita, Elisei Rusu, Doru Tulcan and mathematician Lucian Codreanu aimed to create 'works of a non-individualist, collective nature, social by definition, based on an aesthetic and at the same time an ethic of participation, emanating from the group and oriented toward the group',<sup>16</sup> an atypical strategy within the cultural landscape of Romanian neo-avant-garde, where a limited number of artistic groups existed compared with former Yugoslavia,<sup>17</sup> Czechoslovakia or Russia. Characteristic of the group was an interest in visual research,<sup>18</sup> which involved an orientation toward interdisciplinarity (mathematics – set theory, Pythagorean geometry – structuralism, semiotics, cybernetics, bionics, physics and psychoanalysis), toward visual communication and the relationship between perception and the field of knowledge, and



Landmarks' (1975); 'Art in Industry' (1976) and 'Art and Nature' (1976).

- 15 Bertalan, 'Fragmente dintr-un program posibil', op cit
- 16 Barbosa, 'Despre Grupul Sigma', op cit
- 17 Dietmar Unterkofler, 'The Phenomenon of Groups', *Grupa 143*, Službeni glasnik, Belgrade, 2012, pp 57–61
- 18 Armin Medosch introduces the term visual research in his *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution* (1961–1978), MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016
- 19 Ștefan Bertalan (1930–2014) studied painting under professors Kádár Tibor and Aurel Ciupe at the Institute of Fine Arts 'Ion Andreescu', Cluj-Napoca. His fellow students included artist Ana Lupăș among others.
- 20 Constantin Flondor (1936–), born in Czernowitz, Bukovina (now Chernivtsi, Ukraine), studied painting under Rudolf Schweitzer-Cumpăna and Eugen Popa, among others, at the Institute of Fine Arts 'Nicolae Grigorescu', Bucharest.
- 21 In the early years, the group has functioned under the name  $\Sigma$  1, later called Sigma.
- 22 Together with Roman Cotoșman (1935–2006), between 1966 and 1969 Ștefan Bertalan and Constantin Flondor formed the constructivist-kinetic group 111.
- 23 It is important to add here the particular intellectual and scientific environment which developed in Timișoara during the time, a city that, according to writer Adriana Babeți, is marked out by a 'border-centric' and multi-cultural condition. The close relationships between various cultural fields

toward a conscious exit from the gallery space in favour of environment-type interventions engaged in the development of innovative pedagogical methods and perception tests. Their collective presuppositions took the form of mathematically-generated structures, objects and environments, urban design projects and didactic actions in nature, analytical photographs and film experiments.

The community of artists was formed after the arrival in 1962 of Bertalan<sup>19</sup> and Flondor<sup>20</sup> – Sigma's co-founders, visionary reformers and main protagonists – as teachers at the Arts Lyceum in Timișoara. In 1969 Gaita, Rusu and Tulcan joined the group after their appointment as teachers at the Arts Lyceum. In the same year Flondor was nominated director of the Lyceum where he remained until 1975. Codreanu, also an associate there, named the group and chose the mathematic symbol  $\Sigma$  (Sigma) to reflect the identity of the group.<sup>21</sup> Sigma's principles and programme as revealed by Flondor in a later statement are to be found already outlined in a text written by the artist in 1974 for *Arhitectura* magazine, 'Design Education in Romania'. It is important to observe that the central questions of the pedagogical programme remain part of the group's cross-media experiments and the inner structure of their artistic language: Flondor advances as a fundamental premise of Sigma's artistic practice the experience of group work, followed by the assimilation and study of interdisciplinary subjects such as psychology, cybernetics, bionics, mathematics and architecture. Flondor assigns as the group's task the study of means and ordering principles that lead to the articulation of form, making use of various media from paper, cardboard and wood to acrylic, glass, aluminium and synthetic fibres, and from photography and film to actions in nature. The artists endeavoured to introduce research as part of the process of visual thinking and interpretation, also recognising the need to invest forms with functionality and to convert them into messages.

Between 1964 and 1965 Bertalan and Flondor together with their colleague Karola Fritz, begin to study and translate several texts from German including Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, *The Thinking Eye* and Johannes Itten's *The Study of Colour* (Kunst der Farbe, 1961), which were essential in the conceptualisation of Sigma's artistic and pedagogical programme. Through artist Roman Cotoșman<sup>22</sup> and writer Livius Ciocârlie<sup>23</sup> they became acquainted with the work of Julio Le Parc and the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), Nicolas Schöffer and cybernetic art, as well as with structuralism. Looking at the sources and references that contributed to the articulation of Sigma's new vision, we should stress the legacy of the Bauhaus and its educational ideas, Victor Vasarely and kinetic art, Richard Buckminster Fuller and Georg Kepes, the work of Moscow-based group Dvizhenie, and of modernist architects such as Walter Gropius and Richard Neutra. Contact with Georg Kepes was achieved via a series of typed texts brought by Bertalan, and via the book *The New Landscape in Art and Science*, which Gaita received from the US.<sup>24</sup> They moved closer to Buckminster Fuller's thinking via architectural books and the study of polyhedral forms, grids, and structural forms,<sup>25</sup> and through exposure to the Romanian magazine, *Estetica industrială* (Industrial Aesthetics).<sup>26</sup> Buckminster Fuller was to fascinate them 'because he combines architecture with geometry and bionics (nature)'.<sup>27</sup> They were interested in the energetic-synergetic geometry of

(literature, philosophy, music, arts etc) empowered an interdisciplinary attitude in the local milieu determining the dynamic of various active study circles and music clubs (jazz and rock) established in the epoch: from the Bionics Circle of professor Eduard Pamfil to the Semiotic Circle (1968–1973) initiated by writers Livius Ciocărlie, Ilie Gyurcsik, Marcel Pop-Corniș, Margareta Gyurcsik, Vasile Crețu, Crișu Dascălu, Maria Foață, Șerban

his structures and in finding a basic structural system for the natural world.<sup>28</sup> They were also familiar with Kenneth Snelson's objects probing the tension between rigid and flexible elements, which inspired them when realising the work *Structura elastică* (Elastic Structure, 1970), a spatial structure with tensions between curved steel bars and nylon fibres, based on an octahedral.

Two events are important in defining the group's programme. Firstly, between 1964 and 1965 Bertalan and Flondor began to attend the Bionics Circle of the Romanian psychiatrist Dr Eduard Pamfil at the psychiatric hospital in Timișoara, where around twenty people from various intellectual circles and backgrounds gathered regularly to debate various theoretical texts on semiotics, cybernetics and psychoanalysis.<sup>29</sup> An encyclopaedic figure and a progressive thinker in psychological anthropology, Pamfil



Sigma Group, Ștefan Bertalan and the *Elastic Structure*, 1970, image: courtesy of the artists

Foară and Adriana Babeți. See, Adriana Babeți, 'Un avanpost margino-centric. Literatură și teoriile ei la Timișoara în anii '60-'70' (A Border-Centric Outpost. Literature and its Theories in Timișoara During the 1960s and 1970s), in Oana Fotache, Magda Răduță and Adrian Tudurachi, eds, *Dus-întors: Rute ale teoriei literare în postmodernitate* (Two Way: Routes of Literary Theory in Postmodernity), Humanitas, Bucharest, 2016

24 Private conversation with artist Ioan Gaita, July 2015.

25 Adrian Gheorghiu and Virgil Dragomir, *Probleme de reprezentare a structurilor constructive* (Problems of Representing Building Structures), Editura Tehnică, Bucharest, 1968; Curt Siegel, *Forme structurale ale arhitecturii moderne* (Structural Forms of Modern Architecture), Editura Tehnică, Bucharest, 1968; Otto Patzelt, *Wachsen und Bauen: Konstruktionen in Natur und Technik* (Growing and Building, Structures in Nature and Technology), Bauwesen, Berlin, 1972; Gheorghiu and Dragomir, *Geometria poliedrelor și a rețelelor, forme și structuri constructive*, vol I, (The Geometry of Polyhedrons and Building Networks, Forms and Structures), Editura Tehnică, Bucharest, 1978. 'Through the world of the Platonic polyhedrons (five in number) and Archimedean polyhedrons (thirteen), constructing, bisecting, developing, building three-dimensional structures (in the classroom and the studio), we arrive at self-supporting spatial networks, at surfaces with dual curvature, and finally at Buckminster Fuller's geodesic cupolas'; Constantin Flondor, e-mail to the author, 12 August 2016.

26 *Estetica industrială* was published by the Centre of

impacted the group's visual research and stimulated their enthusiastic involvement with education, becoming one of the close intellectual friends of the group. Secondly, the short-term engagement of Bertalan and Flondor in the Constructivist-kinetic group 111 between 1966 and 1969 and the invitation to participate in one of the important experimental exhibitions of that time, the Nuremberg Biennale in 1969, were essential for the subsequent development of Sigma.<sup>30</sup> The shared background of the group was the 'investigation of the visual and the overcoming of a crisis of language'.<sup>31</sup> The 111 research and experiments manifested a shared spirit 'for being informed and informing',<sup>32</sup> for working methodically with constructive elements of an optical-kinetic order, experimenting with 'potential actions of structures in space'.<sup>33</sup> The 111 projects aimed 'to form open systems of communication, aimed at an ambient space for integrating the arts'.<sup>34</sup> To this end, the artists set out to collaborate with engineers, architects and scientists. Participation in the *Konstruktive Kunst: Elemente und Prinzipien*, (Constructive Art: Elements and Principles)<sup>35</sup> Biennale in Nuremberg spelled the end of the 111 group, when Cotoșman remained in the West, and the birth of the Sigma group, when Bertalan and Flondor returned to Romania.<sup>36</sup> The new group was to go beyond the optical-dynamic structures of the early years but remained faithful to a number of constructivist principles and prospective-experimental methods that wagered on geometric exercise and the study of natural forms in a bionic sense. Regarded as a turning point, the Nuremberg Biennale offered the artists the opportunity to get connected with the international art scene and its newest tendencies and to encounter the historical works of Bauhaus, Russian Constructivism, Suprematism and De Stijl. In attendance at the opening, Flondor watched the installation of works by other artists and met with artists Rafael Soto, Julio Le Parc and Waldemar Cordeiro.<sup>37</sup>

In what was almost ten years of activity of the Sigma group, we can distinguish two relatively distinct periods, which differ in working method, but which also meet within the same analytical, neo-constructivist, deliberately geometrical paradigm of the grammar of forms that always function in conjunction with nature,<sup>38</sup> with the study of the phenomena of the real in the spirit of Da Vinci.<sup>39</sup> Pencil, ballpoint, charcoal and gouache sketches, photographs and films on the subject of the genesis and becoming of form, of the study of plant structures and micro-structures, of movement in natural space remain a constant preoccupation of the group. Nature is an existential invariable that generates the new and which shares patterns and structures with artistic and architectural forms.

The first phase (1969–1974) corresponds with the involvement of the artists in a process of reforming visual education, encompassing design and environmental issues, which gave rise to the experimental basic design programme at the Timișoara Arts Lyceum, orientated towards product design and collaboration with local industrial platforms. It was a phase dominated by team work, by the study of theoretical texts and the testing of mathematical theories, of the principles of articulating objects in space proceeding from analysis of the multiple possible permutations of elementary forms (line, circle, square, triangle), and taking into account movement, light, tonal gradations, and the distortions of objects.<sup>40</sup> During this period the group aspired to realise urban design projects that would interrelate directly with the social, public space and which





Sigma Group and the *Informational Tower*, Elisei Rusu and Ștefan Bertalan in the studio of Constantin Flondor during 1970s, image: courtesy of the artists

Documentation in Social and Political Sciences, Bucharest. The Centre published contemporary international texts from the field of visual and scientific research. The 1972 issue was edited by art historian Sanda Agalidi and included more than fifty translated texts within 493 typed, photocopied pages. It was here that Buckminster Fuller's *Conceptuality of Fundamental Structures* was first published. Further, the translation into Romanian of books by Max Bense and Abraham Moles as well as other writings by Norbert Wiener, Max von Laue,

would be subject to the impulse of cybernetics. Such was the case of the light-dynamic project *Turnul informațional* (Informational Tower, 1969), designed in Timișoara for the public space, 'an urban-information structural complex',<sup>41</sup> with multiple functions (urban electronic display, accompanied by sound and lights), which at the same time is reminiscent of Vladimir Tatlin's tower, Schöffer's cybernetic-light tower, and the *Galaxy* (1967) public kinetic sculpture conceived by a member of the Dvizhenie group, Francisco Infante.<sup>42</sup> The ink drawing of the design includes a series of notes on the group's aesthetic working principles, where the *element* represents the shaping principle of *form* via the mathematical algorithm and where visual research is based on new technologies and scientific principles. Likewise, individual ideas were subject to collective engagement and continuous processing and development; the information being the aesthetic measure with which the artist worked on the street, in the town, in everyday space.

In 1970 the Arts Lyceum officially became an experimental art institution, with the permission of the then Minister of Education

Egmont Colerus, Francois Jacob, Frédérique and Georges Papy, Curt Siegel, Oskar Becker, W N Seymour, Jean Piaget, Benedetto Croce, Charles Pierce, Virgil Nemoianu, Rudolf Arnheim, Leonardo da Vinci, Erwin Schrödinger, James Watson, Corrado Maltese, Gert Selle and Hermann K Ehmer served as the basis for a common theoretical background for the group's members. These texts were discussed, shared and debated either during their private meetings, or at the Arts Lyceum during the teachers' methodological committee, constituting the primary sources of their teaching in art and design.

27 Constantin Flondor, e-mail to the author, 12 August 2016

28 Flondor's experimental film *Membrane de săpun* (Soap Membranes), 1972 and also the multimedia installation *Multivision*, 1978, the final collaborative art project of the group, takes up Buckminster Fuller's poetic observations with regard to the behaviour (and otherwise ephemeral durability) of soap bubbles and membranes.

29 Under the influence of Pamfil's Bionics Circle, Flondor decided in turn to organise similar meetings at the Arts Lyceum in Timișoara during the teachers' methodological committee (held every Thursday at 5 pm).

30 'The very name of the group, from 1+1+1, signifies the association of three personalities. We had shared principles and many affinities, but we differed "in the detail" of our ideas and aesthetic sensibilities. We moved autonomously. Which made us complement each other in a positive way. The group did not have shared theses, programmes or written texts, but only ones that were individually valid and which related to our principles'; see Constantin

(1970–1972), mathematician and diplomat Mircea Malița, after his visit to Pavilionul C in Herăstrău in 1970, where the Timișoara Arts Lyceum presented the new curriculum.<sup>43</sup> 'This implied (the same as in the Bauhaus) the maturation of academicism, the horizontalisation of relations of communication between teachers and pupils, the continuous, deontic oscillation between the inner experience of those who know and provide and those who desire and find out.'<sup>44</sup>

The school curriculum closely followed the fundamental precepts of the Bauhaus and consisted of two main sections: a preliminary course with classes on the study of colour, art history, the construction of form, drawing, photography, writing and the environment, and three specialised classes: Advertising, Packaging, The Aesthetics of Useful Forms (for glass and plastic, furniture and appliances). At the core of the programme was the Grammar of Forms or the Study of Form and Interdisciplinary Activities (where guest lecturers from various theoretical fields were invited to teach; a permanent architectural class was also established during the period). Furthermore, the school allowed students to test the sustainability of their projects in collaboration with the local factories and industrial platforms.<sup>45</sup> Between 1970 and 1979 Sigma's members published their texts on topics and experiments carried out as part of the pedagogical program in the magazines *Arta*, *Arhitectura*, *Estetica industrială*, etc. The school programme was also officially presented in both local and international contexts.<sup>46</sup>

The article published by Ștefan Bertalan in *Arta* sheds light on the process-oriented approach to learning which encourages the independent thinking of students.<sup>47</sup> The text advocates a mix of pedagogical principles which address the student as well as the teacher. Students were encouraged to translate the creative thinking in the information-message and to structure the visual signs according to a principle of order and to the demonstration of a cognitive operation. Outlining that every basic element that serves to construct the simplest structure represents a sign, the curriculum was directed towards the genesis of form conceived not through mimesis, but through mathematical thinking, with the operative structures, experiences and behaviours, the signs and patterns and their appearance, to be included in basic instruction. Bertalan describes the thorough and interdisciplinary experience of learning that every student has to commit to, subsequently announcing an open educational model which places students and the teacher side-by-side, and rejects the duplicitous attitude of the artist, who in his own studio takes a different position to that of the educator.

Affected by the closure of the experimental school programme in 1974, without any official explanation, and by the emergence of differences of opinion within the group, the second phase (1974–1978) heralded new directions in the individual practice of Sigma artists, without rejecting their specific collaborations and joint participation in exhibitions. At the same time, this phase reflects the consequences of a failure to make an adaption between 'the artists' desire to conduct research and their actual capacity to do so, between a programme orientated toward the most advanced level of industrial production and the actual level of technical execution of artwork'.<sup>48</sup> Due to the fact that the social and cultural codes became harsher<sup>49</sup>, artist Elisei Rusu decided to illegally leave the country in 1978, fleeing to Greece, while Codreanu moved to Arad, becoming director of the Electronic Computing Center. Flondor continued

Flondor, *De la "111" + Sigma la Prolog* (From "111" + Sigma to Prolog), Idea Design and Print, Cluj, 2005, p 24.

31 Ibid

32 Eugen Schileru, in the leaflet for the first group exhibition to include 111, at the Kalinderu Gallery, Bucharest (May 1968), alongside Timișoara artists Zoltan Molnar and Dietrich Sayler.

to collaborate occasionally with Doru Tulcan, while Ioan Gaita gave up artistic practice for teaching, and Bertalan decided to leave Romania, moving first to Sibiu in 1982 then to Germany in 1986.

Whilst the initial endeavours of the group in the first phase explored the unity of form and function, the forms generated through mathematical algorithm, such as cubes, polyhedrons, prisms, and the study of textures, structures, microstructures and their various modes of combination/compaction, after 1974 there occurred a change and amplification in regard to experimentation with the potential action of structures in space. Typical in this respect were the *Visual Ambient. Inflatable Structures* projects presented on 13 December 1974 at the Bastion galleries in Timișoara to



*Visual Ambient. Inflatable Structures*, 1974, UNESCO Fine Arts Week, Bastion Art Galleries Timișoara, image: courtesy of the artists, photographers: Doru Tulcan, Constantin Flondor





*Visual Ambient. Inflatable Structures*, 1974, UNESCO Fine Arts Week, Bastion Art Galleries Timișoara, image: courtesy of the artists, photographers: Doru Tulcan, Constantin Flondor

33 See Fundația Interart Triade, ed, *Roman Cotoșman*, catalogue, Timișoara, 2004, p 31

34 Ibid, pp 31–32

35 Ștefan Bertalan in dialogue with Constantin Flondor: 'from the host of things we focused on in the Sigma years, two issues were essential and defining: the first, that which was connected to the principle

mark UNESCO Fine Arts Week,<sup>50</sup> and *Multivision*, displayed at the Arts Lyceum as part of the ground-breaking exhibition 'Studiul I' (Study 1), initiated by artist Paul Gherasim, in collaboration with artist Ion Grigorescu and art historian Coriolan Babeți. The *Inflatable Structures* ambient installation included a series of pneumatic tubular structures, wooden bars and weather balloons onto which were simultaneously projected slides and the *Joc cu baloane* (Balloons Game) film (1974) by Sigma,<sup>51</sup> coloured lights, and a psychedelic sound installation created by Adrian Ilica (then a pupil at the Arts Lyceum) which overlapped with the sound of the children's voices. Artist Iosif Kiraly, present at the event, recounts the strong impact of that 'multimedia spectacle' aimed



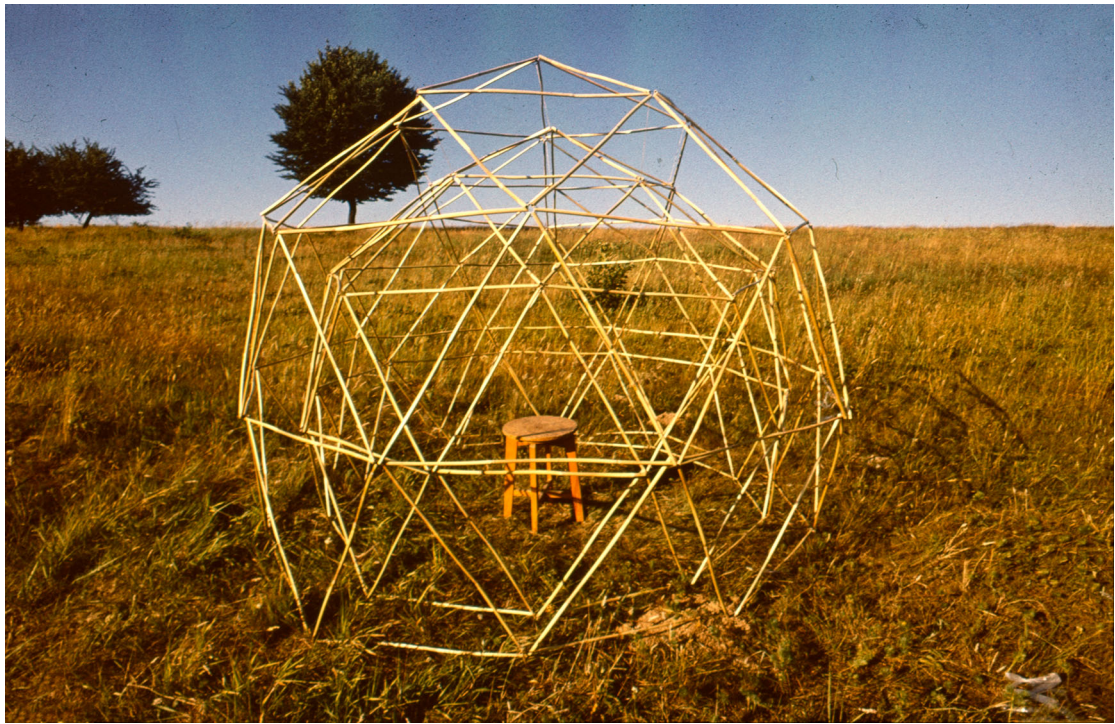
*Visual Ambient. Inflatable Structures*, 1974, UNESCO Fine Arts Week, Bastion Art Galleries Timișoara, image: courtesy of the artists, photographers: Doru Tulcan, Constantin Flondor

articulated in the title of the biennale, *Elements and Principles*, the second, that which was connected to nature, nature as a canvas, as a space with an Indian dimension, with a back and a front'. See Flondor, *op cit*, p 58.

<sup>36</sup> The Group also took part in the 1969 exhibition *Konstruktivisms aru* (The Legacy of Constructivism) (20 September – 2 November) at the Sonja

at all the senses, which was to change the 'paradigm of understanding the art object, shifting everything into a multi-dimensional reality'.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, *Multivision*, a multimedia installation for ten transparent screens and two synchronised Super 8 projections, with a live sound performance by Ilica, represented a compendium of the issues and themes explored by Sigma, in which the artist takes on the position of a 'constructor of signals', attempting to 'attain the invisible, to read the impalpable'.<sup>53</sup> Flondor wrote in his diary: 'The plane (the screen) has become insufficient. We wanted to use the air. Through visual reverberation images become a medium. We find ourselves in the three-dimensional presence of events, of lights, of movements and of thoughts.'<sup>54</sup>





Constantin Flondor, *Pedagogical Curricula: Nature as Partner. Făget*, with the Students of the Timișoara Art Lyceum, 1976, image: courtesy of Constantin Flondor, photographer: Constantin Flondor

Henie–Niels Onstad  
Foundation, Høvikodden,  
Norway.

37 Constantin Flondor remembers that he was enthusiastic about the reconstruction of a room with El Lissitzky's 'PROUN' spatial project, Gerhard von Graevenitz's kinetic room and the photo-documentation about the Moscow Dvizhenie kinetic group, Gianni Colombo's 'Spazio Elastico' (Elastic Space, 1967–1968), and Rafael Soto's corridor of threads, the works of François Morellet *Grille se déformant* (1966) and Getulio Alviani, *Environment Cubo* (1964–1969). Constantin Flondor, e-mail to the author, 12 August 2016.

38 'For example, counter-light, the foliage at the fringe of a forest was an opportunity to read a complex structure of rhythms, networks, circles or squares, white or

Ambient interests, participatory actions in space and in nature, began to make themselves felt within the group and in individual works by the artists. At the lyceum a new class was created, Visual Communication – expanding the focus of learning toward semiotics, semantics, perception studies and the artist/viewer relationship – reflecting a problematisation of modes of seeing and the perception of space and image. Activities dependent on photography and film became more important. Consequently, Sigma members seized the opportunity of art camps,<sup>55</sup> which professors had to organise every summer, in order to extend their research and questions. Various spatial and relational situations concerned with nature placed the emphasis on the subjective relationship with space, probing the perceptual and visual qualities of synthetic or natural materials, analysing various natural forms and phenomena via various media (analytical drawing, photography, film, happenings and ambient installations). Space, water, vegetation, stones and air became elements of painterly organisation with the help of sheets of plastic, wooden bars, coloured strips, paints, etc.<sup>56</sup> Focusing on experimentation and playfulness, they emphasised new creative relationships between forms, natural phenomena (such as light, movement, sound and colour) and artificial interventions (sometimes using found materials). Likewise, they capitalised on the ambivalence of gesture; between the recreational act and the spatial experiment and between the pedagogical act and investigations specific to the individual or the group. And not least, they highlight the role of nature as a locus and object for a pedagogy of the image.





Constantin Flondor, Pedagogical Curricula: Nature as Partner. Făget, with the Students of the Timișoara Art Lyceum, 1976, image: courtesy of Constantin Flondor, photographer: Constantin Flondor

black, against a dark-medium, the space – magnetic, energetic, geometric or perspectival – was likewise configured via orthogonal or undulating linear rhythms, and so on'; Constantin Flondor, e-mail to the author, 12 August 2016.

- 39 Bertalan reflecting on his own practice, in words that may also be extended to Sigma as a whole, wrote in 1977: 'my artistic thought is, from simple passion, more and more deeply, oriented toward, among other things, the laws that govern the growth processes of the living world: how plants bud, their development and orientation, light/form, organisation, overall structure, and the relations established between them, form, as an invariable continuum of the world, statistically notated through the media of

## Conclusion

The Sigma group came into being as an initiative based on friendship and shared interests, but which had the capacity to consolidate the regimen of its independent activities with the support of various social networks and networks of cultural exchange, via which the official public sphere was accommodated to the group's themes and investigations. Tracing the history of the group, both the Arts Lyceum and the natural environment constituted second-order public settings, whose role was participatory and experiential. These became the grounds for testing their ideas, for clarifying or enlarging some of their questions and research, and for exhibiting and producing their works.

As an exceptional case in the context of Romanian art, Sigma can provide us with the substance for a deeper understanding of the way in which dialogue between different strata of Romanian society functioned under the real, existing socialism and how certain alternative networks of artistic communication and production were integrated into the official public realm. By succeeding in combining shared intellectual interests and concerns, Sigma gave rise, albeit not in a programmatic way, to a community based on affinities, collaboration, and collective research, deeply influencing the ways in which generations of artists and architects thought. At the same time, the history of Sigma problematises the artists' interest in occupying new territories of action and manifestation,

drawing and photography'. Quoted in Ileana Pintilie, *Ștefan Bertalan: Drumuri la răscruce* (Ștefan Bertalan: Roads at the Crossroads), Fundația Triade, Timișoara, 2010, pp 134–135. Ștefan Bertalan transformed his own garden into an artistic medium, an area for research (studying in particular sunflowers, apricot blossoms, cauliflowers, and rushes). His bionics studies took the form of drawings, actions – *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea soarelui* (I Lived for 130 days With a Sunflower Plant) at the Kalinderu Gallery in 1979 – photomontages – *Kinogramă a procesului natural văzut prin lentilă* (Cinegramme of the Natural Process Viewed Through a Lens), – and slide projections.



- 40 From 1972, Constantin Flondor researched spatial structures resulting from the combination of triangular and pentagonal bars, seeking to discover the minimum and maximum number of bars in the formation of a nucleus and the mathematical formula for the relations between the section of the bars employed and the angle of the juncture and the angle of the mode of spatial development. The artist's intuitive game was mathematically validated in his collaboration with university professor Maria Neumann, Timișoara.

Sigma Group with the *Mobile Ensemble*, Constantin Flondor, Ștefan Bertalan, Lucian Codreanu and Elisei Rusu in the studio of Constantin Flondor during 1970s, image: courtesy of the artists

whether we are talking about the school, the open-air interventions and actions in the city and in nature, or the intellectual gatherings grouped around the studio of Flondor, the Arts Lyceum, and Dr Eduard Pamil's bionics circle.

*Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth*

- 41 The model is made of welded wire, aluminium discs, plexiglass bars, and a helicoid aluminium ladder. The basic plan is square (a tank of water), on which is placed the structure of the pyramid and the tower. Images of the prototype were published in *Arta* 10–12, 1971, p 75. Footage remained in the possession of the artists from the documentary film produced by Sahia Film: *Lungul drum al muncii către artă* (The Long Road of Labour to Art, Mirel Ilieșiu, 1976). Photographic documents of the project were published in the catalogue of the *Romanian Art Today* festival exhibition organised by the

Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh in 1971.

- 42 See, David Crowley, *The Art of Cybernetic Communism*, 13 September 2011, <https://faktografia.com/2011/09/13/the-art-of-cybernetic-communism/>, accessed 25 August 2016
- 43 The progressive educational ideas taught at the Timișoara Arts Lyceum were extended at the School of Architecture Timișoara briefly by Constantin Flondor (1971–1972) and Ștefan Bertalan (1970–1981) – the latter becoming a permanent professor

there, leading the Study of Form course – and at the Electrotechnical Faculty (1971–1972) by Lucian Codreanu and Ioan Gaita, who taught the Aesthetics of Useful Forms courses.

- 44 Dr Eduard Pamfil, text published in the Lyceum's 1984 anniversary leaflet.

45 Collaboration with the Elba factory, Timișoara, a manufacturer of light fittings, 1972; design and urban interventions in the Calea Buziașului industrial platform, Timișoara.

- 46 The experimental programme was presented at the InSEA International

- Conference, Finland, 1971 (by Constantin Flondor); International Marketing Seminar, Timișoara, 1972; 'Technology of Instruction' exhibition, 'Ion Mincu' Institute of Architecture, Bucharest, 1972; *FORM+ZWECK* 3, 1973, pp 25–26; National Design Seminar, Bucharest, 1974; 'Industry-Creation-Pedagogy' exhibition, Kalinderu gallery, Bucharest, 1978. (Information compiled by Andreea Flondor-Palade, daughter of artist Constantin Flondor.)
- 47 Bertalan, 'Fragmente dintr-un program posibil', op cit. The publication of Bertalan's article, alongside that of Constantin Flondor in the same issue of *Arta* magazine, '*Armonia creației-educatie*' (The Harmony of Creation-Education), p 33, follows the first public exhibition of Timișoara Arts Lyceum in Bucharest at Pavilion C in Herăstrău Park. The two articles sum-up the change of direction in artistic education at Timișoara Arts Lyceum and frame the new approaches in art and pedagogy provoked by Sigma, as totally immersed in the study of the principles and laws that govern the articulation of structures, in the optical and bionic analysis of forms, in a conscious observation of the phenomena and processes of creation, in an exploration of the space between an object and its environment. Based on a design curriculum, Timișoara lyceum was the first to provide students between six and eighteen years old with a basic education directed towards the study of forms. The programme was restructured so that conventional painting, sculpture or graphics classes were replaced with two fundamental cycles which the student had to follow during four years: a) the basic design course and b) elective specialisation. The first design specialisation at university level was founded in 1969 in Bucharest at the Institute of Fine Arts 'Nicolae Grigorescu' and in 1971 at the Institute of Fine Arts 'Ion Andreescu', Cluj.
- 48 Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies*, op cit, p 137
- 49 At the beginning of 1971, after Ceaușescu's visits to China, North Korea, Mongolia and Vietnam, and after the proclamation of the July Thesis, which compelled the population to further ideological measures and control, it became clear that life would rapidly change. Free zones such as the one that reunited art and science would soon disappear. In 1973, the invitation to organise a Sigma exhibition a year later at Bergamo by Lorenzo Boggi, at Centro Internazionale Arti Visive, was declined by the President of the Fine Artists' Union (Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici). The copy of the Romanian translation of the official letter was presented to the author by artist Ioan Gaita.
- 50 At least formally, the work is reminiscent of *Large Pneumatic Object: Environment with Variable Volume* created by Gruppo T at the Galleria Pater in Milan in 1960.
- 51 Shot in the sports hall, the film captures the artists' children playing with the balloons and plastic tubes, and is to a certain extent, pointing to similarities in the 'Activities' by Polish artists KiewKulik. Game actions were a form of self-directed study, 'an exchange of ideas and thought processes, in constant interrelation: geometry, mathematics, physics – light, movement, colours, sounds'; Bertalan, op cit.
- 52 See bewhere the city!, <http://www.bewhere.ro/arta/iosif-kir-ly-happeningul-grupului-sigma-3356/>, accessed 15 December 2016.
- 53 Constantin Flondor, e-mail to the author, 18 February 2016
- 54 Flondor, Ibid, p 72
- 55 Actions as part of summer practice in collaboration with students included: *Nature as a Sign of a New Attitude. Water and Sand. Water and Stone. Wind and Tree*, co-ordinated by Elena and Doru Tulcan, Strungari, (1975); *Nature as Partner: Variable Structures Related to Natural Factors, Sun, Wind, Water*, run by Constantin Flondor, Făget, 1976. (Analogy between geodesic domes and natural structures, namely radiolarians); *Time: Event, Transformation, Movement*, headed by Constantin Flondor, Moldovița, 1977. Ștefan Bertalan participated with a series of actions with torches and candles, with hayricks; *A Creative Sunday: Performance for Park Audience*, Timișoara, 1977, together with second-year architecture students, co-ordinated by Ștefan Bertalan; *Leonardo: Public Performance* in Central Park, Timișoara, 1978, with second-year architecture students, co-ordinated by Ștefan Bertalan (spatial transposition of Leonardo's precepts); *Study of Image as Event*, headed by Rodica Banciu, Ioan Gaita, Margina, 1979; *Sky-Earth Relation*, headed by Constantin Flondor, Gurahonț, 1981 (subjective perception of the relation: I/earth/ clouds/sky). During the art camps, the artists produced individual interventions: Doru Tulcan, *Meșterul Manole* (Master Manole), Strungari, 1975; Constantin Flondor, *Solarogramă* (Solarogram), Făget, 1976.
- 56 The Super 8 film *Acțiune la Timiș* (Action at Timiș River), 1976, documents the artists' collaborative actions in the natural environment using coloured synthetic materials (found and collected by artists from local industrial platforms). Further individual interventions – Constantin Flondor, *Teșătură efemeră* (Ephemeral Web) at the Deia Forrest, Ștefan Bertalan *Membrane: Datura stramonium* (Membranes. Datura stramonium, the Green Forrest (1976), Bertalan's actions at Timiș river (1974–1976) – reveal the nature as a surface on which the artists extend their research, not in a bodily manner, but by testing the frame, the space, the textures and their relationships. From this perspective Sigma belongs to a group of early Eastern European artists that undertook actions in nature, examined by art historian Maja Fowkes in her study, pointing to the involvement with "painterly elements" outside the gallery space, the 'perception of artworks as dematerialised acts of creation' which express a critique of the 'status of a finished art object'. Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2015, pp 209–211.



# The Dictator Visits the Studio

## The Vlora Independence Monument and the Politics of Socialist Albanian Sculpture, 1962–1972

Raino Isto

### Introduction

On 9 August 2013 an article appeared in the Albanian newspaper *Mapo* with the title ‘Enver Hoxha, the True Originator of the Independence Monument in Vlora’. The article’s subheading proclaimed, ‘For the first time, the letter written by Enver Hoxha to sculptors Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, describing how the Independence Monument should be realised, has been uncovered. The dictator intervened to overshadow the figure of Ismail Qemali and falsify history.’<sup>1</sup> A brief contextualisation followed, accompanied by a note that the exchange could be found in Albania’s Central State Archive, together with the text of *two* letters: an open letter from socialist Albania’s dictator Enver Hoxha to the sculptors and a response from the artists (dated 26 June and 10 July 1969, respectively). This was by no means ‘the first time’ these letters had been discovered: they had both been published on the front page of the weekly cultural periodical *Drita* (The Light) in July of 1969.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the exchange between dictator and sculptors was cited in numerous articles and conference papers during Albania’s socialist period, and Hoxha’s letter was collected in a volume of his writings on literature and art.<sup>3</sup> Despite its misleading character – its claim to have discovered a secret history that was not secret at all, but in fact overt – the *Mapo* article is invaluable because it indicates the intricate network of anxieties that characterise contemporary attempts to understand the ways that art, politics and history were interwoven in socialist Albania. Specifically, the *Mapo* article raises questions about the kind of history that was being constructed during Albanian socialism, who was constructing it, and

1 Aida Tuci, ‘Enver Hoxha, Ideatori i Vërtetë i Monumentit të Pavarësisë në Vlorë’, *Mapo*, 8 August 2013. All translations from Albanian to English are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

2 See Enver Hoxha, ‘Në gurrën e pashtershme e jetëdhënëse të krijimtarisë së popullit në do të gjejmë atë frymëzim të madh për të realizuar vepra të bukura e madhështore për popullin tonë’, and Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, ‘I Dashur Shoku Enver’, both in *Drita*, 13 July 1969.

3 Enver Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin: nëntor 1942 – nëntor 1976*, 8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1977, pp 297–301

how artistic practices were intended to contribute to the narration of that history.

The *Mapo* article appeared less than a year after the one hundredth anniversary of Albanian independence from the Ottoman Empire (on 28 November 2012), an anniversary that included extravagant festivities in the southern port city of Vlora, where national independence had first been declared in 1912. The locus of these festivities was Flag Square, Vlora's central plaza, a public space dominated by the seventeen-metre-tall bronze Independence Monument. The sculpture depicts Ismail Qemali, the Ottoman statesman who headed the assembly that first announced Albania's independence, flanked by a collection of representatives of different cultural and geographic groups, as well as a figure representing an intellectual from the period of the Albanian National Awakening. Rising behind this group is a towering boulder, on top of which stands the massive figure of a flag-bearer, holding aloft the streaming flag of the Albanian nation, with its double-headed eagle. The monument – first officially commissioned in 1962, but not inaugurated until 1972 – has long been a touristic landmark and source of national pride, both for the decisive moment it depicts and for its aesthetic qualities.

There is a great deal to be gleaned from the way history is visualised in the sculpture, and in particular from the way it balances the role of the heroic individual (Ismail Qemali) with the role of the collective (the geographically diverse milieu surrounding Qemali). This navigation between the individual and the collective as agents of history, however, was also an important aspect of the Vlora Independence Monument's conceptualisation and creation. In other words, the Vlora Monument is significant not so much for the way it represents history (in this aspect it is quite similar to many other nationalist monuments created since the late nineteenth century across Europe), but for the way the process of its production modelled the collective effort that supposedly characterised the building of Albanian socialism. As the *Mapo* article would have it, Enver Hoxha's intervention in the monument's realisation was primarily an attempt to obscure Qemali's role in creating an independent Albanian state, presumably in order to elevate the perceived relative significance of Hoxha's socialist state as the agent responsible for consolidating and narrating a shared Albanian history. In fact, the situation was far more complex: the exchange of letters, which followed a visit Hoxha made to the sculptors' studio in the summer of 1969, modelled both the artistic process and history itself as collective endeavours. The publication of Hoxha's letter marked the first time that the Albanian dictator's aesthetic commentary and participation in the creative processes of state artists was made public, and in the ensuing years it was held up as an example of the dictator's concern with the importance of art, as well as his guiding role as cultural critic.

My purpose in this article is to examine the way this exchange of letters – and the studio visit that it made the public aware of – functioned to shape the perception of art's relationship to political power in socialist Albania. I explore the kinds of agency that were attributed to the dictator, to state sculptors and to the monumental work of art, and consider how the narrative surrounding the exchange of letters served to conceptualise the process of creating art in socialist conditions as inherently collaborative. Finally, I consider the way this collaborative model of agency was



Unidentified photographer, 'Through collective work, our sculptors often realize works of value to immortalize the major historical events of the Albanian people', 1969, photo published in: *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon*, Tirana, 1969, p 178



metaphorically extended to history more broadly, and the ways the socialist present in Albania was framed as the paradigmatic field in which history could be not only represented but also simultaneously enacted in the creation of works of art. Monuments – as artworks that almost necessarily involved co-operation between commissioning committees, groups of sculptors and architects – were sites where the collective and collaborative character of both building socialism and framing socialist history could be emphasised by official discourses. In the current study, I take the Vlora Independence Monument as a key example of the way socialist monuments staged the collective construction of both past and present.<sup>4</sup>

## Beginnings of a Monument

Let us begin by considering a 1969 photograph showing Albanian sculptors Kristaq Rama (1932–1998), Muntas Dhrami (b 1936) and Shaban Hadëri (1928–2010) engaged in discussion regarding an early model of the Vlora Independence Monument. The image appeared in the photo-book *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon (Socialist Albania on the March)* – also published in 1969 – where its accompanying descriptive caption read: ‘Through collective work, our sculptors often realise works of value to immortalise the major historical events of the Albanian people.’<sup>5</sup> The clarity of the photograph’s visual rhetoric is striking:<sup>6</sup> against an almost completely blank backdrop of a beige studio wall, the dark clay of the model rises to a sharp point that just breaks the top edge of the photo. Arranged in a semi-circle, the bodies of the three sculptors bracket the monument’s base: Dhrami at the centre and Hadëri to the right look on as Rama, on the left, leans forward intently and articulates his speech with an extended hand. The photo captures his gesture at the precise moment when his hand overlays the aggressively worked clay of the model’s base, suggesting the transformation of the artists’ thought and discourse into material form. The trio of sculptors is balanced by a tripartite distribution of the monument itself, which in fact appears in three articulations: two smaller models located at the level of the artists and the larger version towering above their heads. Furthermore, the way the sculptors are grouped horizontally around the base of the model finds a parallel in the grouping of figures in the monument itself, surrounding the flag and flagpole that draws the composition towards its apex. Above all else then, the photograph weaves together the strands and stages of socialist Albanian history and shows this history as a collective event: the present, the sculptors grouped in dialogue, becomes the ground from which the collectivity of past experience achieves clarity, form and metaphysical significance.

The photograph was probably taken prior to Hoxha’s visit to the sculptors’ studio, but in the wake of that visit, it becomes difficult not to read the artists’ engaged conversation as a discussion of the dictator’s aesthetic and ideological suggestions (which I will describe in greater detail below).<sup>7</sup> In either case, however, the photograph reveals the importance of co-operative effort in representing the past. Such collective work became essential to the socialist Albanian cultural industry in the second half of the 1960s, when the country experienced a frenzy of memorialisation aimed at consolidating a shared national historical consciousness.

4 In this aspect, the present study differs from a number of other studies on monuments in socialist and totalitarian regimes, too numerous to list here. The current study is primarily concerned with charting the ways that different kinds of collaboration both amongst artists, and between the state (and the dictator) and artists, were framed to metaphorically represent the kind of co-operative engagement that supposedly also characterised the ongoing construction of the socialist present.

5 *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon*, Shtëpia Botonjese Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1969, p 13, translation in original.

6 This clarity also suggests that the photograph was staged, as were many such photographs appearing in official photo books and periodicals under socialism.

7 Muntas Dhrami, conversation with the author, August 2016

During these years, as artist and critic Kujtim Buza would write in 1973, socialist Albania's landscape would be transformed into 'a landscape of stone, of marble, a landscape of bronze'.<sup>8</sup> The country witnessed a proliferation of monuments to counter their relative absence in the Albanian territory prior to the socialist years. This prior absence of monuments can no doubt in part be attributed to the relative political instability of the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the infrastructure and resources necessary for large-scale monumental projects were simply not available, or were devoted primarily to creating a modern urban architectural environment. Thus, it was not until well into the socialist period in Albania that monuments (which often served as localised architectural interventions into rural areas, symbolically creating a 'modernised' urban space without the need for larger-scale transformation) were profusely produced.<sup>9</sup>

The inception of the Vlorë Independence Monument predates the surge in monumental construction of the late 1960s. The initial commission in 1962 coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of independence from the Ottoman Empire and the first plans for the work were significantly different than the sculpture that was finally inaugurated ten years later. The most detailed plan for the first version of the project was put forward by Odhise Paskali (1903–1985), one of the few sculptors who had realised works of a monumental scale in Albania prior to the socialist period. Paskali belonged to an older generation of artists than those who, in the early 1960s, were just returning from training at the Ilya Repin Leningrad Institute for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture – the artists who would help establish the forms of Socialist Realism that subsequently characterised artistic production in Albania in the late 1980s. Paskali – trained in Turin in the 1920s – proposed an entire monumental complex that was essentially neoclassical in character: a central stone statue of Albania personified as a mother-warrior, holding aloft a flag in one hand and dangling a golden garland in the other, was to be surrounded by three separate groups of warriors.<sup>10</sup> These groups would represent: 1) the politicians, intellectuals, and militants associated with the Albanian National Awakening, including Ismail Qemali; 2) the soldiers who fought in the 1920 Vlorë War against Italian forces; and 3) the soldiers who fought in the National Liberation War, the struggle to free the Albanian territory from fascist forces during World War II.

Although many aspects of Paskali's concept for the monument would survive in the version ultimately realised, it appears that Paskali himself was never contracted to work on the project. Instead, in 1963, the Central Committee of the Politburo announced an open competition for proposals for the monument,<sup>11</sup> and finally in the middle of 1965 the Politburo approved a concept put forward by Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami.<sup>12</sup> The sculptors were contracted to complete the monument within three years. One condition of this contract, however, was the construction of a centralised studio space in Tirana for the purpose of national monumental construction – a fact that reveals the lack of an infrastructure necessary to the construction of monumental sculpture prior to that point. The construction of the new studio was also delayed, and in 1967 the sculptors agreed to complete the Independence Monument by the close of the year 1969 – the year that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Partisan victory over fascist forces

8 Kujtim Buza, Kleanthi Dedi, and Dhimitraq Trebicka, eds, *Përmendore të Heroizmit Shqiptar*, Shtëpia Qëndrore e Ushtrisë Popullore, Tirana, 1973

9 On this topic, see the state-produced documentary film *Lapidari* (10:27 minutes, 1984–1986), written by Viktor Gjika and directed by Esat Ibro; see: <http://departmentofeagles.org/tag/viktor-gjika/>. For an analysis of the film see Julian Bejko, 'About the Film *Lapidari*', in Vincent W J van Gerven Oei, ed, *Lapidari, Volume I: Texts*, Jonida Gashi and van Gerven Oei, trans, Punctum Books, New York, 2015, pp 125–128.

10 A detailed description written by Paskali together with sketches for several variants on this initial plan for the monumental complex can be found in the Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (Central State Archives, Tirana; hereafter AQSh), f 490, v 1962, d 992, fl 4–34.

11 Ibid, AQSh, f 490, v 1963, d 979, fl 9

12 Ibid, AQSh, f 490, v 1967, d 521, fl 5

and Albania's subsequent liberation.<sup>13</sup> However, 1969 would ultimately mark not the completion of the Vlora Independence Monument but instead the aesthetic and ideological re-evaluation of the monument's significance in the wake of Enver Hoxha's visit to the sculptors' studio and his comments upon their labours.

13 Ibid

14 On the Albanian Cultural Revolution, see Isa Blumi, 'Hoxha's Class War: The Cultural Revolution and State Reformation, 1961–1971', *East European Quarterly*, vol 33, no 3, autumn 1999, pp 303–326, and Peter R Piffti, *Socialist Albania Since 1944: Domestic and Foreign Developments*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978, pp 143–149.

15 Elidor Mëhilli, 'Mao and the Albanians', in Alexander C Cook, ed, *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, pp 165–184

16 Ibid, pp 172–175

17 It is significant that the language used treated the policies as a continuation, a 'deepening', rather than an absolute break. Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin*, op cit, p 241.

18 Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History*, I B Tauris, London and New York, 2014, p 197

19 On the cult of Skanderbeg as a civil religion, and the association of Skanderbeg with Hoxha, see Egin Ceka, 'Muzeu Kombëtar dhe Muzeu i Skënderbeut si Institucione të Religjionit Civil Shqiptar të Komunizmit', *Përpyekja*, vol 11, no 21, autumn 2005, pp 121–147. The inauguration of the equestrian monument to Skanderbeg (created by another trio of sculptors – Odhise Paskali, Janaq Paço, and Andrea Mano) in Tirana's central square in 1968 was emblematic of the monumental aspect of the construction of this civil religion. The monument displaced the statue of Stalin that formerly stood in the square.

## The Albanian Cultural Revolution, Monumental Sculpture and Collective Artistic Production

To better understand the significance of the collective labour of the three sculptors and the significance of the dictator's visit to their studio, we must understand the political and cultural situation in socialist Albania leading up to 1969. As noted above, these years saw the beginning of a period of heightened industry involved in the construction of monumental sculpture. This commemorative surge – which lasted well into the 1970s – formed part of Enver Hoxha's own Cultural Revolution, partially carried out in conjunction with Mao's, primarily between 1966 and 1969.<sup>14</sup> The 1960s were a tumultuous period in the country's international relations: at the beginning of the decade, Albania broke off relations with Nikita Khrushchev's Soviet Union and gradually shifted towards an alliance with the People's Republic of China. This alliance made it logical for Hoxha to look to Mao's policies as a model for socialist development, but the character of the Cultural Revolution that took place in Albania was markedly different from that of China.<sup>15</sup> Hoxha viewed the transformation of China's politics and culture beginning in 1966 with concern: to him, Mao's Cultural Revolution was too frenzied, too potentially dangerous to merit imitation; a more controlled, top-down method seemed prudent.<sup>16</sup> While Hoxha ultimately lent vocal support to the changes occurring in China, the Albanian Cultural Revolution was characterised by a greater consolidation of state power and national consciousness, coupled with a decidedly different version of the personality cult.

At the Fifth Congress of the Albanian Party of Labour in 1966, Hoxha outlined his model for 'the deepening of the ideological and cultural revolution'.<sup>17</sup> The 'further revolutionisation of life in the country' would manifest itself in many ways. The ensuing years witnessed an intensification of Hoxha's anti-religious policies – especially vis-à-vis the Catholic tribes in the north of Albania, whose loyalty to familial ties presented an ongoing challenge to centralised governmental control.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the construction of a civil religion centred on the national hero Skanderbeg began, and this civil religion in turn established a link between Skanderbeg's alleged role as medieval unifier of the Albanian people (against the Ottomans) and Hoxha's socialist state.<sup>19</sup> (In this and other ways, Hoxha's cult of personality was constructed obliquely, by first establishing other national heroes such as Skanderbeg and Ismail Qemali, and subsequently associating Hoxha's role with theirs.) The year 1966 saw the inauguration of the Palace of Culture in Tirana, home to the National Theatre of Opera and Ballet and the National Library, and the number and diversity of newspapers in the country started to increase, with local publications overseen by regional Party committees beginning



- 20 Artan Fuga, *Monolog: Mediat dhe Propaganda Totalitare*, Duda, Tirana, 2010, p. 59
- 21 Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, *Historia e Shqipërisë, Vëllimi i Katërt (1944–1975)*, 8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1983, p. 362.
- 22 See the writings in Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin*, op cit
- 23 One such case involved Hoxha's role in deciding the form of the monument that would grace the Cemetery of the Martyrs of the Nation in Tirana, under construction in the same years. Regarding this monument, see Raino Isto, 'Dynamisms of Time and Space: The Synthesis of Architecture and Monumental Sculpture in Socialist Albania's Martyrs' Cemeteries', *Eesti Kunstimuuseumi Toimetised: Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia*, vol 11, no 6, 2016, pp 42–67.
- 24 In the realm of public space, one of the most concrete influences of Mao's Cultural Revolution on Albania was the adoption of the 'big character poster', or *shkronja të mëdha*, as it was called in Albanian. On this phenomenon, see Ardian Vehbiu, 'Me Shkronja të Mëdha', *Përpykja*, vol 20, no 32–33, spring 2014, pp 216–227.
- 25 See Raino Isto, 'Between Two Easts: Albania, the USSR, China, and the Ontology of a Transnational Socialist Reality in Postwar Albanian Visual Art', paper delivered at the College Art Association 104<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference (3–6 February), Washington, DC, 6 February 2016.
- 26 As such, part of socialist Albania's attempt to consolidate national consciousness involved documenting rural practices and gathering ethnographic information on rural populations.

publication.<sup>20</sup> The final years of the 1960s also saw the publication of the first volumes of Enver Hoxha's collected works – a set of writings that would eventually stretch to seventy volumes and would become the single most important reference point for all published criticism and analysis in the later years of Albanian socialism.<sup>21</sup>

Hoxha's own writings on the arts in particular seem to indicate, however, that he was not primarily interested in directly participating in culture. Many of his writings on art and literature (including those from the period of the Cultural Revolution) are quite general,<sup>22</sup> and only in a few specific cases (such as that of the Vlora Monument) did he make concrete suggestions. However, it is clear that Hoxha nevertheless consider it necessary for his involvement in artistic and cultural matters to become public, even if he himself did not emphasise his own artistic sensibilities, and there is documentation of other cases in which his artistic preferences shaped public commissions.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to assess the full impact of the – at least partially-shared – Cultural Revolution on the development of the arts in Albania.<sup>24</sup> Many Albanian artists travelled as part of cultural delegations to China and other Asian countries (although such visits began far in advance of the Cultural Revolution). Exhibitions of art from China and Korea toured to Albania (including a replica of the massive sculptural ensemble *The Rent Collection Courtyard*, 1965), and Albanian artists such as Andon Kuqali, Andrea Mano, and Foto Stamo drew on their experiences of China to represent the landscapes and working classes of that socialist nation for Albanian audiences. What is clear, however, is that cultural exchanges during this period allowed Albania to solidify a position as the last truly socialist nation in Europe (holding out against various 'revisionist' neighbouring states), while at the same time attempting to create a socialist art that would be both nationally specific and globally accessible.<sup>25</sup>

Above all else, the model for the arts developed during the Cultural Revolution in Albania was intended to be popular in character and appeal.<sup>26</sup> As Hoxha asserted,

Our socialist art and culture must base themselves firmly upon our ancestral homeland, upon our miraculous people; they must spring forth from the people and be fully in their service, be clear and understandable to them but not in the least 'banal and without ideas'. The Party supports artistic and cultural production in which deeply ideological content and expansive, popular inspiration are brought into harmony with an elevated artistic form: [artistic and cultural production] that touches the feelings and hearts of the people, and inspires and motivates them to do great things.<sup>27</sup>

It seems clear, however, that artistic production was not meant to relate to the masses solely through its content. The process of artistic production was also supposed to mirror the collective efforts that the socialist populace was purportedly undertaking, and such collectivity was ideally manifest in the creation of monumental sculpture. By 1970, Kujtim Buza would survey the plethora of public art projects (chiefly sculptural and architectural) at the time, and write that '*nearly all of our sculptors, no matter their age, have joined together to form collectives*'.<sup>28</sup> While

- 27 The quotation is drawn from Hoxha's speech at the Fifth Congress of the Albanian Party of Labour in 1966, published in Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin*, op cit, p 255.
- 28 Kujtim Buza, 'Puna Krijuese Kolektive në Fushën e Arteve Figurative', *Drita*, 27 September 1970, (emphasis added). Buza also made clear the centrality of monuments to socialist Albanian life: 'The ideological-aesthetic education of the working masses is an important duty of our artists, painters, and sculptors. Their works play a key role in shaping the masses' notion of beauty, in creating a rich spiritual life [for the people]. Architects and monumental sculptors have a particularly significant role in this process.'
- 29 Relatively little scholarship exists in any language on Albanian monumental sculpture, nor even on Albanian sculpture more broadly. In English, Vincent W J van Gerven Oei, ed, *Lapidari*, op cit, surveys commemorative sculpture from socialist Albania with several scholarly contributions. In Albanian, Suzana Varvarica Kuka is the author of several monographs on Albanian sculptors. On Odhise Paskali's artistic activity, see his memoirs: Odhise Paskali, *Gjurmë Jete*, 8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1986, and Ferid Hudhri, *Arti i Rilindjes Shqiptare: 1883–1945*, Onufri, Tirana, 2000, pp 87–114.
- 30 Suzana Varvarica Kuka, *Andrea Mano. Skulptor i Merituar: 1919–2000*, Ilar, Tirana, 2009, p 123, pp 127–128
- 31 Kristaq Rama, 'Arritje dhe Perspektiva të Skulpturës Sonë Monumentale', *Nëntori*, vol 25, no 1, January 1978, pp 19–20
- 32 Buza, 'Puna Krijuese Kolektive', op cit
- Buza's assessment may be exaggerated, his observation indicates the shift taking place in creative work during the period of increased monumental construction – a shift that the 1969 photograph of the 'Monumental Trio' (as Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami came to be called) at work on the Independence Monument demonstrates quite succinctly.
- Many of the major monuments produced in the country during the late 1960s and 1970s were the work of multiple sculptors (to say nothing of the collaboration with architects in designing the environments for the installation of the sculptures), including the equestrian statue of Skanderbeg in the main square of Tirana (the work of Odhise Paskali, Janaq Paço, and Andrea Mano, inaugurated in 1968) and the *Four Heroines of Mirdita* in Rrëshen (the work of Andrea Mano, Perikli Çuli, Fuat Dushku, and Dhimo Gogollari, inaugurated in 1971).<sup>29</sup> The collaborative aspect of monument-building in socialist Albania served both a practical and an ideological function. Multiple sculptors were often necessary to complete the works in time for the established inauguration dates and artistic collectives allowed younger sculptors to work with older, more experienced ones.<sup>30</sup> The collective character of the creative process was also seen as vital for the development of artists as creative individuals in the course of building socialism. Collaboration allowed for group discussions of artworks – considered to unlock their full aesthetic-didactic potential – and co-operative work in the studio facilitated the exchange of both experience and ideas out of which individual artistic styles were able 'to crystallize'.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, collaborative artistic effort assured that individual style did not transform into individualism or intellectualism.<sup>32</sup>
- This conflict, between the artist's individuality as evidence of socialism's cultural fecundity and the drive to model a collectivised mode of artistic creation, was never fully resolved in socialist Albania. Albania never really saw, for example, the kind of mass cultural production characteristic of Mao's China, although the move towards collective artistic processes in the late 1960s might certainly be seen as a response to Mao's Cultural Revolution. Thus, there was always a degree of tension between the concept of collaboration – implying individual subjects joining together in the work of creation – and that of an achieved artistic collectivity, in which such individuals would cease to matter as individuals. Thus, although 'collective' creative work was repeatedly celebrated in official discourse, the individual and indeed elite status of artists was retained both practically and to a degree ideologically.<sup>33</sup> However, the imperative to collaborate and to study 'popular' sources of culture attempted (in a way analogous to some of the changes in artistic practices in Maoist China) to place artists in direct contact with social groups with whom they would not otherwise interact.
- By 1969, Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami were the paradigmatic artistic collective in Albania. Together, they had achieved notoriety as prolific and popular sculptors; indeed, their collective success was such that the three were caricatured as a monument by cartoonist Bujar Kapexhiu in a 1969 issue of *Drita*. All three first studied in the Jordan Misja artistic lyceum in Tirana and later (as was common for artists in Albania during the 1950s and early 1960s, prior to the break with the Soviet Union) in the Ilya Repin Institute in Leningrad. Upon returning to Albania, Rama worked first as an superintendent for the Ministry of

- 33 Likewise, as we shall see, although Hoxha's interaction with the sculptors of the Vlora monument could certainly be termed collaboration, it cannot be said that the dictator's own subjectivity disappeared into the artistic collective – rather, the leader appeared to emerge all the more clearly *out of* his participation in the genesis of the monument.

Art and Culture, then as Director of the National Gallery of Arts (in 1960), and later as a director in the Ministry of Art and Culture (in 1966).<sup>34</sup> Hadëri and Dhrami both returned from Russia to work as professors of sculpture in the Institute of the Arts in Tirana. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Monumental Trio was at work not only on the Vlora Independence Monument, but also on the *Mother Albania* monument destined for the Cemetery of the Martyrs of the Nation in Tirana (also inaugurated in 1972), the *Monument to 1920* near Vlora (inaugurated in 1970), and a monumental relief on the façade of the Prime Minister's residency (completed in 1974).<sup>35</sup> The event that fully solidified the significance of the Monumental Trio's position in socialist Albanian art history, however, came with Enver Hoxha's visit to their studio.

## The Letters

The genesis of the Vlora Independence Monument established that the collaborative aspect of monumental industry did not occur *only* between artists. Enver Hoxha visited the sculptors' studio in the summer of 1969, and the subsequent exchange of open letters between Hoxha and the artists established the paradigmatic involvement of the dictator in cultural affairs, assigning him a role that hovered between enlightened benefactor and educated critic. Hoxha's intervention in the Vlora monument's creation was highly strategic: it not only clearly established the meanings the monument would have upon completion, but it also contributed to Hoxha's own transformation from military leader into a figure of intellectual and socio-cultural authority. As Albania entered the 1970s, Hoxha would wield this authority more aggressively, eventually declaring war on all 'foreign influences' in Albanian culture in 1973.<sup>36</sup> However, he also used this authority to establish himself as the leader of a *culturally and historically* unified people, not merely of a politically delineated state. Coming as it did at a key moment in the political, cultural, and social transformation of socialist Albania, Hoxha's letter to the Monumental Trio paradoxically indicated both the 'correct' interpretation of national history and the degree to which the interpretation of that history was still an open question. Put differently, Hoxha's observations to the sculptors prescribed a set of meanings that the monument was intended to convey, but in so doing it also indicated that those meanings were not self-evident, that collaboration and discussion were necessary between artists, the state and the people in order to fully comprehend (and to *make*) history.

Hoxha made several things clear in his letter. First, he insisted that the Vlora monument should present not merely the events surrounding the Albanian Declaration of Independence in 1912, but the entire history of the Albanian people's struggle against 'centuries-long enslavement and [against] every impediment' to national unity. Second, he emphasised that this historical synthesis should be embodied in an image of ceaseless and violent forward motion: he wrote, 'The whole ensemble of the monument should be on the attack, so that the figures that make it up are not in static positions... independence must be protected, the war must be continued, the revolution must rise.' As a result of these two suggestions,

- 34 Ylli Drishti, Suzana Varvarica Kuka, and Rudina Memaga, *Monografi: me Artistë Shqiptarë të Shekullit XX*, Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve, Tirana, 1999, pp 76–77, pp 92–93, pp 106–107
- 35 These latter two works were created in collaboration with sculptor Hektor Dule (b 1939), who was slightly younger than the other three.
- 36 This declaration was made at what would become the infamous Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Albanian Party of Labour, a meeting where 'liberal' trends evident in the Ninth Albanian Radio and Television Song Festival (December 1972) were condemned. On the effects of the Fourth Plenum in Albanian art, see Fjoralba Satka, 'Albanian Alternative Artists vs Official Art Under Communism', in Corina Pălasă and Cristian Vasile, eds, *History of Communism in Europe, Vol. 2–2011: Avatars of Intellectuals Under Communism*, Zeta Books, Bucharest, 2011, pp 79–89.



Hoxha argued that the monument should present a clear connection between the moment of independence and the ongoing project of Albanian socialism: 'In it we would see our own revolution moving forward, rising up. The people's imagination should see, in the work you will create, that which [they] realised in the glorious National Liberation War, that which [they are] realising today in the building of socialism.' Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, he commented on the role of Ismail Qemali as it appeared in the sculpture: 'I agree with you that the figure of Ismail Qemali should be the central figure, as you have made him, but from the entire ensemble it should be clear that his act is a consequence of the legendary struggle of the people.'<sup>37</sup> That is, Hoxha desired the Independence Monument to reflect not only the past as history but also the *present* as history, and that history was meant to be a collectively popular one; if heroes emerged in this history, they emerged out of the kind of communal effort that characterised the creation of the monument itself, as an exemplary instance of socialist labour.

Hoxha made other concrete suggestions regarding both form and content in his letter, most of which were integrated into the finalised version of the monument. He lamented the absence of a representative figure from the period of the Albanian National Awakening, a movement of intellectual and nationalist consolidation that Hoxha clearly wished to establish as a parallel to his own administration.<sup>38</sup> He also noted that the degree to which the artists had attempted to represent the specific clothing of fighters from different ethnographic regions within Albania, but suggested that the figures should be more generalised in their appearance, since – as he put it – war cast aside the need for costumes and finery. Finally, he remarked upon the flag's rather crestfallen character, suggesting the need for a more dynamic form.

In their letter of response – published on the front page of the same issue of *Drita* in which Hoxha's letter appeared – Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami for the most part accepted Hoxha's suggestions regarding the monument's content. The sculptors' letter indicates, in many ways, both the possibilities open to and the limitations constraining artists in socialist Albania. On the one hand, the sculptors take issue with none of Hoxha's observations. They praise his incisive sense of both aesthetics and Marxist-Leninist history and describe at length the inspiration that his letter instilled amongst themselves and their colleagues. In short, the letter of response would appear to confirm that the artists themselves had little or no agency in the creation of the monument, that their work was suddenly effaced by the dictator's intervention. However, this interpretation ignores the degree to which the publication of the two letters places the emphasis precisely on the dialogic character of the creative process, the need for discussion and exchange, for debate about history and its proper representation. The dictator's letter published alone would have meant something quite different.

Furthermore, the changes to the monument that Hoxha proposed by no means fully encompass the changes that the sculptors subsequently carried out. First of all, the final monument in fact increases the number of warriors dressed in recognisable (though still generalised) costumes that locate them in various different ethnographic regions within or adjacent to Albania's national boundaries under socialism. As sculptor Hektor Dule – a colleague of the Monumental Trio – wrote,<sup>39</sup> the four warriors

37 All citations in this paragraph are from Hoxha, 'Në Gurrën e Pashtrshme', *op cit*.

38 On the National Awakening period, see Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening 1878–1912*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1967.

39 Hektor Dule, 'Një Vepër nga më të Fuqishmet në Skulpturën Tonë', *Drita*, 3 December 1972

flanking Qemali appeared to represent a *malësor* (a resident of the mountainous regions of northern Albania and Kosovo, known to Albanians as *Gegënia*), a *myzeqar* (a resident of the region of southwest-central Albania once known as *Myzeqeja*, around present-day Fier and Lushnja), a *lab* (a resident of *Labëria*, a region in the south of Albania stretching between present-day Vlorë south to Saranda and east to the Vjosa river), and a *tosk* (a resident of *Toskëria*, a historical region in southeastern Albania, east of Myzeqeja and Labëria and south of the Shkumbin River). Thus, the sculptors in fact heightened the ‘popular’ character of the figures in the monument, at once fulfilling Hoxha’s call for an art based upon direct contact with the people and in a sense rejecting his preference for a generalised image of historical Albanian fighters for independence.

Indeed, perhaps the most fundamental change to the model involved the flag form at the centre of the monumental ensemble, a change that affected not only the composition but the meaning of the work as well. In their letter, the sculptors emphasised that one of the most salient pieces of advice the dictator had given had been that regarding the need for the monument’s contemporaneity. They wrote,

[Our] subject also always calls not only for deep historic truthfulness but also a solid connection to the present. Precisely in this connection between the subject of history and that of today, we artists sometimes have difficulties, since we may present the highest achievements of various periods of history as if they were disconnected from [our] present.<sup>40</sup>

To bridge the abyss between history and the present, the sculptors ultimately transformed the crestfallen flag into a sharp upward protrusion of the stony base, crowning this vertical element with a flagbearer – a youth representing the ‘New Man’ of socialist Albania.<sup>41</sup> In this way, the sculptors satisfied both the monument’s historical character and the requirement that the work function as a reflection of the transforming socialist present. That is to say, the contemporaneity of the Vlora Monument lay in the way it brought together diverse times (the age-long struggles of the Albanian people, the emergence of national consciousness in the National Awakening, the rise of the ‘New Man’ of socialism) in the historical present. In this sense, the monument is not simply a representation of the ‘new’, of socialist *modernity*. As Peter Osborne points out, ‘The subject of modernity (and there is ultimately a singular one) has a “collective” dialectical unity; the equally speculative, but differently unitary, subject of the contemporary has a “distributive” unity.’<sup>42</sup> In Albania during late socialism, there was a distinct political and existential clash between the attempt to construct a ‘modern’ subject (one characterised by the dialectical unity achieved through, for example, the nation, the social class, or the ethnic identity) and a ‘contemporary’ subject (one characterised not by dialectical transformation, but defined through its differential distribution across times or geographies). The Vlora Monument’s depiction of a unified history was not merely about the synthesis of that unity, but also about its distribution: it suggested that the warriors of the mountainous north of Albania (who had not yet been fully ‘modernised’), the late Ottoman political and literary elite that helped establish the Albanian state and the socialist youth, all represented instantiations

40 Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami, ‘I Dashur Shoku Enver’, op cit

41 In some ways, the flag-bearer represented one of the monument’s clearest ideological tensions, discussed above: that between the significance *in its own right* of collective struggle and effort, and the coalescence of that collectivity into an individual figure.

42 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, New York, 2013, p 25



Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlorë, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlorë, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlorë, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlora, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Andrea Mano, Perikli Çuli, Fuat Dushku, and Dhimo Gogollari, *Monument to the Four Heroines of Mirdita*, inaugurated 1971, bronze, Rrëshen, Albania (now destroyed), photo in: Kujtim Buza, Kleanthi Dedi, and Dhimitraq Trebicka, *Përmendoretë Heroizmit Shqiptar*, Shtëpia Qëndrore e Ushtrisë Popullore, Tirana, 1973, p 111



Odhise Paskali, Janaq Paço, and Andrea Mano, *Skanderbeg Monument*, 1968, bronze, Tirana, Albania, photo: Raino Isto

of a historical reality that was being constructed most emphatically in the socialist present. In this way, the monument straddles collective synthesis and the distributive character of socialist contemporaneity.

## Conclusion

Enver Hoxha would never again intervene as directly and publicly in the creative process as he did in the case of the Vlora Independence Monument. Nor would he need to: thanks to the peculiar citational economy of socialist Albanian culture, once introduced into discourse, an event such as the exchange of letters between Hoxha and the artists could be endlessly referenced, removing the need for subsequent interventions. Over the course of the next several years (as the monument was being completed, and after), the letter Hoxha had written to the Monumental Trio became established as a crucial document of socialist art criticism within Albania. Above all else, Hoxha's letter emphasised that the historic moment depicted in the Vlora Monument should be seen as the *collective* struggle of the Albanian people – and his letter also *performed* that function, since it made clear the importance of the mutually reinforcing collaboration between the socialist state and its artists. In 1970, when Kujtim Buza wrote about the significance of collective artistic labour in *Drita*, he insisted that the open exchange of letters was responsible for significant aesthetic and ideological transformations in other monuments under construction at the time, such as the *Four Heroines of Mirdita* monument.<sup>43</sup> When the Vlora Independence Monument was finally inaugurated in 1972, the article published in *Zëri i Popullit* (Voice of the People) – socialist Albania's primary daily newspaper – did not fail to discuss the exchange between Hoxha and the sculptors in the summer of 1969. When Kristaq Rama delivered the keynote speech at the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists' plenum on monumental sculpture in 1977, he stated that Hoxha's letter 'had special importance not simply for the successful realisation of [the Independence Monument], but for [Albanian] art in general'.<sup>44</sup>

Let us, finally, return to the 1969 photograph of the three sculptors published in *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon*. It may now seem that the *absence* of the dictator from the photograph is all the more striking, even if we know that the image was taken before Hoxha's visit to the studio. Of course, there is a kind of bathetic – and no doubt accurate – explanation: even if Hoxha's intervention was celebrated *within* socialist Albania, the photobook in which the image was published was one of those produced primarily for export to other nations, to demonstrate the successes of Albania's Cultural Revolution. As such it was far more important to emphasise the freedom of Albania's cultural workers, their independent innovation in the creative process. At the same time, however, it seems not entirely accidental that the dictator's visit to the studio was an event that belonged almost immediately to the realm of discourse, that proliferated itself through texts and references rather than through photographic documentation. With its combination of vague ideological suggestions and concrete formal ones, Enver Hoxha's letter to the Monumental Trio was perhaps also an example of socialist Albanian culture as pure text: far from a concrete material instantiation, as

43 Buza, 'Puna Krijuese Kolektive', op cit

44 Rama, 'Arritje dhe Perspektiva', op cit, p 15



the monument would become – as it already appeared in the photograph of 1969 – the letter exchange between dictator and artists was the production of another kind of collaborative structure, a citational one. It allowed the Vlora Independence Monument to serve not only as a concrete aesthetic model to be directly emulated, but also – perhaps even more so – as a loose conceptual framework in which and across which a plethora of histories would unfold.

Understanding the genesis of the Vlora Independence Monument helps us understand the work of monumental sculpture as an agent of history and historical consciousness – not only the ways monuments represent historical events and produce an understanding of these past events through their enduring presence, but also the ways their production models various forms of history in the present. History made in the present in socialist Albania during the late 1960s was intended to be a collective history, and out of this collectivity emerged groups of artists more fully equipped to capture what Shaban Hadëri would later term ‘the monumentality of our socialist life’.<sup>45</sup> It also produced a new image of the state and the dictator as collaborators in the construction of art, history, and collective life. The complexities of this process were far greater than is often suggested by contemporary accounts of Albania’s socialist past, such as the one presented in the 2013 article in *Mapo*, cited at the outset. Such accounts see the art of the socialist period primarily as a tool that political power used to distort history and reality alike. What these accounts omit is the degree to which neither art’s role in relation to history, nor history itself, were unambiguously defined concepts. Rather, they were emergent in particular works and particular situations, and the scale of monumental industry made monumental sculpture a particularly significant field through which these concepts could be configured by artists as well as political figures.

In so many ways, socialist Albania’s cultural scene was unique in terms of art history. The country lacked the neo-avant-garde tendencies that arose nearly everywhere else in the region. It largely avoided the tendencies towards either geometric or biomorphic abstraction that appeared elsewhere, even in monumental contexts, in favour of pursuing figurative Socialist Realism as an aesthetic ideal. Its monumental landscape sought to establish itself not against a long history of sculpture, but against a territory supposedly empty of developed commemoration. And yet, for precisely these reasons, the historical role that monumental sculpture was called upon to play in Albania can assist in showing us the importance of monumentality in the late socialist context. As political structures, international alliances and ideologies began to shift in the 1960s across Eastern and Central Europe, and socialist culture transformed, the role played by artists in relation to history also changed. In monuments, where a sublime vision of the past was intended to be unified with the socialist present, artists often found themselves not only representing history but also participating in its collective significance.

45 Shaban Hadëri, ‘Monumentaliteti i Jerës Sonë dhe Pasqyrimi i Tij në Skulpturë’, *Nëntori*, vol 24, no 5, May 1977, p 246

# The Man Behind the Curtain

## Gábor Bódy, Experimental Film Culture and Networks of State Control in Late Socialist Hungary

Sonja Simonyi

In 2004, Hungary's commercial TV2 channel broadcast an episode of the television show *Nyom nélkül* (Without a Trace), which investigated the circumstances of media artist and film-maker Gábor Bódy's alleged suicide in 1985.<sup>1</sup> Bódy was a foremost figure of late socialist Hungarian visual culture who, as it was revealed posthumously, also worked as a secret informant, reporting on friends and colleagues between 1973 and 1981. The TV episode illustrated the extent to which post-socialist Eastern European media had by the early 2000s successfully appropriated the foremost clichés and sensationalising agendas of commercial television: footage foregrounded sordid details surrounding its subject's scene of death, revisiting the site for added dramatic and visual effect.

Exploitative televisual tropes aside, as a piece of investigative journalism, it nevertheless provided informative, insightful testimonials from Bódy's former colleagues and childhood friends. The report thus ultimately offered a confounding portrait of the artist, decidedly puzzling in its laying out of contradictory facts. These appeared to confirm his stellar career as an interdisciplinary, transnational film-maker and media theorist.<sup>2</sup> Yet while the dedicated testimonials highlighted the incredible allure of his powerful intellect and personality, they also revealed crucial blind spots that remain in accounts of his life and death. The show as a whole thus foregrounded a sense of inscrutability attached to Bódy's private and public personas that has inevitably fed into the myth that defines his posthumous image.

1 Krisztina Máté, *Nyom nélkül: Bódy Gábor* (Without a Trace: Gábor Bódy), TV2, 2004

2 After a prolific film career, in the late 1970s Bódy began to focus more intensely on video art. In 1982 he received a DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst/German Academic Exchange Service) scholarship, which allowed him to move to West Berlin and he subsequently worked as an assistant professor at the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (Film and Television Academy Berlin).

This article explores Bódy's role as a central figure of experimental film culture in late socialist Hungary. It argues that his status as a subversive creative intellectual active in both state-funded and unofficial artistic contexts, who also served the state through secret reports, exemplifies the interrelatedness of seemingly contradictory cultural spheres under the regime. In doing so the study has two aims: one, to sketch the sites where these converging activities unfolded in the early 1970s and in which Bódy was active during this time, and two, to invite a reconsideration of the artist beyond habitual binary understandings of socialist cultural actors as either heroically resistant or fully subservient, and connect these issues to discourses that have shaped thinking about acts of secret surveillance in the period since 1989. My analysis also emphasises the limitations of considering Bódy through the mythologising lens that has generally defined posthumous assessments of his life and work. Bódy negotiated rigid power structures and bureaucratic systems of state control that raise questions about the role individual cultural actors held within the fabric of both state-sanctioned and subversive artistic practices in socialist Hungary.

Bódy confidently traversed avant-garde and mainstream spheres of cultural production, and in the 1970s made available state-supported sites of artistic creation for politically subversive and aesthetically provocative artists. During his relatively short but unusually prolific life, he held multifarious official and unofficial institutional positions of influence. He was a crucial figure within the Balázs Béla Stúdió, Hungary's central platform for experimental film-making throughout the 1970s where he enthusiastically provided material resources to artists until then uniquely reserved for movie professionals. Besides producing a rich oeuvre that spanned big budget narrative features made at mainstream film studios, and experimental works on celluloid and video alongside a significant body of theoretical and critical writings, Bódy expanded the formal and narrative possibilities of the medium, propelling such investigations beyond the confines of the industry.<sup>3</sup> His role within these different contexts thus makes him a foremost subject through which to assess intersecting areas of cultural production under socialism.

Hungarian narratives of Bódy's professional and artistic achievements that have appeared since his passing foreground his captivating personality, which combined with his contested death at the age of thirty-nine, and the unexpected posthumous revelations about his active involvement with the secret service, yield a seemingly inscrutable, dauntingly contradictory image. In this light, Bódy encompasses irreconcilable profiles for one of the most prominent creative spirits of the socialist period. Rethinking this posthumous image, a deeper understanding of this figure's influence should move away from readings that seductively foreground his magnetic personality as the primary driving force of his remarkable trajectory.

It should be noted that commentaries on Bódy, whether informal or scholarly in nature, encompass a confusing range of reactions, from dismissal to unconditional devotion, which inexorably corrals thinking about him into a polarised, subjective, sphere. Emotionally charged responses to his infamous persona are unquestionably informed by visceral reactions to the repressive period through which he lived. As such, continued research on his life and work should inevitably take into

<sup>3</sup> For a complete filmography, see <https://bodygabor.hu/filmek/>, accessed 3 June 2018.



4 Key edited volumes to highlight Bódy's writing include the bilingual publication Miklós Peternák and László Beke, eds, *Bódy Gábor, 1946–1985: Életműbemutató / Gábor Bódy, 1946–1985: A Presentation of His Work*, Műcsarnok, Budapest, 1987 and Vince Zalán, *Bódy Gábor: egybegyűjtött filmművészeti íráskok: I kötet* (Gábor Bódy: Collected Film Writings, Vol. I), Akadémiai kiadó, Budapest, 2006. An edited volume on the history of the Balázs Béla Stúdió also features several essays that foreground aspects of his aesthetic approach to cinema and theoretical writings on film and media. Gábor Gelencsér, ed, *BBS 50: A Balázs Béla Stúdió 50 éve* (BBS 50: 50 Years of the Balázs Béla Stúdió), Műcsarnok, Budapest, 2009.

5 László Csujá, 'A Bódy Legendárium' (The Bódy Legendarium), Dissertation project outline, see [filmacademy, http://www.filmacademy.hu/uploads/dokumentumtar/csujaalaszlobody.pdf](http://www.filmacademy.hu/uploads/dokumentumtar/csujaalaszlobody.pdf)

6 Gábor Bódy, 'Önéletrajz' [1981] (Autobiography), reprinted in Zalán, *Bódy Gábor*, op cit, p 21

7 See for example András Forgách, 'Sötét angyal: Kerekasztal-beszélgetés Bódy Gáborról' (Dark Angel: Roundtable Discussion on Gábor Bódy), Part 1, *Filmvilág* 6, 2008, pp 14–18 and Forgách, 'Sötét angyal, Part 2, *Filmvilág* 7, 2008, pp 24–28; see [http://www.filmvilag.hu/xista\\_frame.php?cikk\\_id=9375](http://www.filmvilag.hu/xista_frame.php?cikk_id=9375) and [http://www.filmvilag.hu/xista\\_frame.php?cikk\\_id=9409](http://www.filmvilag.hu/xista_frame.php?cikk_id=9409), accessed 3 June 2018

8 György Cserhalmi, 'Barátom, Bódy Gábor' (My Friend, Gábor Bódy), *Filmvilág* 10, 1990, pp 21–27, see [http://filmvilag.hu/xista\\_frame.php?cikk\\_id=4716](http://filmvilag.hu/xista_frame.php?cikk_id=4716), accessed 3 June 2018

9 János Sugár, private conversation, May 2016

consideration the challenges of coming to terms with Hungary's socialist past, while also broadening debates centred on what is at stake in researching this era. This article's multifaceted approach does not deny Bódy's undeniable charm, strikingly performative character, and towering talent and intellect. Instead, it attempts to appraise the ways in which his life trajectory and professional achievements can shed light on a paradoxical historical moment in the cultural production of postwar Eastern Europe.

## Bódy, the Dark Angel

Bódy affected virtually all areas of cultural life in the Budapest of the 1970s and early 1980s. Academic work has primarily framed him in a variety of film contexts, usefully delineating his theoretical writings and analysing his film and new media productions.<sup>4</sup> In recent years several scholars have highlighted the ways in which Bódy's private life is inexorably connected to his artistic legacy. László Csujá for example states that such an approach provides a key link between Bódy and neo-avant-garde artists of his generation, born immediately postwar. As he explains, such artists rather self-consciously considered their personal lives a fundamental part of their creative output: 'in the spirit of the avant-garde [they] fully subjugated their entire existence to the forces of creation and their art'.<sup>5</sup> Csujá supports this by citing Bódy's autobiographical note from 1981, in which he proclaimed to 'continue to dedicate [his] life to freedom, love, art, and the sciences'.<sup>6</sup>

Bódy's electric personality undoubtedly forms an important aspect of his looming legacy and as Csujá convincingly states, it is essential for understanding his place within the creative and artistic networks that emerged in Hungary during the 1970s. Yet the abovementioned self-identification with nebulous terms such as 'freedom' and 'love', which Bódy attractively attaches to the notion of artistic creation, also gestures towards poetic vagueness and an undeniable sense of irony, given the political conditions within which he worked. A scholarly approach seeking to elucidate Bódy's trajectory within socialist Hungary's audio-visual culture should thus address such impassioned declarations, as well as a straightforward conflation of personal and professional achievements, with a necessary critical distance.

Similar romantic frameworks appear elsewhere, notably in several posthumous discussions and interviews. Recurrent tropes that surface in these writings emotionally describe his 'angelic appearance' and 'cult-like persona', alongside other seductive aspects of his character.<sup>7</sup> Attaching this attraction to his striking good looks, his long-term friend and collaborator, actor György Cserhalmi affectionately recalled his 'pretty face' and 'intelligent gaze' upon meeting him for the first time.<sup>8</sup> More recently media artist János Sugár called him the 'life of the party', someone who 'always brought energy and dynamism into the drab everyday' of Budapest's cultural life.<sup>9</sup> Even his nickname, 'dark angel' effectively signals the ways in which those close to Bódy assigned an almost otherworldly quality to him even during his lifetime.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, these monikers signal a less appealing side of the artist. Together with a seemingly faultless image, contemporaries

- 10 Bódy's interest in mysticism and esoteric topics has undoubtedly contributed to tempting parallels between his tumultuous life and otherworldly spheres. These subjects culminated in his final, unfinished, film project, which was an adaptation of Valery Bryusov's *The Fiery Angel* (1908), a historical novel that details the occult world of sixteenth century Cologne. His script was published after his death in 1987 alongside another uncompleted project. See Gábor Bódy, *Tűzes angyal / Psychotechnikum azaz Gulliver mindenekelőtti utazása Digitáliában* (Fiery Angel / Psychotechnicum or Gulliver's Pre-eminent Travels in Digitalia), Magvető, Budapest, 1987.

- 11 Cserhalmi, 'Barátom, Bódy Gábor', *Filmvilág*, op cit, and Vilmos Csaplár, in Forgách, 'Sötét angyal', op cit

- 12 Avant-garde playwright Péter Halász exemplifies an artistic trajectory that grew firmly detached from the official cultural system. He did this not merely symbolically, but also literally, by categorically moving the setting for his experimental plays and performances to the domestic realm, where they famously operated under the moniker *lakásszínház* (apartment theatre).

- 13 The broader socio-political backdrop for this period concerns the temporary loosening of ideological control within Hungary in the late 1960s related to the development of the so-called *Új gazdasági mechanizmus / New Economic Mechanism* (NEM) which was to achieve decentralisation in several key economic and societal areas. While the promise of the NEM had significantly energised cultural milieus as well, the concrete changes it heralded were scarcely implemented before Party hard liners undermined

have stressed Bódy's difficult nature, sudden inexplicable reclusiveness, and calculated, ruthlessly self-serving streak, which accompanied a penchant for outrageously provocative behaviour that often bordered on emotional exploitation, not infrequently leading to physical altercations.<sup>11</sup> The intensity of Bódy's social interactions thus greatly defined his roles within the local intellectual circles in which he operated from the late 1960s onwards, and with which he continued to forge productive, mutually beneficial creative relationships throughout his career. What remains elusive in the total picture of his life is the wider context for Bódy's institutional allegiances, which fundamentally underpinned his varying roles as an artist, film-maker, theorist, critic, organiser, producer and curator. Unlike creative figures who categorically resisted modes of oppression and exploitation by the state, or in turn unabashedly followed its political dictates, Bódy offers a challenging example.<sup>12</sup> Time and again he notably negotiated his position vis-à-vis power structures and either passively or vocally assumed key positions of control and influence. He greatly extended opportunities for avant-garde artists with regard to cinematic experimentation, only to report on some of the same people he drew into this creative environment.

## Bódy as Mediator

Bódy was central to the development of alternative film culture in late 1960s and early 1970s Hungary. He continued to play a pivotal role in connecting transformations within local and later international new media scenes, most notably video art, up until his death. But this earlier transitional period, of the early 1970s particularly, usefully illustrates issues of public versus private, independent versus state-controlled artistic frameworks under socialism, and serves to illuminate the ways in which individuals, notably Bódy, traversed these contexts. Despite well-known limitations, numerous artists operated at this time within a fluid space that existed between systems of state control.

Cultural life during the post-Stalinist period was placed under the general control of György Aczél, who managed a notorious three-step policy based on the so-called 'Three T's'.<sup>13</sup> These encompassed supported (*támogatott*), tolerated (*tűrt*), and forbidden (*tiltott*) areas of production, which thrived on ambiguously delineated modes of control and (self-)censorship.<sup>14</sup> The experimental sphere generally straddled the dividing line between the tolerated and forbidden realms, an ever-shifting field of cultural activity facing a set of rules and formal and ideological dictates that perpetually changed in line with the ideological tightening and loosening of the political field. These artistic activities comprise a so-called 'liminal' public sphere that collectively defines the creative and artistic realm that scholarship in recent decades has explored to deconstruct the traditionally perceived binaries of Cold War era culture production already referenced above.

Bódy was active in wide-ranging cultural milieus, from quasi-illicit sites of neo-avant-garde experimentation to alternative film cultural initiatives operated and funded by the state, most notably the Balázs Béla Stúdió, a singular platform for experimental film production in the Soviet Bloc. While in the first context, Bódy appeared in turn as an eager audience

these reforms. By 1973 the promises of change came to a grinding halt and a sense of stalemate, withdrawal and passivity pervaded the rest of the decade that also affected the broader film culture. This development is outlined for instance in film historian Gábor Gelencsér's study on the Hungarian cinema of the long 1970s. Gábor Gelencsér, *A Titanic zenekara: stílusok és irányzatok a hetvenes évek Magyar filmművészetében* (The Orchestra of the Titanic: Styles and Trends in Hungarian Cinema of the Seventies), Osiris, Budapest, 2002.

14 For the specific ways in which the Three T's were implemented, see for example László Eörsi, 'Ideológiai pragmatizmus és (Ön)cenzúra: A három "T" kultúrpolitikája' (Ideological Pragmatism and (Self-)censorship: The Cultural Policy of the Three 'Ts'), *Világosság*, vol 49, nos 11/12, 2008, pp 73–96.

15 Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári, *Törvénytelen Avantgárd*, Artpool, Budapest, 2003. The publication invaluablely combines an art historical account of the Chapel's activities with the reproduction of archival materials, such as secret service reports, including those concerning Gábor Bódy's visit in 1973.

16 Klaniczay and Sasvári, *ibid*

17 Miklós Peternák, 'A Magyar Avant-Garde Film', in *F.I.L.M.: A Magyar Avant-Garde Filmtörténete és Dokumentumai*, Képzőművészeti kiadó, Budapest, 1991, p 26

18 The establishment of the BBS epitomises the decentralisation and reorganisation of the film industry and the cultural sphere more broadly during a period that saw János Kádár's regime gradually opt for an increasingly reconciliatory, consensus-driven cultural programme

member and as an active participant, in the latter he became a foremost catalyst for institutional transformation, crucially taking on the management of the internal functioning of an organisation to expand its activities towards experimental and avant-garde film-making.

The former context can be exemplified by Bódy's visits to the Balatonboglári Kápolna Kápolnaműterem (the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio) in 1972, where he participated in a series of paracinematic film events and performances that engaged the materiality of celluloid.<sup>15</sup> The Chapel was a crucial site of alternative cultural activity during this period. Artist György Galántai operated it between 1970 and 1973, when he was forced to close it down after relentless harassment from state authorities. Bódy undoubtedly drew on his experiences and informal creative encounters with visual and performance artists in such environments, perhaps most significantly a shared film project he collaborated on with Miklós Erdély at the aforementioned Chapel site.<sup>16</sup> There is not space here to expand on the specific parameters through which Bódy transferred his involvement in these environments to his subsequent artistic and institutional activities, but it should be emphasised that they were deeply influential. Bódy's conflation of countercultural neo-avant-garde milieus with the institutional framework of the Balázs Béla Stúdió (BBS) should also be framed within the wider influence private film experiments had on the implementation of collective experimentation on celluloid at the institution in the early 1970s, as Miklós Peternák notes in a survey on Hungarian avant-garde film.<sup>17</sup> This is an area that requires further scholarly attention to refine our understanding of the crucial nodes of connection between private and public fields of cultural activity in late socialism.

The BBS in its initial form, established in 1959 and relaunched in 1961 after discussions with regards to its central purpose within the cultural realm, functioned as a creative space and testing-ground for budding film professionals moving towards full-fledged film careers within the industry.<sup>18</sup> As the Studio in this initial form operated through a membership structure (one had to be a graduate of the Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskola (Academy of Theatre and Film) to use its resources), the formal innovation and aesthetic exploration it fostered was exclusively attached to distinct modes of professionalisation. In this way, it closely followed the pre-constituted hierarchies of the overall industry.

The transformations within the BBS reflected the dynamism of the late 1960s. Its activities were increasingly geared towards alternative modes of production, framing on the one hand an increased interest in social inquiry, and later a move towards formal experimentation. Although Bódy initially had a close affiliation with the faction dedicated to documentary modes, his most prominent role was realised with the establishment of the experimental 'branch' of the BBS in the early 1970s. Bódy officially became a BBS member himself in 1971, the same year he enrolled at the Film Academy. As he later emphasised, he was the first person to do so before receiving his film education, which suggests that already in this early period he was subverting the membership structure that served to inherently enhance the links between the BBS and the professional film industry.<sup>19</sup> Such exceptionality appears representative of Bódy's life and suggests that his highly developed talents and interpersonal skills uniquely



in the wake of the failed 1956 anti-Soviet uprising and its immediate aftermath of violence and reckoning.

- 19 Gábor Bódy, 'Önéletrajz', reprinted in Zalán, *Bódy Gábor*, op cit, p 21

allowed him to navigate bureaucratic structures to benefit his artistic vision and personal needs.

A well-known aspect of the Balázs Béla Stúdió's functioning relates to its markedly democratic institutional framework, whereby an elected committee comprised of the Stúdió's members was responsible for selecting relevant projects and allocating funds to them. Film historian Gábor Gelencsér, in highlighting a foremost historiographic challenge associated with defining the central concerns of Hungarian cinematic culture in the 1970s, has stressed that many decisions to do with the production and exhibition of films were made 'behind closed doors'.<sup>20</sup> The actions of industry insiders were shaped as much by clearly-voiced ideological directives and the limiting material conditions of film-making under socialism, as by hidden negotiations of authority, of which secret intelligence poses just one aspect. If this lack of transparency relates to film culture, or indeed cultural production more generally during this period, researching the specific ways in which decision-making happened at the BBS remains an even more difficult site to reconstruct.

Collective discussions, debates and conflicts that were voiced internally during BBS meetings were as much intellectual as they were aesthetic and ideological in nature, that is to say, as much about what film should be within a socialist context as it was about diverging conceptualisations of the formal possibilities of the moving image.<sup>21</sup> Bódy undoubtedly profited from this unfixed milieu of at times intense opposition and debate. Yet it is also important to underline that the particular transitional era of the late 1960s and early 1970s also provided a unique socio-political and cultural reality that made such developments possible.

Bódy's subverting of the limitations of the organisation's initial principles produced remarkable results: he did not only materialise his own experimental projects: he was also at the forefront of expanding the group of creative individuals that benefited from BBS's resources. This effort culminated in the establishment of the *Filmnyelvi sorozat* (Film Language Series) implemented in 1973. As an experimental platform for avant-garde explorations of the medium, it provided a structured basis for visual artists, musicians and other creative individuals – many attached to countercultural milieus – who sought to engage moving images without aspirations to enter the film industry proper.<sup>22</sup> Bódy's important role in facilitating their access to film remains one of his most important legacies.

László Beke's assessment of Bódy's life and work hinges on foregrounding the artist's achievements as a 'networker'.<sup>23</sup> This conceptualisation usefully brings together his wide-ranging work in experimental film and media, his theoretical writings, his engaging social life and his later achievements in quasi-administrative roles at the BBS that the above-outlined early trajectory illustrates. But Beke also integrates Bódy's hidden role in secret reporting into this wider sphere of interconnectedness and communication that the notion of 'networking' implies, designating it not as a separate realm, but as Bódy's 'other networking activity' instead. Indeed, the subjects of several of his reports unfolded in the artistic and film cultural milieus referenced above. The ways in which recent scholarly debates have straddled this concealed activity in connection to various aspects of Bódy's legacy is the focus of the next section of this article.

- 20 Gelencsér, *A Titanic zenekara*, op cit, p 32

- 21 Several accounts highlight this particularity. See for example Sugár, private conversation, op cit.

- 22 Key figures of this period included visual artists such as Dóra Maurer, and other representatives of neo-avant-garde art, including Miklós Erdély, Tamás Szentjóby and László Najmányi alongside composers such as László Vidovszky and Zoltán Jeney.

- 23 László Beke, 'Gábor Bódy, Networker', in Siegfried Zielinski and Peter Weibel, eds, *State of Images: The Media Pioneers* Zbigniew Rybczyński and Gábor Bódy, Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, 2011, pp 56–64

## The Dark Angel and the Secret Services

24 Miklós Haraszti for example describes the way all aspects of cultural production and state control were enmeshed under state socialism in his seminal book *The Velvet Prison*, rejecting the simplistic notion of the 'red pencil of the censor' as a distinct sphere of control. Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, I B Tauris, London, 1988.

25 István Eörsi, 'A besúgójelentés mint kultúrtörténeti forrásmunka' (Secret Informant's Reports as Source Texts for Cultural History), *Élet és Irodalom*, vol 46, no 47, 22 November 2002, p 8

26 József Havasréti, *Széteső dichotómiák: Színterek és diskurzusok a magyar neoavantgárdban* (Disintegrating Dichotomies: Scenes and Discourses in Hungarian Neo-avant-garde), Gondolat Kiadó, Pécs, 2009. Havasréti's discussion originally appeared as a review of Klaniczay and Sasvári on the Chapel of Balatonboglár referenced earlier. The relevant section of Havasréti's book that discusses the publication is also available at <http://www.artpool.hu/boglar/sajto/havasreti1.html>, accessed 3 June 2018.

27 István Eörsi's essay describes a report of an event that featured Bódy as a participant. Eörsi, 'A besúgójelentés', op cit, and both Csaplár and István Fogarasi shared anecdotes about Bódy being watched in Péter Kecskés, 'Beszélgetés Csaplár Vilmossal, Fogarasi Istvánnal és Cserhalmi Györggyel Bódy Gábor halálának 10. évfordulóján' (Discussion with Vilmos Csaplár, István Fogarasi and György Cserhalmi on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Gábor Bódy's Death), Filmkultúra, 23 September 2006; see

The period of Thaw under Kádár's rule saw a decreased use of hard-line censorship. The symbolic Stalinist 'red pencil,' serving as an essential tool in fully erasing ideologically and formally inadequate artistic production, made way for increasingly more subtle, inscrutable, and difficult to pin down modes of control.<sup>24</sup> In this unreadable environment, the invisible activities of the secret police functioned as a very real, yet generally intangible threat to those working on the fringes of tolerated artistic milieus. The surveillance of the cultural scene in particular demanded an operation that necessitated a well-structured invisible machine of thousands of conscripted men and women who infiltrated artistic milieus in various capacities, including creative individuals with already promising careers who opted to work as agents. In the late 1970s, the cultural sector included almost 500 recruits who worked for the notorious III/III department of the Ministry of Interior in charge of secret policing.

The functioning of the secret service department of the socialist Hungarian state to this date signifies an underexplored, shadowy area of activity. Its research is fraught with missing links that reflect a contentious negotiation of not just gaps in historical knowledge, but the refusal of the post-1989 political realm and its legal structures to comprehensively make accessible the contents of the relevant archives for scholarly research. At the same time, this field of historical investigation engages a series of ethical questions attached to the particular ways in which such revelations should unfold.

In a much-cited essay from 2002, writer and public intellectual István Eörsi invited scholars to consider secret service reports primarily as valuable documents for the reconstruction of the artistic life of the avant-garde under the Kádár regime.<sup>25</sup> Reacting to Eörsi's proposition, József Havasréti helpfully qualifies the conditions for integrating such materials into historical research. He defines surveillance reports as a 'distorted and dreadful public sphere' that insidiously reveals itself in the interstices of 'public' and 'secret' terrains.<sup>26</sup> He warns against their unproblematic deployment as evidence, highlighting that acts of terror, intimidation, and distortion frequently defined the conditions under which its authors produced them, a distortion that more often than not also dictated their warped content. For Havasréti, what he calls the 'ominous shadows' that tainted their creation decidedly corrupt their straightforwardly illustrative powers as historical documents. He further warns that their application too often casts a reductive, retrospective and inevitably moralising view onto a complex historical period that perversely entangled acceptable and inadequate codes of behaviour. One such basic entanglement relates to the realisation that informants such as Bódy themselves were frequently the subject of reports, thus referencing a web of surveillance mechanisms in which individual actors held at times opposing roles.<sup>27</sup>

Archivist and historian István Rév, in assessing the historiographical and conceptual challenges of researching the field of surveillance materials more generally, further points to such challenges. In order to avoid the pitfalls of 'truthfulness', he suggests bypassing the unattainable illusion of historical completeness when studying these records. Instead, Rév suggests that academic work should engage 'truthful efforts of reconstruction' for

<http://www.filmkultura.hu/regi/2006/articles/profiles/body.hu.html>, accessed 3 June 2018.

which the unearthing of concealed records is a justifiable source of information.<sup>28</sup> While stressing different points of contention, both Havasréti and Rév underline the fragility of working on these subjects in a post-totalitarian historical moment that has to date failed to adequately confront its socialist past.

It is not the aim of this article to offer a clear solution to this composite sphere of inquiry, or to dwell in detail on the challenges of the post-1989 research environment for secret police documents. Nevertheless, it is important to signal these issues as they provide the broader framework within which one should consider Bódy's activities. Scholarship on Bódy generally avoids mentions of his collaboration with the Hungarian secret service. On one hand, this lack reflects the wider gap in scholarship already noted above. On the other, the silence with regard to this topic may also signify a strategic 'opting out' of the ethical binary that too frequently sees former citizens of the socialist realm as either victims or perpetrators, often entwined with post-socialist allegiances to either the political left or right. Yet in addition to these motivations, this lack also suggests an incontestably uncomfortable and fundamentally contradictory aspect of the film-maker's legacy that infinitely complicates the widespread romantic Bódy imaginary. It inexorably pulls it into the insidious realm of policing, but also the shockingly banal field of dutiful reporting, very much removed from the spheres of grand emotions of 'freedom' and 'love' that the artist sought to proclaim through his creative worldview. It is certain, as Havasréti also claims, that Bódy's exceptional intellect, virtually limitless connections within the cultural sphere and towering legacy makes it challenging to consider him as representative of surveillance practices.<sup>29</sup> One might also pose the question – as writer Vilmos Csaplár, Bódy's long-time collaborator and close friend did – why we should make an exemplary case out of Bódy's past as a collaborator, when several key figures of the contemporary political and intellectual elite undoubtedly held similarly incriminating positions before 1989, and remain comfortably hidden from public scrutiny.<sup>30</sup> Bódy was long deceased by the time that these revelations surfaced, yet his immediate superiors, notably his so-called *tartótiszt* or handling agent, has escaped any meaningful ostracism to this day, further confirming the dubious morality brought to bear on the artist as an individual.<sup>31</sup>

Yet it is perhaps precisely because of the seemingly irreconcilable nature of this revelation and the towering achievements of its subject in virtually all areas of artistic creation that it needs to be discussed more frequently and insightfully. Rather than providing judgement based on ethical and moral grounds, integrating this element into the total picture of this creative figure crucially confirms the manifestly 'grey zones' of cultural life during the late socialist era, and crystallises a key point of contact between the political powers and artistic milieus, bringing Bódy back into the sphere of actually existing socialism.

Illustrating the difficulty of coming to terms with Bódy's diverging activities and achievements during his short career, one can trace various approaches to revelations about this segment of his life. Some of these appear to be driven by disbelief, others by a need to connect missing links and fragmented elements of his legacy. A book-length study written by András Gervai that appeared in 2010 presents the most systematic investigation of the involvement of members of the

28 István Rév, 'The Man in the White Raincoat', in Sharika Thiranagama and Tobias Kelly, eds, *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy, and the Ethics of State-Building*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, pp 200–226. Rév establishes his general points about this topic by introducing the case of Academy Award winning director and BBS alumnus István Szabó, which presents perhaps the most widely, even internationally publicised example of secret service activities within the cultural sphere. Revelations about Szabó's past provided a necessary first step in breaking down undeniably naive constructions of the socialist state and creative artists working within its boundaries, and initiated albeit temporarily a public debate about the moral implications of such acts.

29 Havasréti, *Széteső dichotómiák*, op cit

30 Csaplár interviewed in *Nyom nélkül*, op cit. On the loopholes that prevent full oversight in the matter of secret archives, see Rév, 'The Man in the White Raincoat', in Thiranagama and Kelly, eds, *Traitors* op cit, p 204.

31 In the above-cited television report, Csaplár expressed hope that the identification of Bódy's superior would shed light on the wider networks responsible for his surveillance activities. However, the making public of the individual's name has to this date not provided further revelations.



32 András Gervai, *Fedőneve: 'szocializmus' – Művészek, ügynökök, titkosszolgák* (Code Name: 'Socialism': Artists, Agents, Secret Servicemen), Jelenkor, Pécs, 2010. Gervai momentarily came to the forefront of public discussions surrounding these issues as the author to publicly identify István Szabó as an informant. See Gervai András, 'Egy ügynök azonosítása' (The Identification of an Agent), *Élet és Irodalom* (Life and Literature), vol 50, no 4, 27 January 2006.

33 Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010, p 13. Vatulescu prioritises approaches that critically reread and reframe the files using the strategy of estrangement to redefine both their meaning and the act of reading itself. Such an approach foregrounds the multiple levels of writing (by the informer and their superiors, as well as the archivist making notes or removing content from the files) and reading (by the users of the reports and later by archivists) that is embedded in the fabric of the texts. Vatulescu's study foregrounds a self-reflexive, deconstructive strategy that also features in several artistic and literary engagements with secret service files. A recent Hungarian example is media artist Péter Forgács's installation from 2016. *Jelentéstudajdonítás* (Meaning Attribution) deals with recent revelations about the secret informant past of Forgács's mother through a dazzling display of hundreds of photographs and documents interweaving public and private, known and secret elements of ten years of reporting, corresponding to a decade of the artist's life. The work also features a selection of Bódy's reports embedded in a complex textual web that

cultural elite in secret policing.<sup>32</sup> The publication significantly filled a lacuna in the history of the conditions of socialist cultural production. It provides a wealth of information on the functioning of secret services, primarily in the realm of the film industry and theatre, and thus unapologetically sheds light on an essential tenet of socialist state control over cinema and the performing arts. Yet despite the meticulous archival research that is at the basis of the book, the primary concern of Gervai's journalistic approach remains distinctly revelatory and appears primarily concerned with naming names. Thus, rather than providing an in-depth analytical study, the work as a whole frequently reads as a reckoning with those who participated in these concealed activities of the socialist state.

Cristina Vatulescu, in *Police Aesthetics*, her seminal work on secret police archives and personal files in postwar Eastern Europe, has provided a detailed analysis of not just the physical objects that comprise these vast depositories of facts and fictions related to individual lives under totalitarian systems. More than that, her study outlines the ways in which one needs to retrospectively 'read' this accumulation of visual and textual materials. Vatulescu follows scholars who warn to step away from 'treating the police reports as hard nuggets of irreducible reality, which one has only to mine out of the archives, sift, and piece together in order to create a solid reconstruction of the past'.<sup>33</sup> Despite its scholarly significance and the author's best intentions, András's work appears to conform to the appealing approach Vatulescu rejects. His work on Bódy notably activates a sequential narrative as it appears in existing archival documents, a false fluidity that chronologically highlights one instance of reporting after the next. Gervai readily notes that Bódy's sixty-five-page file is very incomplete and highlights throughout his chapter the sections that have been crossed out or altered even within the existing text. Yet the totality of the work nevertheless suggests the 'avid search for the truth about the past' which as Vatulescu cautions, 'betrays an enduring belief in the authority of [the secret police archive's] holdings'.<sup>34</sup>

Alongside Gervai's publication, several close friends and associates have provided a range of interpretations of these past events. Two widely opposing and broadly circulating readings of Bódy's activities focus on his alleged suicide. According to Csaplár, the artist took his own life as he succumbed to the moral weight of his surveillance activities.<sup>35</sup> Others argue that even his participation in these deplorable practices must have been the result of vicious processes of extortion and coercion, well-known tools of control systematically and ruthlessly deployed by the socialist state. Such interpretations largely relieve Bódy of individual responsibility and frame his death as a murder. For Péter Jósmai for example, what he deems a faked suicide, features as the fatal culmination of a series of abuses the 'filthy' socialist powers inflicted upon its most talented idiosyncratic artists, Bódy being a towering example.<sup>36</sup> A third interpretation, while acknowledging Bódy's activities, avoids describing him as either victim or perpetrator, granting him a sense of hidden agency instead. This reading notably assigns him the role of quasi-guardian, who by infiltrating the surveillance milieus could exert control over the content of his reports, inevitably incriminating some, while protecting many others. By agreeing to feed the authorities details about specific subjects, Bódy, in this narrative, allowed some undeniably

indicates how such documents elude transparency.

34 Ibid

35 Forgách, 'Sötét angyal', *Filmvilág*, op cit

36 Péter Jósmai describes this in a lengthy response to Csaplár. 're: Csaplár-verzió (válaszul Filmvilágban megjelent kétrészes cikksorozatra – 2008 Június/Július)' (re: Csaplár Version: [A Response to a Two-part Article Published in Filmvilág – 2008 June/July]), see BodyGabor.hu; <https://bodygabor.hu/read/?id=115>, accessed 3 June 2018. He revisits the topic of Bódy's death and provides a somewhat more nuanced view in an interview from 2011; see Talita.hu; <http://talita.hu/magazin/body-gabor-65-univerzalis-mvesz-volt/>, accessed 3 June 2018. A related interpretation of Bódy's death, with which Gervai's book also concludes, suggests that Bódy was terminated after he failed to provide satisfactory reports upon his move to West Berlin, where he may have been forced to expand reporting to the East German Stasi police, bringing his activities into a wider realm of East-West German secret policing, beyond a national context.

37 See for example experimental film-maker and artist László Najmányi's take on Bódy's surveillance activities in the interview with Emese Kürti, 'Oral History Kürti Emesének, 2011' (Oral History to Emese Kürti, 2011), 3 November 2011, Budapest; see <http://www.freewebs.com/wordcitizen18/interviews.htm>, accessed 3 June 2018.

38 They included, among others, the key neo-avant-garde artist Tamás Szentjóby who notably produced *Kentaur* (1973–1975), one of the foremost experimental Hungarian films of the 1970s at the

rebellious characters of the experimental art scene to remain outside the grasp of the authorities.<sup>37</sup>

The careful reading and contextualising of the content and stylistic elements of Bódy's reports will require further analysis. Here, it is significant to mention, even briefly, that the documents at times carry a remarkable sense of vindictiveness, which seems to move far beyond ideologically-grounded judgments. This appears to confirm that the sphere of secret reports is inexorably entwined with inscrutable, subjective and personal motivations that coexisted, and at times unquestionably overrode purely ideological motivations. Bódy's reports, which were produced under the code name 'Pesti', frequently contained vicious indictments of the key actors of the local cultural scene, which frequently focused on aesthetic and theoretical considerations. Bódy's reports, and the lack of understanding surrounding the conditions of his conscription, do not undo the damage that was done to the subjects of these acts of surveillance.<sup>38</sup> Yet their contents confirm that Bódy's secret reporting stemmed from a more complex engagement with his environment than a mere 'patriotic' duty towards the socialist state, as his record in its current state reveals.

Regardless of the specific conclusions that discussions of his surveillance activities yield, references to Bódy's past as an agent often draw on larger than life fictional characters to interpret his actions. Describing his secret service connections as a 'Faustian pact with the devil,' or equating him with the famed anti-hero Hamlet, continues to present him as a fascinating, yet deeply flawed, and overwhelmingly tragic character.<sup>39</sup> Such readings conveniently fit into, and unquestionably reinforce, the quasi-mythical proportions of his Janus-faced persona, the 'angelic' qualities that friends and colleagues ascribed to him closely connected to the devilish acts his betrayals represent. They in this way define him as a larger-than-life figure defiantly operating in an unattainable sphere distant from the drab, stifling every-day of the socialist era. Such an approach is undeniably appealing, as it satisfies a need to regard an exceptionally colourful and talented cultural figure as a fallen romantic artist undermined by his own limitless ambitions. Yet it nevertheless, perhaps unwittingly, detaches Bódy's crucial activities of the 1970s from a very real socio-political climate and cultural realm that operated through a network of impenetrable bureaucratic structures and their face-to-face negotiations that he appears to have expertly manoeuvred. As such, a deeper exploration of Bódy's involvement with socialist structures of power and influence, whether voluntary or forced, will necessitate stepping away from considering him as a Faustian, or angelic figure in possession of an otherworldly aura. Instead, it should seek to understand him as an artist with unparalleled interpersonal connections, whose life usefully illustrates the contradictory impulses, opportunities and limitations of socialist cultural production and the political systems of control that pervaded it.

## Conclusion

The Hungarian film-maker and media artist Gábor Bódy is an exceptional cultural figure of late socialism. He effortlessly traversed

BBS, as well as film professionals, such as Yvette Bíró, editor in chief of the leading journal *Filmkultúra*, and theatre director Péter Halász. All three featured as crucial members of the period's cultural life, and all suffered considerably from the stifling ideological climate of the socialist era.

- 39 The tendency to evoke these figures also relates to his professional life: his first film, *A harmadik* (The Third, 1971) centring on discussions around Faust and Hamlet is a Shakespearean play he directed for theatre and then later TV in 1981–1982. László Csúja's use of the term 'Legendarium' in the title of his aforementioned study suggests an awareness of the constructedness of Bódy's posthumous mythical image. He nevertheless also uses the term 'Post(modern) Faust' in reference to his secret service activities and describes Bódy as both an angelic and demonic figure, thus inevitably absorbing the mythologising approach this study highlights; Csúja, 'A Bódy Legendárium', op cit, p 15.

numerous spheres of artistic production during his career, from the mainstream film industry to subversive avant-garde environments. Bódy functioned not merely as an influential artist-film-maker and theoretician of moving images, but also as a tireless collaborator bringing together hitherto disparate realms of audio-visual exploration. Negotiating access to film-making for artists, musicians and other creative individuals, he was notably crucial to opening up the Balázs Béla Stúdió – the foremost film-making platform of the period – to those positioned outside of the immediate realm of the film industry. In this way, he importantly facilitated the development of a dynamic experimental film scene in Hungary during the 1970s. His image as a veritable patron saint of avant-garde cinema under socialism has been rendered infinitely complex and frustratingly contradictory by posthumous revelations of his involvement with the secret police as an informant. This aspect of his life has not yet been adequately explored, as it is often absorbed within broader processes of mythmaking that frame Bódy as a tragic, doomed Faustian figure. Rather than dwelling on the moral implications of his actions by casting him as a larger than life fictional icon, his secret service activities should be considered alongside his achievements as a dominant cultural negotiator of his times. Such a reading moves away from issues of guilt and allows for a better understanding of the endlessly contradictory official and unofficial networks of activity according to which cultural life was shaped and experienced under state socialism.



# 'A Taster of Political Insult'

## The Case of Novi Sad's Youth Tribune, 1968–1971

Marko Ilić

1 I am grateful to Branka Ćurčić, New Media Center\_Kuda.org and Slavko Bogdanović, who offered their valuable insights and provided me with much of the archival material featured in this text; the term 'new art practice' refers to the neo-avant-garde scene that emerged in many of Yugoslavia's republican capitals from the mid-1960s to the 1980s. Its first adequate and timely appraisal was the landmark 'New Art Practice' exhibition of 1978, organised by Zagreb's Gallery of Contemporary Art. The show's supporting publication consisted of a series of introductory essays written by key critics associated with their local art scenes, along with extensive photographic documentation and biographies, contributed by artists affiliated with the phenomenon. For further information, refer to Marijan Susovski, ed, *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966–1978*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1978.

2 Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State That Withered Away*,

In the former Yugoslavia, students' cultural centres played host to what came to be known as the 'new art practice', fostered under the system of 'socialist self-management'.<sup>1</sup> Novi Sad's Youth Tribune, founded in 1954 and located in the largest city of the multinational, Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, represented one such site where the 'new art' crossed with social engagement. During the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, it became a lively zone of collaboration between writers and artists from the entire territory of Yugoslavia, with student-run editorial boards that were in several ways decisive for the country's alternative cultural scene. At this time, the clustering of cultural phenomena that took place in the city was unparalleled in the rest of Yugoslavia, not only in the field of visual arts, but also in literature and film production.

This article focuses on a specific episode in the history of the Youth Tribune, when it came into conflict with municipal socio-political organisations over the provocative activities of student artist groups, leading to the enforcement of a more restrictive understanding of the basic function of the space in educating and disciplining young people. It follows the centre's increased bureaucratisation – the resistance to it and the coercive consequences – along with the ultimate dilution of radical practices in Novi Sad, which forced its key players to appeal to an 'invisible art'. Though Yugoslavia is frequently characterised as a country in which all were 'at least verbally encouraged to participate in public debate', considering the important and often overlooked case of the Youth Tribune reveals the consequences of a direct confrontation with the city's cultural apparatus, at a moment marked by the reaffirmation of party control and the brief reinstatement of central authority.<sup>2</sup> It represents a vital precursor to the struggles experienced by alternative artists in Yugoslavia who sought an autonomous form of activity within the framework of 'self-managing' relations, directed against the prevailing cultural bureaucracy, which in turn fought for the power to appropriate such freedoms.

Purdue University Press,  
Lafayette, Indiana, 2008,  
p 226

## Translating the 'New Art'

After being expelled from the Communist Information Bureau in 1948, Yugoslavia began to pursue a political path in staunch opposition to both the liberal West and the statist socialism of the Soviet Union. The most important outcome of the break was an introduction of forms of self-management: envisioned, in its broadest possible sense, as a system that would grant workers the autonomy to manage their own factories and enterprises in order to work towards a society in which 'classes and all traces of exploitation and the oppression of man by man will disappear'.<sup>3</sup> In the cultural sphere, self-management would, according to the 1958 *Programme of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia* (LCY), enact the 'emancipation of educational, scientific, artistic and all other cultural life from the administrative interference of government authorities'.<sup>4</sup>

Novi Sad's Youth Tribune was founded during this modest democratisation of Yugoslavia, which marked a shift from dogmatic socialism to 'self-managing democracy'. Established in 1954 as part of the People's University it was envisaged as a cultural catalyst for free speech on contemporary sociopolitical issues. Editor-in-chief from 1968–1971, Judita Šalgo defined the Tribune's dominant aims as accessibility and the cultivation of 'an atmosphere of spontaneous discussion and thought'.<sup>5</sup> Above all she maintained that the organisation of the Tribune should not merely serve as entertainment for the youth, and that the standard of its programmes should never be disputed through the position of 'certain mass social structures, groups, local interests or the so-called interest of the youth'.<sup>6</sup> Only by 'overcoming local surroundings' would the Youth Tribune be able to commit itself to an invigorating dialogue with the public.<sup>7</sup>

If the fulfilment of remaining 'open' rested on an expanded, intercultural dialogue, it was the Tribune's editorial boards that facilitated a lively collaboration between writers and artists from the entire territory of Yugoslavia. The centre's framework included two editorial offices: *Polja* (Fields), a magazine for art and literature, inaugurated in 1955, and *Új Symposion* (New Symposium), magazine for culture, art and politics in Hungarian, since 1965. Publishing and translating works of both Serbian and Hungarian historical avant-gardes, as well as the contemporary proponents of new writing and art from Yugoslavia's multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic space, the Tribune's editorials enabled a cross-fertilisation of dialogue. Another important contributor to the city's cultural scene was *Index*, the magazine of the Student Association of Vojvodina, published since 1957. Although *Index* was only a student newspaper, it was in many respects decisive for the Yugoslav alternative art scene, gathering and publishing some of the most important names in the country's intellectual and literary scenes.

*Index* also became a platform for the activities of Grupa KÔD – an art collective established around the Youth Tribune in April 1970 – founded on the initiative of Slobodan Tišma, Janez Kocijančič, Mirko Radojičić (then Culture Editor of *Index*), Branko Andrić, Slavko Bogdanović, and Miroslav Mandić. Consisting of students from the city's university, that came together from a variety of disciplines (mostly literature), the collective endeavoured to remove art from its consecrated pedestal, favouring

3 *Seventh Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia*, (Ljubljana, 22–26 April 1958), translated in the International Society for Socialist Studies, *The Programme of the League of Yugoslav Communists*, Aldgate Press, London, 1959, p 195

4 Ibid, p 167

5 Judita Šalgo, 'neka pitanja tribine mladih i njenog "parket salona"' (Some Questions Regarding the Youth Tribune and its 'Parquet Salon'), *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, 4 April 1970, p 3; all translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.

6 Judita Šalgo, 'tribina mladih: otvorena – zatvorena' (Youth Tribune: Open – Closed), *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, 21 October 1970, p 7

7 Ibid

- 8 Mirko Radojičić, 'Activity of the Group KÔD', in Susovski, *New Art Practice*, op cit, p 38
- 9 Ibid, p 40; KÔD's activities largely sought to reduce the importance of authorship, and to challenge the traditionally passive relationship between art institutions and its audiences. In the essay 'Galleries', published in *Index*, Miroslav Mandić for instance wrote about the functioning of the gallery, which is frequently a 'cultural representative for the policy of a given state apparatus'. The notion of participation was the only factor that could liberate the gallery from total fetishisation: a gallery as a 'stable in which we [the public] will create the gallery space... so that it becomes a part of us, of our perceptive consciousness'; so that 'we are no longer integrated into it as "passive consumers"'. See Miroslav Mandić, 'Galerije', *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, 21 October 1970, p 7.
- 10 Šalgo, 'tribina mladih: otvorena – zatvorena', op cit, p 7; This was a clear confrontation between a new generation of free-thinking cultural workers and the dominant, conservative cultural bureaucracies of the state apparatus. An essay titled 'What Will Become of the Youth Tribune?', published in *Index*, reported the conflicts of interests that existed in the management of the institution. A month earlier, a local paper had declared news that the founders of the Tribune, the Municipal Youth League of the Communists of Yugoslavia, were intending to take the institution and its editorial boards under their patronage, to ensure that its basic function remain 'education and discipline'. It was the first of such news that the Tribune's editorial team had received. Though such stringent action was yet to

'direct communication'.<sup>8</sup> The name of the group itself functioned as a metaphor for the group's activities – a 'code' being a system of signs which enables communication and carries messages from one system to another. Significantly, the members of this group were acting from inside an 'official' youth state institution – it was only through the financial assistance of the Tribune, and particularly Šalgo's support, that the group was able to carry out some of their first works. Working in the editorial board of *Index* further enabled KÔD to distribute some of their most important works, including manifestoes and the documentation of actions and interventions.

## January's Messages of Insolence

Throughout KÔD's brief but critical history, their practice represented a form of social engagement that was not aimed at politicisation, but rather at the 'democratisation' and 'de-institutionalisation' of art. They identified their key aim as freeing 'art of all the functions ascribed to it, starting from the educational and cognitive functions to the religious and ideological ones'.<sup>9</sup> But by acting as a counterpoint to the institutional configuration of the 'art system', KÔD demonstrated the inert functioning of cultural consumption in Yugoslavia. The fervour with which KÔD members carried out work at *Index* consequently came to a premature halt, with their dismissal from the editorial board by Vojvodina's Association for Students. The last issue of *Index* to be edited by the group members was published in November 1970; after which the conservative replacement of new staff was unfavourable to experimental art practices.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Youth Tribune had come into conflict with the municipal sociopolitical organisations of Novi Sad, which had little understanding of its work and frequently complained that it did not 'fulfil the interests of a wide circle of youth... and, especially recently, insists too much on the so-called avant-garde currents, experiments neglecting the affirmative majority'.<sup>11</sup>

The infringement that was eventually implemented at the editorial office of *Index* and the Youth Tribune represents a clear instance of the contradictions inherent in the administration of self-management. While the system was supposed to offer a considerable amount of flexibility and adjustment, it struggled to achieve the anti-institutional element of workers' politics.<sup>12</sup> Milovan Đilas, Yugoslavia's most notorious dissident, and previous leader of Agitation and Propaganda for the LCY, wrote of the two possible paths that socialist democracy could follow: 'in the direction of its own disappearance to the extent that socialism strengthens itself, or in the direction of the strengthening and transformation of bureaucracy into a privileged caste which lives at the expense of society as a whole'.<sup>13</sup> In Novi Sad, the alternative practices that occurred through the co-operation of *Index* and the Youth Tribune, and consequently state funding, were precisely tempered in their agency through their institutionalised status. The local administrations prevailed and oversaw the events – to quote Đilas again: 'authority [continued to be] the basic means of communism and every true communist. The thirst for power [was] insatiable and irresistible... careerism, extravagance and love of power [were] inevitable, and so [was] corruption'.<sup>14</sup>

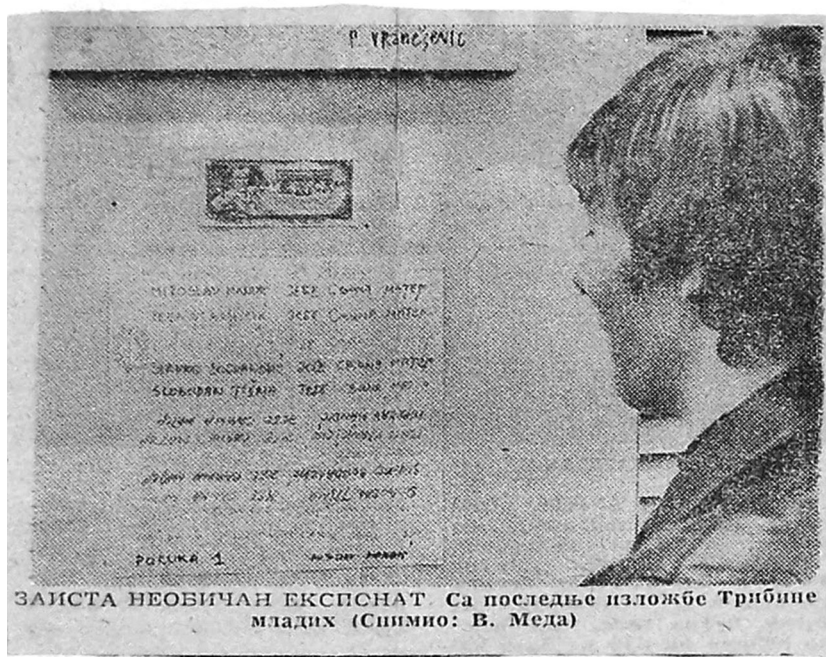


be taken on the programmatic orientation of the Tribune, it marked the beginning of interventions by local sociopolitical leagues. See R. M., 'Šta će biti sa Tribinom Mladih?' ('What Will Become of the Youth Tribune?'), *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, Novi Sad, 11 November 1970.

- 11 Radojičić, 'Activity of the Group KÔD', op cit, p 44; According to Želimir Žilnik, the disbanding and replacement of the staff was enforced because the local Party organisations 'knew what the power of the magazines was... *Index* was a student newspaper, but it was well edited in its time... and was pointing out anomalies in politics, and offered alternatives', which resulted in the banning of several issues. See Želimir Žilnik, in New Media Center\_kuda.org, ed, Nebojša Pajić, trans, *Omitted History*, Kuda.org, Novi Sad, 2006, p 64; <http://kuda.org/sites/default/files/docs/Izostavljena%20istorija.pdf>, accessed 18 May 2018.

- 12 Gal Kirn, 'From the Primacy of Partisan Politics to the Post-Fordist Tendency in Yugoslav Self-Management Socialism', in Gal Kirn, ed, *Post-Fordism and its Discontents*, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, 2010, p 264
- 13 Milovan Đilas, *On New Roads of Socialism: Address Delivered at the Pre-Election Rally of Belgrade Students, March 18, 1950*, Jugoslovenska Knjiga, Belgrade, 1950, p 9/10
- 14 Milovan Đilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, Frederick A Praeger, New York, 1957, p 81
- 15 Radojičić, 'Activity of the Group KÔD', op cit, p 41
- 16 Ibid

- 17 A chronology of events at Novi Sad's Youth Tribune has been amassed in



Miroslav Mandić, *Poruke 1* (Messages 1), exhibited on 21 January 1971 at January Group's first group exhibition in Novi Sad's Youth Tribune, photograph from *Novosti*, Belgrade, 30 January 1971, from the archive of Slavko Bogdanović

As a platform that could transcend institutional boundaries, in its most critical period, *Index* represented an important channel for KÔD's work. After their dismissal, the only locus which remained open to the collective in pursuit of experimental art practices was the Youth Tribune, and its small visual arts space – the 'parquet salon' – despite the fact that 'programmes continued to be conceived in a traditional way'.<sup>15</sup> Joining forces with other members of Novi Sad's alternative scene, who had experienced similar feelings of marginalisation, under the leadership of Vujica Rešin Tucić – experimental writer and Editor-in-Chief of *Polja* from 1967 to 1971 – the former members of KÔD participated in a collective, whose name would be changed each month to correspond with that particular month. Working together represented a combination of efforts to create a space for their artistic activities, of which they had all been deprived.<sup>16</sup>

The 'January' group first appeared together at the Youth Tribune on 21 January 1971, in an action documented in the Tribune's diary as the 'Work Day of the January Group', between twelve and nine o'clock.<sup>17</sup> During the event, former KÔD members investigated issues that had prevailed in their previous practice.<sup>18</sup> Yet these more 'objective' exhibits were overshadowed by the most provocative work shown – a poster featuring a real ten dinar note, inscribed with the caption 'how we are', beneath which were featured numerous swear words, paired with their authors' signatures. These words of a 'ludic-political' nature were hastily interpreted by local citizens as disqualifications 'directed against our society and system' – 'false-avant-gardism', calling for 'opposition to the politics of

Gordana Dilas, Nedeljko Mamula, *Tribina Mladih: 1954–1977*, Kulturni Centar Novi Sad, Novi Sad, 2004

18 For example, Bogdanović nailed several books together and exhibited them, to produce an art out of matter, where the book was no longer a text to be read, but rather an immediate presence. Tišma made a legend of signs from a geographical atlas onto the wall, while on the floor he placed a crumpled white canvas along with other objects. In an accompanying text he stipulated that the objects should be arranged according to the legend – a play on the index, establishing meaning along the axis of a physical relation to referents, disrupting the autonomy of the sign.

19 These disqualifications were collected and quoted in Hrvoje Turković, 'Farsa oko Novi Sad's Tribina Mladih' (The Farce over Novi Sad's Youth Tribune'), *Studentski List* 4/5, Zagreb, 15 February 1971.

20 *Novosti*, 'Izložba psovke' ('Exhibition of Swear Words'), Belgrade, 30 January 1971

21 Ibid

22 Turković, 'Farsa oko', op cit

23 The 1965 reform sought to remove political involvement from economic decision-making. It aimed at integrating the Yugoslav economy into the world market, at liberalising foreign trade and at achieving a convertibility of the dinar. State investment planning and price reform were abandoned with the intention of placing the distribution of profits at the discretion of enterprises, creating added incentives and profitability. See Kirn 'From the Primacy of Partisan Politics', pp 253–302.



The Group for New Art 'February', Invitation to *Zakuska Novih Umetnosti* (A Taster of New Art), Youth House, Belgrade, 9 February 1971

the Communist Party'.<sup>19</sup> A week later, a newspaper referred to the heterogeneous display exclusively as the 'exhibition of swear words' and reported that it had since brought the existence of the Tribune into question.<sup>20</sup> Apparently this gesture had provoked one group of Novi Sad's workers to complain to the Municipal Committee for Culture, and demand that the house, due to its 'open-mindedness, have its funds cut'.<sup>21</sup>

Triggering a threat to the possible liquidation of the Tribune, these 'anti-social' four-letter expletives had penetrated a deeper taboo of Yugoslav society. Writing for Zagreb's *Studentski List* (Student Paper), Hrvoje Turković recognised that this gesture had happily 'coincided with the day of an announced devaluation of the new dinar'.<sup>22</sup> By appropriating a symbol of Yugoslav economy, the action had intercepted real social concerns – real economic conditions. The new dinar was introduced in 1965, through the broad economic reform that resulted in the increased liberalisation and bureaucratisation of self-management.<sup>23</sup> Never very stable, and suffering from an inflation rate of fifteen to twenty-five per cent per year, this currency was arguably emblematic of the beginning of self-management's economic contradictions, under which a 'new class' of bureaucrats and technocrats had consolidated control over society.<sup>24</sup> Supplemented with the caption 'how we are' (which appropriated a pronoun synonymous with socialist phrases and the political rhetoric of the LCY), January's simple gesture, charged for containing 'anti-socialist ideas', had awakened the insufficient involvement of the broad masses in political life – the difficulty in creating democratic institutions, in spite of the Party's proclamations of working in the name of the people.<sup>25</sup>



24 Đilas, *The New Class*,  
op cit

25 *Novosti*, 'izložba psovke',  
op cit

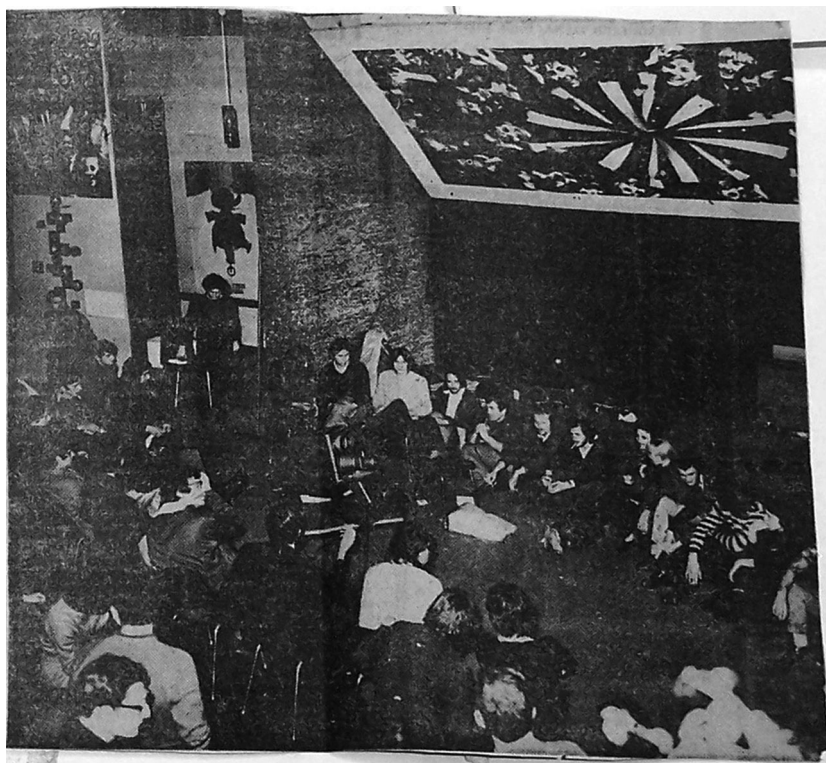
It revealed and raised accusations which the LCY were themselves guilty of, including 'false avant-gardism'.

## February's 'Open Letter to the Yugoslav Public'

Condemned in Novi Sad, the Youth Tribune's collaborators were forced to seek a new audience, and organised another political happening at Belgrade's Youth House, further testing the tolerance of the local state apparatus. On 9 February 1971, the group 'for new art, February from Novi Sad', invited the public to a 'Taster of New Art', consisting of 'verse, painting, songs, plays and film projections'. The display included some twenty panels of KÔD's conceptual works, on which documentation is sparse. Yet, again the most memorable aspects of the evening rested in the open, performative attacks on Novi Sad's cultural and political establishments – forcing the public to 'demonstratively abandon the hall', and creating strong negative feedback from the media.<sup>26</sup> According to press reports, the public and the organiser of the event had been brazenly deceived: under the guise of 'new', 'conceptual', 'poor' or 'neuro-art', publicised by the event's programme, February carried out an open political demonstration against the 'Party management of Vojvodina and against one leading politician of that province.'<sup>27</sup> Reporting on this 'fault at the

26 Sava Dautović, 'Zakuska političkih uvreda' ('A Taster of Political Insult'), *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 2 March 1971

27 Ibid; In a recent video interview, Rešin Tucić spoke of how he 'talked against [the] local government structure. When Makavejev heard what I was saying, Žilnik and he came to me and said "tell them you were drunk", and I said "I wasn't drunk, I meant to say that".' Video Interview owned by Kuda.org, Novi Sad, 2006.



The Group for New Art 'February', *Zakuska Novih Umetnosti* (A Taster of New Art), Youth House, Belgrade, 9 February 1971, photograph from *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 2 March 1971, from the archive of Slavko Bogdanović





Slavko Bogdanović's cover for *Student's* 'Underground' Issue, Belgrade, 16 December 1971, 52 x 34.5 cm, collection of the artist

# SLAVKO BOGDANOVIĆ PESMA UNDERGROUND TRIBINA MLADIH NOVI SAD

treba reći da su to bee gees.  
dix  
ausret  
i slobna stranja  
intelektualni underground sam komercijalne koja je sporedna  
ima i značajnu intelektualnu dimenziju  
on je pobuna  
on je kvalitet  
on je nada u srećnu budućnost elektronskog komunizma  
u sudini on je čista direktno suprotstavljena razornim snagama  
civilizacije  
avangarda koja odlazi ostavljajući mase svojih mladih sledbe  
nika  
zbunjena drogirano ili mrtve  
on je jedna čovna usamljenost ipak potkopana potrošačkim oso  
nisama ovog sveta  
to je CAGE

PINK FLOYD  
JARRY AEBBY ANGELA TIM i drugi prijatelji  
TRIBUNA STUDENT PROBLEMI U SYMPOSION

underground  
je savršen nelojalne stvar koja se javlja spontano  
u uskom krugu  
(prijatelja)  
nosji kvalitet koji ču odmah prepoznati  
underground  
kao da kažem L. H. O. O. Q. broj 7

underground list  
za razvijanje međuljudskih odnosa  
koji pravim za svoje prijia  
telle  
underground  
kao mirisav i kao bijela  
kao oružana pobuna koju smerom  
underground  
kao moj brat holko  
kao UZ KOSMOS  
privatno

## TRIBINA-CIK

nko je tribina vlasništvo službene omladinske organizacije  
(u daljem tekstu društvo za brigu o razvoju mladih potre  
laža)  
onda je njen društveni smisao jasno određen karaktere  
rom društva za brigu...  
tribina mladih u novom sadu:  
neelitni program  
masovna komunikacija  
privikavanje mladih stanovnika grada na potrošački odnos  
prema svetu  
gašenje svake kreacije  
nukleinska ideologija  
deindividualizacija  
rad  
zabava  
lojalnost  
očuvanje i zaštita tradicija mora  
drug  
(cenzurisao Jov. Ach.)  
tribina je mesto gde dolaze radnici i gimnastici  
nepelice  
da slušaju muziku donerih iko sastava  
govore svojih političara  
pesme svojih kolega  
da gledaju slike



da gledaju slike  
da se bavim svojim kolegama  
da "BESKUPNO I TIGODNO PRAVEDU" SLOBODNO  
SLOBODNO UZ COCACOLI I SPONOVIC  
tribina je ona koja i vreme sve slušate  
tribina zato treba da proizvede ONE ORUŽKE ZABAVE koji će  
komunistički ponudi da otkriju i dan dočeka spreman za rad i  
efikasne radne kreacije  
tribina je mesto gledano u svakom postudu  
tribina je mesto od poverenja  
na tribini niko neće biti pojeban  
na tribini niko ne pusti hatis  
na tribini se niko ne buni  
tribina je sigurno i provereno sastajalište omladine našeg  
grada  
tribina mladih u novom sadu ne valja fer pokusava nešto za  
što mlada našera grafa boli bruce a za što stare našega  
grada ne boli kance jer se plaže  
cato što na njoj nema haš mnogo zabave i socialističke in  
na tribini su dobri disko, klub i polja i laza domar  
a dobri vizija jedne dobre generacije ostaje vizija i kad  
tribina nastane proizvodna masovne zabave i komercijalno  
nezavisna  
samo lift i uvek  
u novom sadu  
samo komercijalni underground i politički govori

## POČEV OD DEJANA POZANOVICA PA DO POSLEDNJE ZABRANE U SYMPOSIONA U NOVOM SADI

nih pratin iskolčeni očini i već okračatog daha a ne nitne  
neumitno stremući kaša dobari stalin i govori računa ide  
ali in sam tu ali in sam tu ali in sam tu ali in sam tu ali in sam tu  
i još na komercijalnu kalicije: da vas zaštitim da vas ču  
štitim pod svojim krovom  
sada je jasno da u ovom zaicanom gradu svako ko nešto parnet  
no i pošteno smisli i samo pokuša da uradi  
i jedina prava šansa momaka za tribine je da  
našega  
u politima  
nepunja soc-realistički kic komercijalni undergro  
und nadrealizam  
i preko toga ništa jer dalje liude ubijati  
jer ovaj odvratni grad  
uređno pokazuje svoju crnu  
dušu  
tribina nikada neće postati elitno uporište avangardne misli  
jer tom prokletom gradu to nije potrebno  
i zato ona i nije prava šansa nego sitno zaračkanje za kukavice  
osećaj društvenog priznanja — osećaj da sam pojeo govna  
PORUKA PRIJATELJIMA NA TRIBINI UKOLIKO IH TAMO IMA  
ostuhnite pažljivo u novom sadu spodavim hod revolucije  
politično garbu  
pažljivo one koji će prestatu da čekaju  
vsi snas nije u drkanju  
vi treba da ljubite  
živite pobuna a na surogat pobuna i ne za prijavu pare koje se  
strogo cenzuriraju u svojoj kući na npli.

slavko bogdanović  
29. 11. 71.

Slavko Bogdanović, *Pesma Underground Tribina Mladih* (Underground Song of the Youth Tribune), Student, Belgrade, 16 December 1971, 52 x 34.5 cm, collection of the artist

28 Miroslav Antić and Pero Zubac, 'Žurnal Miroslava Antića; Neki Feler u Mladima' ('Miroslav Antić's Journal: Some Fault in the Youth'), *Dnevnik*, Novi Sad, 23 February 1971

29 Ibid

30 Dautović, 'Zakuska političkih uvreda', op cit

31 Želimir Žilnik, 'Žilnik demantuje' ('Žilnik Denies'), *Dnevnik*, Novi Sad, 24 February 1971

32 Ibid

33 Ibid

34 Referred to by Dautović, 'Zakuska', op cit, and more recently corroborated by Rešin Tucić, in an interview with Peda Vranešević, 'Čemu umetnost' (Why Art), Saša Rakezić, *Vreme* 1159, Belgrade, 21 March 2013, <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1105012>, accessed 18 May 2018

35 The USSR had provided a constant threat to Yugoslavia's independence, especially following the events of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 – seen by Yugoslavia as a crushing of the attempts of Czechoslovakia's leadership to implement reforms similar to the ones of self-management which they had been pursuing for the past fifteen years, and a cataclysm which would define the loyalties of Eastern European countries in relation to the Soviet Union for the next decade. See Ragna Boden, 'Soviet World Policy in the 1970s: A Three-Level Game', in Marie-Janine Calić, Dietmar Neutatz, Julia Obertreis, eds, *The Crisis of Socialist Modernity: The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1970s*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2011, p 192

36 Dautović, 'Zakuska', op cit

37 This allusion was revealed more recently by both Rešin

Youth House', a member of the then-current editorial board of the Tribune, Miroslav Antić claimed that this disgrace had 'blackened, spat and spoilt the culture of [Novi Sad], and there was no epilogue in sight. Novi Sad remains silent.'<sup>28</sup> Pero Zubac, editor of *Polja*, further added that the events left a 'bitter taste, like mud had been stuffed in [his] mouth'.<sup>29</sup>

These two proponents of the Youth Tribune's new editorial team had clearly denigrated what they understood as 'acts of political reckoning'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, having been mentioned by Antić as one of the witnesses who 'ran away from the disgrace of the Youth House in Belgrade', Želimir Žilnik – Novi Sad's notorious film-maker and previous Editor-in-Chief of the Tribune – offered his thoughts on the implications of this 'tastelessness and insolence'.<sup>31</sup> Žilnik had remained until the termination of the 'taster', because he was bothered by 'what was really the disgrace' – not that 'young people write slogans, shout, play and swear', but rather the 'shame that in the city where we ourselves live, there is a lot of truth in which the youth speak in agitation'.<sup>32</sup> As he testified, the editorial team of *Polja* had been locked in fear before its own staff and editors; there was no way for the Youth Tribune to reach self-managing rights, and most disturbingly 'young people [were] being manipulated by various forums and being cheated'.<sup>33</sup>

Though few photographs of the event remain, all of which barely testify to the levels of destruction mentioned in official press statements, one detail was frequently observed in the accounts – a verse that dominated the chants of the group. Throughout the course of the night the group proclaimed the slogan 'we love the Russians, the Russians love us, the Russians will save us'.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, it was a proclamation that in itself would have caused severe contention, considering Yugoslavia's complex and often strained relationship with the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> No wonder then that one newspaper chose to refer to this specific feature of the 'taster' as an 'imbecile song-melody'.<sup>36</sup> Yet this slogan contained a more subtle relevance within the specific frame of events, being a reference to Karpo Godina's film *Zdravi ljudi za razonodu* (translated as 'Healthy People for Fun' or 'Litany of Happy People', 1971), produced by Novi Sad's Neoplanta Film company – a state-independent organisation.<sup>37</sup>

*Zdravi ljudi za razonodu* depicted the diversity of the autonomous province of Vojvodina, screening the harmonious co-existence of nations and ethnic groups. While the short film documented the tradition of the same ethnic groups painting the facades of their houses in the same colour (Croats red; Hungarians green; and Slovaks blue), it was nevertheless through a playful and humorous approach, receiving acclaim from critics and winning a prize at its premiere at Belgrade's Documentary and Short Film Festival. The film's scenes were structured by announcements from the respective ethnic groups, followed by the repeated song lyrics, written by Predrag Vranešević, 'we love the Russians/Croats/Hungarians/Slovaks/Gypsies' (finally concluding with the line 'we love them all!'). However, this film was soon banned, because the 'system' was not clear whether Godina had remained dedicated to the concept of Brotherhood and Unity – Yugoslavia's guiding principle, adopted during the National Liberation Struggle as a triumph over all ethnic diversities – or whether he had chosen to glorify, or ridicule it. Not being 'readable' enough, *Healthy People for Fun* was considered an attack on one



Tucić and Vranešević, in the interview 'Čemu umetnost', op cit.

- 38 Grupa za nove umetnosti 'Februar' (New Arts Group 'February'), 'Otvoreno pismo Jugoslovenskoj javnosti' ('An Open Letter to the Yugoslav Public'), published in *Student*, Belgrade, 23 February 1971, the detail of which is reproduced in *Omitted History*, op cit, p 128/129; Bogdanović's unpublished letter, 'Dear Jaša', also mentions that it was published in Ljubljana's student paper, *Tribuna*; see Slavko Bogdanović, 'Dragi Jaša', published in Miško Šuvaković, ed, *Grupa KÓD, GRUPA (3, Grupa (3-KÓD:Retrospektiva*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 1995.

- 39 Dautović, 'Zakuska', op cit

- 40 Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive Tolerance' [1965], in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, pp 95–137

- 41 Zvonko Maković, 'Kad li će procvetati tikve' ('When Will the Pumpkins Blossom?'), *Tlo – Tjedni list omladine*, Zagreb, 9 April 1971, p 26

- 42 Dragoslav Mihailović, *Kad su cvetale tikve* (When the Pumpkins Blossomed), Series: Biblioteka Danas, Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 1968

- 43 The family's tragedy unfolds as Ljuba's brother is sent to the Goli Otok concentration camp; his father returns home as a broken man, his sister is raped and commits suicide, and his mother dies of grief. Ljuba's own career prospects wane as a consequence of his father's and brother's 'disloyalties' and he ends up a murderer and renegade. For information on the book's reception, see Jasna Dragović-Soso, *Saviours of*

of the key emblems of Yugoslav society, receiving almost immediate censorship.

This crucial detail reveals the general motivation behind the happening, not directed against 'self-managing society' explicitly, but rather the cultural potential of Novi Sad, which had experienced a constant 'arbitration of political organs and functionaries in art and culture' – a 'normalised method for disqualifying new occurrences'.<sup>38</sup> The significance of the event was further clarified by the February group in their *Open Letter to the Yugoslav Public*, dated 12 February 1971. Addressing the public was a bold gesture – it represented a plea for protection from local political organs. Yet this text, which spoke out about the situation surrounding the Tribune, and endeavoured to clarify the intention of the events in Belgrade, raised in advance its reservations with regard to any absolute political readings that could be extrapolated from it, appealing to an 'artistic language' instead. But in spite of this strategic petition, the letter was taken as another perpetuation of political suspicion. Writing in the Croatian daily paper *Vjesnik* (News) – in itself demonstrating how widespread news of Novi Sad had become – Sava Dautović used the letter to denounce rather than illuminate the events of Belgrade, in order to ridicule the 'young rebels', ending his article with quoted words from Mirko Čanadanović, Secretary to the Provincial League of Communists in Vojvodina:

There is a distorted understanding of cultural creativity and political activism. Freedom is, rightfully, understood as something which is given, provided or inhibited from others, and not as a result of just creating – something which is given through real and consistent efforts. In the future there will be less of those who will credulously assign these public forums to these provocateurs, who have nothing to show other than their creative impotence and primitivism.<sup>39</sup>

The tenor of Čanadanović's declaration aptly demonstrates the kind of 'repressive tolerance' that was being enacted at the Youth Tribune – identifying freedom as 'something which is given', or gifted.<sup>40</sup> These 'warnings' did not go unaddressed – writing in Zagreb's *Tjedni list omladine* (Weekly Youth Newspaper), Zvonko Maković responded to these declarations in an essay titled 'When Will the Pumpkins Blossom', in which he sought to retaliate against Dautović's mockery and Čanadanović's slogans, by complaining of how the words of the letter had been distorted and taken out of the context in which they had been written, to be denigrated.<sup>41</sup> The essay's title referenced Dragoslav Mihailović's celebrated novel of 1968, *Kad su cvetale tikve* (When the Pumpkins Blossomed), which initially received popular and critical acclaim, and was reworked into a play, only to be banned after a few performances.<sup>42</sup>

*When the Pumpkins Blossomed* depicted Belgrade's violent suburbs through the story of one young hooligan – Ljuba Šampion – a boxing champion, whose life is unsettled by the imprisonment of his father and brother as Cominformists.<sup>43</sup> While depicting the bold theme of the plight of supporters of the Russian line after the break with Moscow, it also pointed to a deeper social ill – the alienation of youth. By referencing Mihailović's novel, Maković was not only perhaps alluding to another instance of the violation of the freedom of speech, but also, through

*the Nation: Serbia's Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, Canada, 2002, pp 23–24.

analogy, the dark underside of the 'Communist Revolution', that was jeopardising the development of a generation brought up under the new system. In the Youth Tribune, this translated to the state's intervention that was to deprive the youth of an active forum for critical engagement, even if in terms of an exclusively 'artistic' language.

Did the 'pumpkins' ever blossom at Novi Sad's Youth Tribune? Following the events of Belgrade and the *Open Letter*, an article entitled 'February Sentenced in March', announced that four Novi Sad Cultural Associations sent a letter to the Municipal Cultural Committee with 1,200 signatures of high school and university students, distancing themselves from the activities of the Tribune.<sup>44</sup> The letter announced a 'unanimous condemnation of the newest orientation of the group at the Youth Tribune', and demanded the Municipal Cultural Committee and Municipal Youth League 'take the necessary social measures to ensure the programme of this youth cultural institution does not alienate the general living and cultural interests of workers, high-school youth and university students of our city'.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, the Belgrade events were the final straw – having confronted the local cultural apparatus so directly, February's actions had entered the sphere of broad public knowledge.

Why did February's appeals to the public, which they sought to engage from the outset, go unheard, to the extent that their dismissal was even demanded? The public's hostility can partially be explained by the disinformation that was filtering through media outlets, which portrayed the serious, purposeful endeavours of the Tribune as 'self-serving', with members of February apparently attempting to seek 'monopolisation', in collaboration with Šalgo who was 'interfering with the view of this youth institution' and 'bringing it to a critical situation'.<sup>46</sup> The youth of Novi Sad were clearly being manipulated by various official organs, most notably the Municipal Communist Youth League. Their authority continued to be maintained through what *Praxis* author Ivan Kuvačić described as forms of 'voluntary obedience': the 'press editor replacing the role of the gendarme or jail-keeper'; 'cudgel succeeded with the technique of suggestion'.<sup>47</sup> Once the Youth League had defined its values, adhering to the LCY leadership, it ensured these norms were to be followed, and remain a permanent sign-post to guide people in their thoughts and modes of behaviour.

Initially granted 'self-managing' autonomy from its founding community of interest, the Youth Council of Vojvodina, the Youth Tribune became completely subordinated to its interests. On 17 October 1971, a local paper announced that 'Novi Sad [is] Waiting for a Director' – 'faced with the extreme activities of the Tribune, the Youth League of Vojvodina was forced to interrupt, a new programme and new council will be constructed'.<sup>48</sup> The state's reaction demonstrated the regime's subtle and strategic tactics of neutralising critical heterogeneity – restoring order through what Belgrade philosopher Zagorka Pešić-Golubović described as its power to 'decide completely the fate of science, literature, and culture, even if completely incompetent people made those decisions'.<sup>49</sup>

44 S Božović, "Februar" osuđen u Martu' ('February Sentenced in March'), *Novosti*, Belgrade, 4 March 1971

45 Ibid; Quoted in Branko Andrić, "Februar" je prestao da postoji još u januaru' ("February" Already Ceased to Exist in January), *Index*, 24 February 1971

46 Ibid

47 Ivan Kuvačić, 'Contemporary Forms of Mental Violence', *Praxis: A Philosophical Journal*, Power and Humanity Issue 1/2, Zagreb, 1970, pp 130–135

48 Ibid

49 Zagorka Pešić-Golubović, quoted in Nebojša Popov, *Contra Fatum: Slučaj grupe profesora filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu* (Against Fate: The Case of a Group of Professors from the Philosophy Faculty in Belgrade), Mladost, Belgrade, 1989, pp 393–394

50 Slavko Bogdanović, 'PROGRAM ČASOPISA "L.H.O.O.Q.".' ('The Programme of the Magazine "L.H.O.O.Q."'), Bosut, Novi Sad, 1971, reprinted in Šuvaković, *Grupa KÖD*, op cit, p 76

51 Ibid

52 Radojičić, Activity of the Group KÖD, op cit, p 45

53 Bogdanović, 'PROGRAM', op cit, p 76

54 Grupa za nove umetnosti 'Februar', 'Otvoreno Pismo', op cit; Only the first issue of L.H.O.O.Q. appeared in *Új Symposion*, the other twelve were hand-typed with a limited print-run: six times as a 'paper for the permanent destruction of everything existing'; three times as an 'underground paper for developing interpersonal relations'; and three as an 'underground paper for new revolution'. One issue included Bogdanović's *Stripa o Grupi KÖD* (Comic about the Group KÖD), where among other signs he appropriated the semantically-charged sign of the swastika, clockwise and counter-clockwise, to present the history of the group – representing a polemical question about public values. Other issues included political-ludic texts, such as 'Drugs and Revolution: Junkies of all Countries, Unite!', which adopted the form of party revolutionary speech to discuss the topic of drugs – another highly taboo topic of discussion in socialist society. Fusing the seemingly incompatible – irony, paradox, provocation, rebellion, revolution – the text even directly insulted the radical extremists of Serbia. See Slavko Bogdanović, 'Posle dugog vremena', handwritten, Bosut, Novi Sad, 20 January 1972, reprinted in Šuvaković, *Grupa KÖD*, op cit, p 77.

55 Miroslav Mandić, 'Pesma o Filmu' ('Song about a Film'), *Új Symposion* 76/77, Novi Sad, September

## Going 'Underground'

Following the Youth Tribune's institutionalisation, Bogdanović, together with Mandić, began to seek different channels through which to engage in their activities, formulating a proposal for a magazine committed to the 'development of interpersonal relations' in May 1971.<sup>50</sup> *L.H.O.O.Q.* (according to Duchamp's appropriation of *La Gioconda*), was to only appear as a part of 'other official reviews', mainly due to logistical reasons, since it was impossible to publish independently.<sup>51</sup> It first appeared in the May 1971 issue of *Új Symposion* – the only journal which remained accessible to these artists – as a proposal requiring the Yugoslav public and institutions to approve funds and normalise the work of the magazine.<sup>52</sup> The first issues contained texts which dealt with its theorisation alone, and above all emphasised that 'the editorial board which wishes to print a number of *L.H.O.O.Q.* can't condition the terms of printing, eject some texts or correct ideas, inasmuch as they are significant for that number or the general orientation and profile of *L.H.O.O.Q.*'.<sup>53</sup> Again, this project represented an attempt to overcome institutional intervention and enable 'progressive thinking and freedom of creation'.<sup>54</sup> But *L.H.O.O.Q.*'s public existence came to an abrupt but inevitable halt with a violent confrontation between the state apparatus, following the publication of Miroslav Mandić's 'Song about a Film: Sonnet or Fourteen Stanzas' in the final issue of the 'Underground Paper form New Revolution'.<sup>55</sup> Written in defence of Dušan Makavejev's film *WR: Misterije Organizma* (Mysteries of the Organism, 85 minutes, 1971), the text also included a discussion on the creation of films with political themes of the National Liberation Struggle, and most provocatively a 'script for Josip Broz Tito', which simply read: 'to capture Josip Broz Tito, in colour, in one shot, which lasts two hours. The camera is static. Along with the inscription "The End", the announcer says "it was Josip Broz Tito"'.<sup>56</sup> Despite its seemingly inert critical position towards the President, Tito's cult of personality remained an untouchable topic, not to be debated. Attacking the President's image was considered an attack on the body of the state itself.<sup>57</sup> As a result, Mandić received a nine-month prison sentence and was banned from further publishing until 1984.<sup>58</sup>

*L.H.O.O.Q.* was forced to continue its activities deep underground, with a print-run limited to one to four copies, hand-typed, and no longer appearing in public.<sup>59</sup> Outside these intimate projects, Bogdanović continued to publicise the deprived cultural conditions of Novi Sad, including a letter to Slovenian intellectual and editor of Ljubljana's student magazine *Tribuna* (Tribune), Jaša Zlobec, who had participated at a discussion at the Youth Tribune in January 1971. In this letter, Bogdanović addressed Zlobec's suggestion of the 'possibility of acting through the Party in forming some oppositional force', by noting the regional differences in political climates.<sup>60</sup> While in Ljubljana working within institutional frames appeared a 'real and acceptable exit', since it seemed the 'Slovene Party left more than other spaces for free breath,' in Novi Sad 'arguments were [exclusively] handled through force... and any kind of divergence resulted in a purge'.<sup>61</sup>

These practices that dominated Novi Sad and 'South of the Sava (except Belgrade)' can more generally be explained by the reaffirmation



1971; WR was financed by Neoplanta Film and Telepol, a Bavarian TV company, both working in the international market: a film not officially banned, but not publicly screened in Yugoslavia until 1987 and causing the director to be dismissed from the Communist Party, unable to continue work they emigrate to Paris.

56 Ibid

57 As *Praxis* author Svetozar Stojanović suggested in a 1971 essay, though not explicitly in reference to Tito's name, the threat of social progress was pronounced in times of state crisis, because the 'charismatic leader is aware that democratisation [within a socialist system] would gradually deprive him of his power unless he secures for himself the saviour's role...'. The charismatic leader [Tito] inevitably resists liberalisation because he 'subverts the power of the charisma'. See Stojanović, 'From Post-Revolutionary Dictatorship to Socialist Democracy: Yugoslav Socialism at the Crossroads', *Praxis International* 4, Zagreb, 1973, p. 313.

58 Within a week of the publication's dissemination Serbian national newspaper *Novosti* reported that 'Miroslav Mandić seriously offends our nation, state and the President of the Republic... through various comparisons of an offensive, ironic and distasteful nature (executed in his words through a "clearly-defined aesthetic-ethical stance")'. Distorted and misinterpreted as 'anti-socialist excesses and vulgarisms', Mandić's text further resulted in the temporary closure of the *Új Symposion* editorial board by the Youth League. See B Mirosavljević, 'Zabrana zbog laži i uvreda' (Banning Because of Lies and Insults), *Novosti*, Belgrade, 11 December 1971.

of party control over society, following the Croatian Mass Movement in the spring of 1971.<sup>62</sup> In Serbia, the liberal leadership, elected at the 1968 Party Congress and headed by Marko Nikezić and Latinka Perović, was ousted and blamed for 'liberal practice and for opposing the new party line'.<sup>63</sup> As in the rest of Yugoslavia, it marked the 'new line's' return to 'a crude form of ideological indoctrination, and the abandonment of all former sophisticated ideas of creating new socialist consciousness through dialogues or struggles of opinion and patient persuasion'.<sup>64</sup> In short, quoting Zlobec's sentence professed at the discussion in the Youth Tribune: 'Something like that could be imagined in Russia, but not in Novi Sad.'<sup>65</sup>

At a moment when the mass media remained inaccessible and institutions were not in a position to provide guarantees for democratic work, Bogdanović pleaded in the same letter that 'revolutionary action unfold outside the institution', and go underground in order to: 'DESTROY the Youth League and the Council of Students... conservative and counter-revolutionary organisations which actually don't exist, but vegetate in the form of bulky, bloated bureaucratic organisations, and represent a sclerotic mind which thinks, and works, in the name... of the Party.'<sup>66</sup> His 'underground' task culminated in the censored 'Underground' issue of Belgrade's *Student* newspaper, printed on 16 December 1971, where he published his 'Pesma Underground Tribina Mladih' (Underground Song of the Youth Tribune). Regarding those who attempted to change this situation, Bogdanović concluded:

#### BEGINNING WITH DEJAN POZNANOVIĆ AND TO THE LAST BANNING OF ÚJ SYMPOSION IN NOVI SAD

Young men with gentle fingers are running, their eyes goggled, already short breathed, and behind them inevitably follows Stalin, with clenched fists, saying the words of Jaša Zlobec, 'this could be expected in Russia, but not in Novi Sad. But I am here! I am here! I am here!'

And also on the Congress of Cultural Action: to protect you, to protect you under my roof.

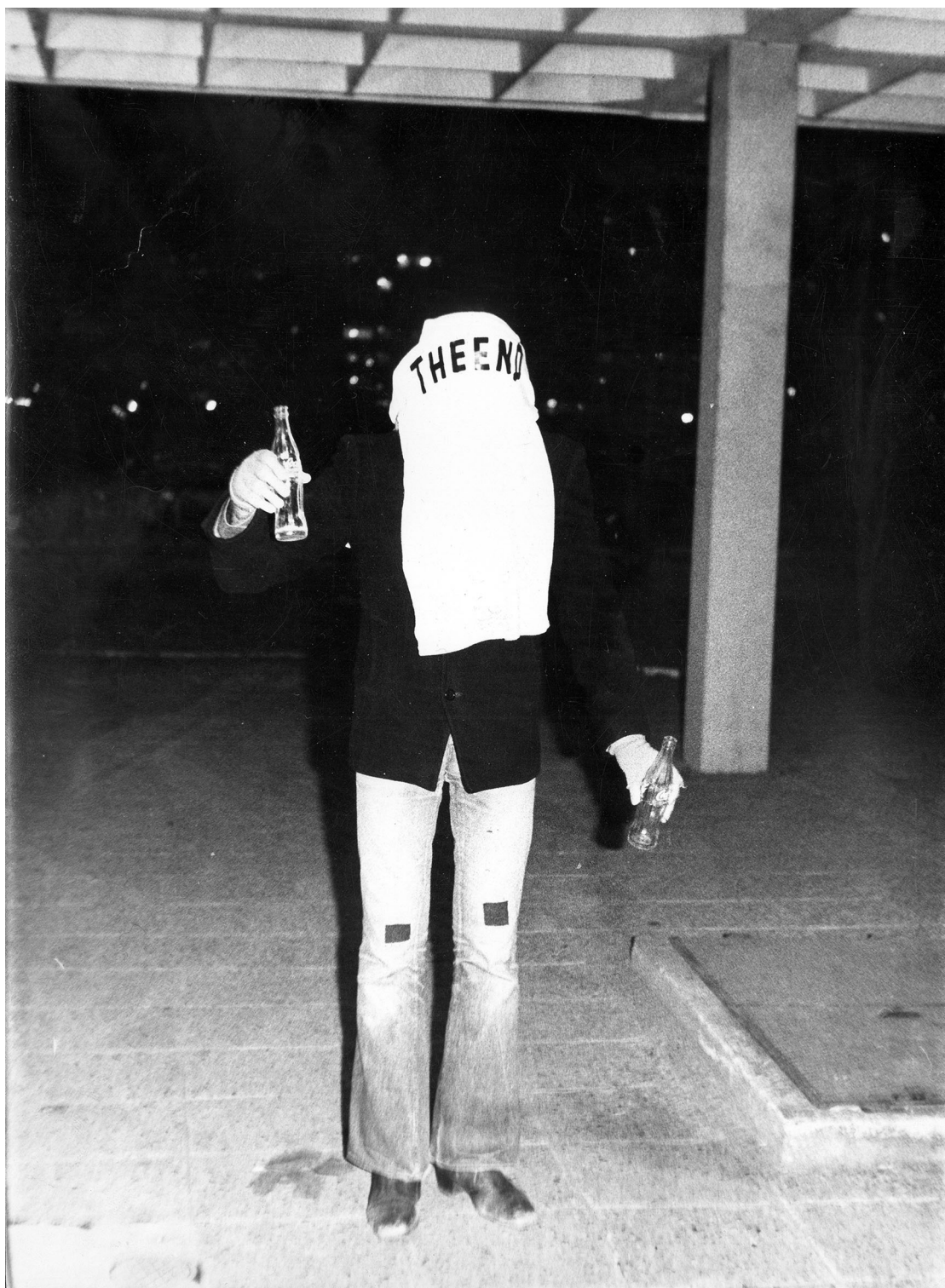
Now it is clear that in this fucked up city, everyone who thinks of something smart and is honest or dares to do it,

is fucked over  
and the only change for the boys from the Tribina Mladih is to,  
like Boško Ivkov

in *Polja*,  
foster socialist kitsch, commercial underground,  
Surrealism  
and nothing beyond that, because beyond it people get killed,  
because this disgusting city  
shows its black soul every time.

The Tribune will never become a stronghold of avant-garde thought, since there is no need for it in this fucked up city and therefore it doesn't stand a real chance.<sup>67</sup>

While from the outset Tito's government emphasised the risk of making the same errors 'being made by the leading communists in many countries', including the Soviet Union's failure to put the slogan 'the fac-



Slobodan Tišma and Čedomir Drča, *Primeri Nevidljive Umetnosti* (Examples of Invisible Art), Novi Sad

59 Still, in Bogdanović's words: 'twenty existing copies of *L.H.O.O.Q.* [was] altogether enough for one illegal newspaper'; see Bogdanović, 'Posle dugog vremena', reprinted in Šuvaković, *Grupa KÓD*, op cit, p 77.

60 Bogdanović, 'Dragi Jaša', in Šuvaković, *Grupa KÓD*, op cit, p 74

61 Ibid

62 Ibid

63 Noam Chomsky and Robert S Cohen, 'The Repression of Belgrade University', *The New York Review of Books*, vol 21, no 1, 7 February 1974; These leaders had earned respect for rejecting the policies associated with radical nationalists by treating the other people of Yugoslavia as equal partners: according to political historian Sabrina Ramet, whose work focuses on the former Yugoslavia, their dismissal represented 'one of the most fateful errors committed by Tito'. See Sabrina P Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2002, p 4.

64 Chomsky, 'Belgrade University', op cit; No wonder then, that Bogdanović's letter specifically referenced the fact that Čanadanović, who had previously stipulated that freedom was something 'given', was thanked on the twenty-first seat of the representatives of the LCY by Tito for the 'firm stance which he expressed there'. See Bogdanović, 'Dragi Jaša', in Šuvaković, *Grupa KÓD*, op cit, p 74.

65 Ibid

66 Ibid

67 Slavko Bogdanović, 'Pesma Underground Tribina Mladih' (Underground



1976, Black and White Photograph of Artists in Street Action, 18 x 24.2 cm, collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Vojvodina

tories for the workers' into practice, it seems that, in Novi Sad at least, the state was still relying on certain tenets of an authoritarian rule.<sup>68</sup> Could it be that Yugoslavia had entered an affair similar to Makavejev's fatal romance in *WR* between Vladimir Ilyich (a Russian ice-skater who is visiting Yugoslavia with his ice-ballet troupe, whose words in the film are often direct quotations of his namesake, Lenin), and Milena (a young Yugoslav communist)? According to Vladimir: 'We Russians, appreciate your efforts to find your own way. You are a proud and independent nation. However, we are sure you will find out yourselves that the course we've chosen is the best one.' In Novi Sad, Stalin followed with 'clenched fists', in a city where to remain loyal meant to completely identify with



Song of the Youth Tribune), *Student: Underground Issue*, Belgrade, 16 December 1971

- 68 See Josip Broz Tito, 'Workers Manage Factories in Yugoslavia', Belgrade, 26 June 1950, see Marxists Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tito/1950/06/26.htm>, accessed 20 May 2018. In the words of Praxis author Stojanović: 'Discipline, hierarchy, duty, responsibility and appointment came at the cost of diversity, initiative, democracy, rights, and choice'; Stojanović, *Between Ideals and Reality: A Critique of Socialism and Its Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973, p 78.

- 69 Václav Havel et al, *The Power of the Powerless*, M E Sharpe, New York, 1985, p 43

- 70 Slobodan Tišma, video interview, copyright Kuda. org, Novi Sad, 2006

- 71 Božović, "Februar" osuđen u Martu', op cit. The ultimate thwarting of progressive artists and intellectuals from the Tribune marked a dilution of radical practices – a difference that can be observed when tracing the programmes from 1971 to 1975 – before it became the Sonja Marinković Students' Club in Novi Sad (the cultural art society of Sonja Marinković in Novi Sad being one of the committees which demanded the Tribune's provocative activities be ceased).

the will of the party leadership. Breaching the 'rules of the game', Bogdanović's 'song' broke through the facade of the system to expose the base foundations of power.<sup>69</sup> The regime responded with repressive measures – as a consequence, Bogdanović received an eight-month prison sentence.

## Towards an 'Invisible Art'

After the reaction of the local state apparatus, former KÔD members Slobodan Tišma and Cedomir Drča withdrew from public art practice. According to Tišma, the only solution that remained was to 'go round institutions (that had become occupied by state apparatchiks), to leave the state and society out of everything, [so that] everything be strictly private, intimate'.<sup>70</sup> In such an indissoluble situation, they created the time-based action called *THE END*, involving the work *Nevidljiva Umetnost* (Invisible Art), between 1972 and 1977. In that time, Tišma and Drča drank American Coca-Cola and Russian Kvass every day with friends in front of a local store. Today, these 'invisible' actions exist only through sparse photographic documentation: framing still-life displays composed of detail reproductions of Ancient Greek imagery; empty Coke bottles and Coke pencil-holders perched on a shop front window, or on the front windshield of the nationally produced Yugo automobile. In other images, the protagonists are captured wearing T-shirts embossed with the caption 'THE END', whilst holding empty Coca-Cola bottles. For these artists, this 'gesture' represented the 'end' of their art, with these photographs behaving more as residues and remnants of a form of reflection, than documents of an artistic action or performance.

In retrospect, these private acts were a result of the disappointment sensed by these artists at being abandoned by the Youth Tribune. Engaging in escapism and emphasising the invisible – disappearance, cancellation – these artists were opposing the instrumentalisation of art by an administrative society. While purporting to be 'invisible', *THE END*, at least on reflection, constituted the sole means of expression against an official socialist ideology unable to fully integrate difference, and marked the end of experimental art production in Novi Sad's official cultural institutions.<sup>71</sup> As becomes clear, Novi Sad's local art infrastructure at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s did not possess the mechanisms to process the rich cultural activities that were occurring, forcing artists to cease provocation and instead completely withdraw from the ideological dictates that threatened their practice. Escapism became the only means to resist an otherwise anaemic cultural mechanism at a moment marked by oppressive change and political turmoil.

# Cutting the Networks in Former Yugoslavia

## From New Tendencies to the New Art Practice

Armin Medosch<sup>1</sup>

### 1974

In 1974, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia passed a new constitution. It was the fourth constitution in less than thirty years and the longest constitution ever written, surpassing the constitution of India.<sup>2</sup> It ‘signified the end of a clearly-defined chapter in postwar Yugoslav history’, wrote Denison Rusinow, author of the authoritative study on that very chapter, titled *The Yugoslav Experiment (1948–1974)*.<sup>3</sup> The constitution contained many contradictions which had characterised the Yugoslav experiment. On the one hand it sought to give legal shape to what differentiated Yugoslav socialism from Soviet Communism, in particular the official ideology of workers’ self-management in combination with a liberalised economy (‘market socialism’) and a decentralised political system. On the other hand, the 1974 constitution re-introduced a much stronger role for the party, the League of Communists of Yugoslav. This was not a re-Stalinisation of society, as was happening in Czechoslovakia and Poland, Rusinow pointed out: ‘Yugoslav socialism would continue to be based on autonomous enterprises and communes and “social self-management”,’ but the party would become now what it had already been, a centralised, bureaucratic power structure or, to use a euphemism of the era, ‘one ring to bind it all’.<sup>4</sup>

The constitution of 1974 had a profoundly negative effect on self-management by creating an ideological separation between labour as a political and economic category. It ‘foreclosed the political potential of self-management’ which became a major reason for the increasing inability of Yugoslavia to reinvent itself.<sup>5</sup>

1 Armin Medosch, 1962, Graz – 2017, Vienna

2 Dennison Rusinow, *The Yugoslav Experiment, 1948–1974*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977, pp 326–327

3 Ibid

4 Ibid, p 338

5 Ibid, p 201



Almir Mavignier, surrounded by his work, in the first New Tendencies exhibition, 1961, black and white photograph, image courtesy the artist

The introduction of the constitution coincided with the rise of a new type of art, often misleadingly called conceptual art, but in Yugoslavia known as the 'new art practice'.<sup>6</sup> The early 1970s also saw the rise of neoliberalism as an ideology,<sup>7</sup> and in practical terms a significant expansion of international money-lending fuelled by surplus capital from oil-producing nations yet globally redistributed by American banks.<sup>8</sup> Yugoslavia was a willing beneficiary of such loans enabling it to embark on a dual strategy: consumerism for the masses through debt financed imports and repression against a critical minority.<sup>9</sup>

6 Marijan Susovski, ed, *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966–1978*, Documents 3–6, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1978

7 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005

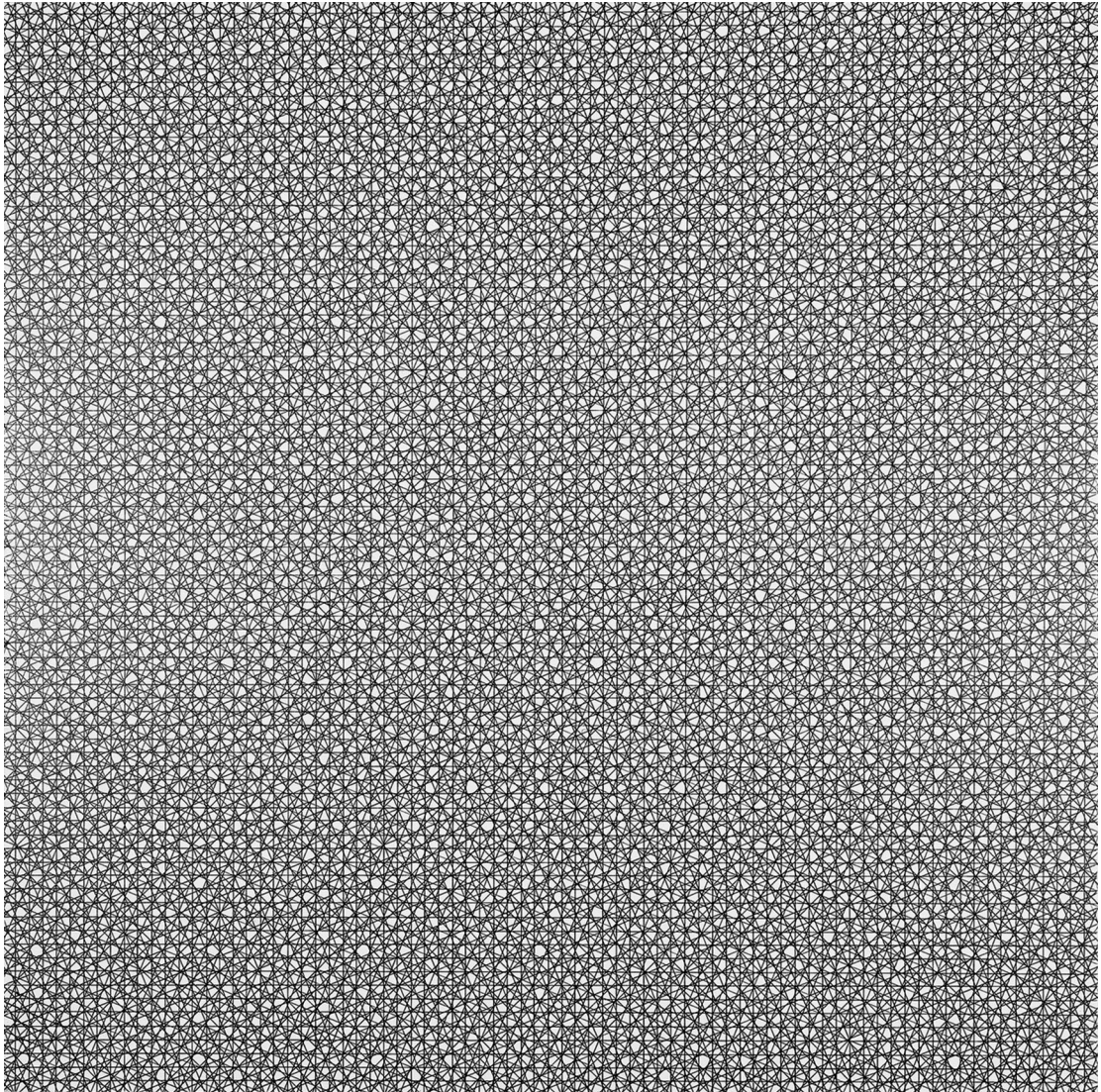
8 Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy*, first edition, Verso, London 2002

9 Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2016, p 201

## 1961

In August 1961 the first *Nove tendencije* (New Tendencies) exhibition (3 August – 14 September) opened at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. The exhibition had been initiated by the Brazilian painter Almir Mavignier and the Croatian critic Matko Meštrović, who had both been disappointed by the Venice Biennale of 1960 which was dominated by Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel. They suggested an exhibition to give visibility to a new type of art which had already been fermenting in studios and artist-run galleries and exhibitions since the late 1950s. Mavignier, who at the time was teaching at the School of Design in Ulm, was part of those networks, which included the Zero group from Düsseldorf, Azimut gallery and Azimuth magazine in Milan, Gruppo N from Padua, the Groupe de recherche d'art visuel (GRAV) from Paris, Karl Gerstner from Switzerland, and a number of individuals from Munich





Morellet, *4 double trames* 0°, 22°5, 45°, 67°5, 1961, oil on canvas, 80 × 80 cm, collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb © Studio Morellet

10 Susann Scholl, 'Die Neuen Tendenzen: Entwicklung Einer Europäischen Künstlerbewegung' (The New Tendencies: The Development of A European Art Movement), in Tobias Hoffman and Museum for Konkrete Kunst, eds, *Die Neuen Tendenzen: eine Europäische Künstlerbewegung 1961–1973: [eine Ausstellung des Museums für Konkrete Kunst Ingolstadt]*, 29.

who were all former students of Ernst Geitlinger. Božo Bek, director of the Gallery of Contemporary Art, a city sponsored public gallery, accepted the proposal. The participants of the first exhibition recognised that their collective efforts amounted to a 'movement'.<sup>10</sup> Although New Tendencies saw itself as a movement, it might do those artists, curators and theorists more justice to conceive of them as a network of networks. As I have shown in my book *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)*,<sup>11</sup> New Tendencies was the umbrella term for a multiplicity of converging but also radiating artistic desires to go beyond the postwar impasse in the fine arts according to which the world was divided into Abstract Expressionist and Socialist Realist painting.<sup>12</sup> The movement and network New Tendencies expanded the networks of art



*September 2006 bis 7. Januar 2007, Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren, 28. Januar bis 25. März 2007*, Edition Braus, Heidelberg, 2006, pp 277–285

- 11 Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)*, Leonardo Book Series, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2016
- 12 Catherine Millet, *Contemporary Art in France*, Flammarion, Paris, 2006, p 16
- 13 Medosch, 'The Scientification of Art? (1962–1963)', in Medosch, *New Tendencies*, op cit, pp 67–108
- 14 Ibid
- 15 Marco Meneguzzo, 'Vom Kinetischen zum Programmieren: Eine Italienische Geschichte 1958–1968', in Menaguzzo and V Feierabend, *Luce, movimento & programmazione 1958/1968: Kinetische Kunst aus Italien*, exhibition catalogue, Silvana, Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2001, pp 16–17
- 16 François Morellet, 'Pour une peinture expérimentale programmée', in GRAV and Galerie Denise René, eds, *Groupe de recherche d'art visuel: Paris 1962*, exhibition catalogue for 'L'instabilité' (4–18 April 1962), Maison des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1962
- 17 Jacopo Galimberti, 'Chapter 2: The Controversial Success of Collective Art (1960–1965)', in 'Art Collectives/Collective Art: Authorship and the Cold War in Western Europe, 1957–69', doctoral thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2013, pp 76–123
- 18 Marilyn Strathern, 'Cutting the Network', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*

moving beyond traditional media and developed a research-based artistic practice. As New Tendencies worked out its artistic programme in a series of meetings after that first exhibition, the movement replaced the term art with 'visual research' in a thorough and comprehensive effort to redefine the role of art in societies of advanced mass production.<sup>13</sup> Engaging with theories of perception from Gestalt psychology, the artists sought to engage the viewer in relational artworks which amounted to a wholly new ontology of the work: the meaning was no longer to be found in the work itself, but in the relation it engendered with the viewer. This dynamic, unstable and indeterminate (terms used in a series of manifestos by key New Tendencies participants GRAV)<sup>14</sup> relationship with the viewer was expected to demonstrate their agency, which they in turn were expected to take away as an insight.<sup>15</sup> Another key aspect of the programme of New Tendencies was to exclude the hand of the artist by devising algorithmic strategies for making work, most notable in the work of François Morellet.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the artists of New Tendencies wanted to create an art for the non-specialist, and a type of work that was often created by collectives in the name of the collective good.<sup>17</sup>

A benevolent climate in Zagreb after 1961 allowed New Tendencies to be held as a biennial with exhibitions in Zagreb in 1963 and 1965, and then again from 1968 to 1969 and in 1973. In between these, other New Tendencies exhibitions were held in Venice, Italy in 1963, in Leverkusen, Germany, and in Paris in 1964. The network grew very quickly and already comprised over sixty artists at the second Zagreb exhibition and more than a hundred at the third. It peaked with more than 140 participants in 1969 followed by only slightly less, 136, in 1973; in 1978 a final symposium was held with approximately twenty-five participants.

How can a researcher deal with such subject matter without gravely reducing its complexity? How can common issues, shared goals and strategies among the artists be identified without riding roughshod over their diversity? Taking inspiration from anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's term 'cutting the network' New Tendencies can be understood as a network not only of artists and curators but also as one that connects people and artefacts, humans and non-humans, material and intangible objects.<sup>18</sup> The task of the researcher is to decide where to cut the network, because cutting the network is a necessary strategy which facilitates keeping the object of analysis stable for long enough to create an interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

In the first few years, the flow of energies in the networks of New Tendencies seemed limitless. Only a few weeks after the first New Tendencies exhibition, the non-aligned movement of nations was officially brought into existence through a large-scale conference in Belgrade.<sup>20</sup> The non-aligned movement was an alliance of nations who asserted their right to follow an independent path, without allegiance to either of the power blocs, the US-led capitalist West or Soviet-led communism. It has been argued that Yugoslavia's participation in the non-aligned movement was one of the key conditions for the emergence of New Tendencies.<sup>21</sup> Non-aligned Yugoslavia, with its ideology of self-management, created a 'third space' which served as a contact zone for artists from all parts of the world where the 'recombinant creativity' of artists created new forms and new methodologies for making art.<sup>22</sup> The art can be described as a non-aligned modernism which breaks through established categories in postwar modern art.<sup>23</sup>

vol 2, no 3, September  
1996, pp 517–535

19 Ibid, p 522

20 Alvin Z Rubinstein,  
*Yugoslavia and the  
Nonaligned World*,  
Princeton University Press,  
Princeton, New Jersey, 1970

21 Ljiljana Kolečnik, 'New  
Tendencies within the  
Context of Yugoslav  
Society and Culture of  
1960's', unpublished  
manuscript, 2009

22 Strathern, 'Cutting the  
Network', op cit, p 522

23 Armin Medosch, 'Non-  
Aligned Modernism: The  
International Network and  
Art Movement New  
Tendencies (First Phase,  
1961–1965)', paper  
presented on 22 May at  
'Postwar – Art Between the  
Pacific and the Atlantic,  
1945–1965 conference in  
Munich at Haus der Kunst  
(21–24 May 2014); see also  
Okwui Enwezor, Katy  
Siegel and Ulrich Wilmes,  
eds, *Postwar Art Between  
the Pacific and the Atlantic  
(1945–1965)*, Haus Der  
Kunst, Prestel, Munich,  
2016

24 Ana Janevski, ed, 'As Soon  
as I Open My Eyes, I See a  
Film (Cinema Clubs & the  
Genre Film Festival/GEFF)',  
in WHW et al, eds, *Art  
Always Has Its  
Consequences*, John Bakti  
et al, trans, What/How &  
For Whom/WHW, Zagreb,  
2010, pp 236–245

25 Borislav Mikulić, 'Poetic  
Notion of Practice and its  
Cultural Context: Praxis  
Philosophy in the Political,  
Cultural, and Artistic  
Turmoils in the 1960s', in  
Branka Ćurčić, ed, *Id:  
ideologija dizajna/Ideology  
of Design: [zbornik  
tekstova/Reader]*,  
Autonomedia, New York,  
2009, p 234

26 Karl Marx, 'Economic and  
Philosophic Manuscripts of  
1844: Selections', in Robert  
C Tucker, ed, *The Marx-  
Engels Reader*, Norton,  
New York, 1972,  
pp 52–103

1961 had also been the foundational year of the Music Biennale of Zagreb which presented many of the biggest names in contemporary classical music such as John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen; and soon thereafter, in 1963 the experimental film festival GEFF was founded, which developed from discussions at an amateur film club in Zagreb which, despite the word 'amateur' in its title, took a decidedly avant-garde direction, pioneering the genre of anti-film.<sup>24</sup> The Korčula Summer School, *Praxis* magazine and the Praxis orientation in philosophy all began in 1963 and 1964. The Korčula Summer School was an annual conference on the Dalmatian island of Korčula which brought leading non-orthodox Marxist philosophers from Yugoslavia together with the great names of Western Marxism such as first-generation Frankfurt School members Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, and Jürgen Habermas and other non-orthodox Marxists, such as Lucien Goldmann and Henri Lefebvre. According to Boris Mikulić, the Praxis orientation in a sense repeated the earlier split of Tito from Stalin in the field of philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Praxis used the concepts and terms created by the Yugoslav regime, such as self-management, but took it into new dimensions which the regime could no longer control. The Praxis orientation took inspiration from the early writings of Marx and Engels, in particular the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (1932) in which Marx,<sup>26</sup> on the basis of a critique of Hegel, developed a theory of alienation.<sup>27</sup> In that regard the Praxis orientation created an important intellectual context for New Tendencies for whom overcoming alienation was a central issue.<sup>28</sup> Yet it would be wrong to insinuate close relations between Praxis and New Tendencies, and those relations that existed were rather one-sided: while New Tendencies artists and curators read *Praxis* magazine and attended Korčula summer school, the philosophers paid scant attention to the activities of the artists.<sup>29</sup> The dividing lines between the two phenomena which ran parallel for over a decade become clear by a cross-reading of early editions of *Praxis International*. The 1966 issue of *Praxis International* was entirely dedicated to the question of 'Art in a Technological World'. In the essay 'Why Art' by Danko Grlić which can be understood as exemplary for other positions, Grlić claimed that art was merely ephemeral when compared to technical progress.<sup>30</sup> Grlić passed harsh judgement on technological art, calling it the 'baggage' of technology, and an 'unnecessary excrescence'.<sup>31</sup> The logical conclusion for Grlić was that art should return to itself, producing an autonomous art, 'free from any formal novelty'.<sup>32</sup>

Another key dividing line between Praxis and New Tendencies was the advanced positions New Tendencies artists and theorists had on the issues of the relation of art to science. The catalogue text of Matko Meštrović for the 1963 exhibition of New Tendencies in Zagreb was understood<sup>33</sup> as expressing the 'Ideology of New Tendencies'.<sup>34</sup> In this text, Meštrović demanded the scientification of art, whilst warning at the same time against the dangers of an alienated and instrumentalised science. Science would only realise its full potential if it became the common property of society as a whole.<sup>35</sup> He emphasised a striving to overcome individualism and demanded an art that performed a 'breakthrough into the extra-poetical and extra-human sphere'.<sup>36</sup> Meštrović expanded the networks of New Tendencies, to include not only a humanised world – a familiar demand from humanist Marxism – but also the 'extra-human' and





Rudolf Kämmer, *Drehgrafik* (Rotary Graphic), 1964–1965, courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

27 Ibid

28 Medosch, 'Overcoming Alienation: New Tendencies' (1961–1973)', in Christian Höller, ed, *L'internationale: Post-War Avant-Gardes between 1957 and 1986*, JRP/ Ringier, Zurich, 2012, pp 251–260

29 Ljiljana Kolečnik, 'A Decade of Freedom, Hope and Lost Illusions: Yugoslav Society in the 1960s as a Framework for New Tendencies', *Journal of The Institute of Art History Zagreb* 34, 2010, pp 211–219

30 Danko Grlić, 'Wozu Kunst', *Praxis*, International Edition, 1966, p 267

31 Ibid, p 277, author's translation

32 Ibid, p 279

'extra-poetic'. Such demands clearly marked a break with classic humanist notions of the individual. Meštrović placed artistic action in a holistic, organically and technically interwoven totality, arguing that despite huge difficulties a 'possibility of historical projection, a possibility of an ideology of understanding what happens in the world, emerges'.<sup>37</sup>

As Ljiljana Kolečnik argues, the theoretical discourse of New Tendencies could be seen as 'some kind of "floating signifiers" trying to fill in the void generated by the disintegration of the initial utopian projects of socialist self-management, with utopian visions of their own'.<sup>38</sup> Compared with this, the discourse of Praxis on science and technology appears conservative, based as it was on classical philosophical concepts.<sup>39</sup> Praxis, strongly influenced by Frankfurt School critical theory, mainly saw the oppressive potential in technology and its mastery by a ruling class as dangerous for society. An exemplary piece in this regard is Jürgen Habermas's 'Technischer Fortschritt und soziale Lebenswelt' (Technical Progress and Social Lifeworld).<sup>40</sup> Habermas thought that science, freed from any humanistic values was becoming a mere instrument of oppression, that the power that science held over nature had now been extended to society.<sup>41</sup> This analysis fails to account for a more optimistic and experimental approach to science and technology such as that embodied by New Tendencies practice of 'visual research' – a constructive approach using science for non-utilitarian purposes.

## 1965

- 33 The text appeared initially without title and acquired its title only in later translations.
- 34 Matko Meštrović, 'Untitled (The Ideology of the New Tendencies)', in Margit Rosen, ed, *A Little-Known Story About a Movement, a Magazine and the Computer's Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International, 1961–1973*, MIT Press and ZKM Center for Art and Media, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Karlsruhe, Germany, 2011, pp 114–117
- 35 Ibid, p 114
- 36 Ibid, p 117
- 37 Ibid, p 116
- 38 Kolečnik, 'A Decade of Freedom', op cit, p 219
- 39 Danilo Pejović, 'Technology and Metaphysics', *Praxis: Revue Philosophique, International Edition* 1/2, 1966, p 210
- 40 Jürgen Habermas, 'Technischer Fortschritt und soziale Lebenswelt', op cit, 1966, pp 217–228
- 41 Ibid, p 222
- 42 Medosch, 'Dreamworlds of Cybernetic Socialism (1963–1965)', in Medosch, *New Tendencies*, op cit, pp 109–42
- 43 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002
- 44 Ernst Bloch, *Subjekt-Objekt; Erläuterungen zu Hegel*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1962
- 45 Leibniz quoted in ibid, p133, author's translation
- 46 Ibid
- 47 Some exceptions are Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002; Georg Trogemann,

The third New Tendencies exhibition in Zagreb in 1965 presented itself as a 'Dreamworld of Cybernetic Socialism'.<sup>42</sup> Dreamworld could be understood in the sense of Susan Buck-Morss's usage, who derived the term from Walter Benjamin's understanding of history.<sup>43</sup> Such a dreamworld is much more than an illusion; it is a collective social imaginary capable of mobilising powerful resources. It is also a dream, because society nurtures in its midst an idea for a future world to come which is not yet well understood. The idea that the present becomes pregnant with the future, albeit in an unclear shape, had taken a journey from the mathematician, scientist and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz via the French author Louis-Sébastien Mercier to Karl Marx, narrated Ernst Bloch.<sup>44</sup> Leibniz wrote that 'in the soul, as everywhere, the present becomes pregnant with the future'.<sup>45</sup> Leibniz made this statement in the context of discussing kinetic gas theory. A gas which is heated up inside a container gives rise to increasing pressure against the container's walls. The same, Bloch insinuates, is true for revolutionary tendencies in a society which is not yet capable of expressing itself.<sup>46</sup>

The 1965 exhibition projected a future of cybernetic socialism, understood as an open metaphor, not a fixed category. This was a tendency shared among scientists, artists and intellectuals in the Eastern bloc and Yugoslavia who had discovered cybernetics and information theory and endeavoured to bring them together, in the widest sense, with Marxism and experimental artistic practices. This tendency, although very widespread in the industrially more advanced nations such as the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic, has received little scholarly attention until now.<sup>47</sup> The question was how could the notion of communism being equal to 'electrification and workers' councils' be updated? The answer was tentatively given by Henri Lefebvre in his 1964 Korčula summer school statement: suggested it might be 'cybernetics plus workers' councils'.<sup>48</sup> Through communication technologies, methods of political self-organisation, practised locally, could be scaled up and applied across regions and whole nations. A study report of the Czech Academy of Science argued that such an enlightened use of information technologies in the service of self-organisation and empowerment could give socialism the edge over capitalism.<sup>49</sup> The art of New Tendencies, presented in the exhibition in Zagreb in 1965 was an illumination of that idea, a socialist, cybernetic art movement. It tried to conflate 'autogestion' with participatory art and information technology. It expressed itself through interactive environments, gadgets and whole labyrinths, through works using electrical motors and projections, through spaces filled with light and moving objects. The new playfulness was inspired by the rise of theses around the notion of 'homo ludens' as the Italian critique Giulio Carlo Argan pointed out.<sup>50</sup>

Yet 1965 had also been the year of another exhibition in which New Tendencies artists had played a key role, the exhibition *The Responsive Eye* curated by William C Seitz at MoMA (23 February – 25 April 1965) turned Op Art into a well-known and market-compatible new genre. The aesthetics of New Tendencies suddenly became widely known yet without its socially-engaged, emancipatory content. This was

Alexander Yuryevich Nitussov and Wolfgang Ernst, eds, *Computing in Russia: The History of Computer Devices and Information Technology Revealed*, Vieweg+Teubner, Braunschweig/Wiesbaden, 2001.

48 Lefebvre, 'Sur quelques criteres du developpement social et du socialisme', *Praxis International* 2/3, 1965, pp 166–167

49 Cf Radovan Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads: Social and Human Implications of the Scientific and Technological Revolution*, third edition., International Arts and Sciences Press, Prague, 1969

50 Giulio Carlo Argan, 'Art as Research', in *A Little-Known Story about a Movement*, op cit, pp 194–197

experienced as a real caesura, a cut into the networks of New Tendencies carried out by capital. As individual artists shot to fame, the network of groups and collectives started to fall apart, spelling the end of New Tendencies as a movement.

## 1968

On 2 June 1968 students from a student dormitory in New Belgrade took to the streets apparently because of a trivial matter; they had been denied entrance to a rehearsal of a popular music and variety show.<sup>51</sup> After clashes with the police they attempted to walk to central Belgrade but were stopped by excessive police force at a railway underpass. Within a short period of time the matter turned political.<sup>52</sup>

For a few days, from 2 June to 9 June 1968, Yugoslav students got a real taste of self-organisation outside of party control. They founded action committees and held plenary meetings thereby potentially forming the nucleus of an independent student organisation.<sup>53</sup> The regime reacted with a complex dual strategy of co-optation and repression. On 9 June, in a public television address, Tito said that the students had been right to protest and that he would seek to address their grievances, even going so far to say that he would step down if he did not succeed. He also said that now that they had been successful it was time to go back to work.<sup>54</sup> On the very same evening the students ended their protest, and a sustained campaign of repression began.<sup>55</sup> Philosophy professors and *Praxis* editorial board members were excluded from the party in Zagreb and Belgrade. Editors of student media were publicly criticised in state media and finally replaced in 1970.<sup>56</sup> Yet while there was repression, there were also new beginnings. In Belgrade, Zagreb and Novi Sad student culture centres were opened.<sup>57</sup> Some magazines escaped the initial crackdown and continued an open editorial stance.<sup>58</sup>

Tendencies 4, held as a series of events from summer 1968 to May 1969, was the biggest New Tendencies exhibition. It showed a large selection of neo-constructivist work, but its main theme was 'computers as a medium of visual research'. A small colloquium at the beginning of August 1968 was followed by a much larger event in May 1969. This was accompanied by the launch of a new journal, *Bit International*, which was released in nine issues from 1968 to 1972. The computers had brought a new type of artist, the programmer artist, and the corporation, as a collective. Tendencies 4 was probably the most representative computer art exhibition at the time.

Only weeks after the student uprising, shortly after Tendencies 4, Praxis philosophers met on Korčula for their annual summer school. That year's topic was Marx and Revolution.<sup>59</sup> Many of the great names of the New Left were there including Herbert Marcuse, who had become an international celebrity because of his influence on the student movement.<sup>60</sup> The regime held Praxis philosophers responsible for the student revolt, but this was almost certainly not the case; Praxis, far from being political organisers, were certainly not the student movement's puppet masters. But maybe more importantly, the events of the summer of 1968 mark a real seismic shift, which rendered humanist Marxism obsolete in a certain sense: one of the few to recognise this, because he was

51 Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects*, op cit, p 125

52 Ibid, p 126

53 Ibid, p 31

54 Ibid, p 32

55 Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects*, op cit, p 141

56 Ibid, pp 145–146

57 Ibid, p 144; Vuković, 'Trouble with Reality', p 50

58 Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects*, op cit, p 146

59 The title had been chosen a year ahead, in consideration of the anniversary of Marx's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday.

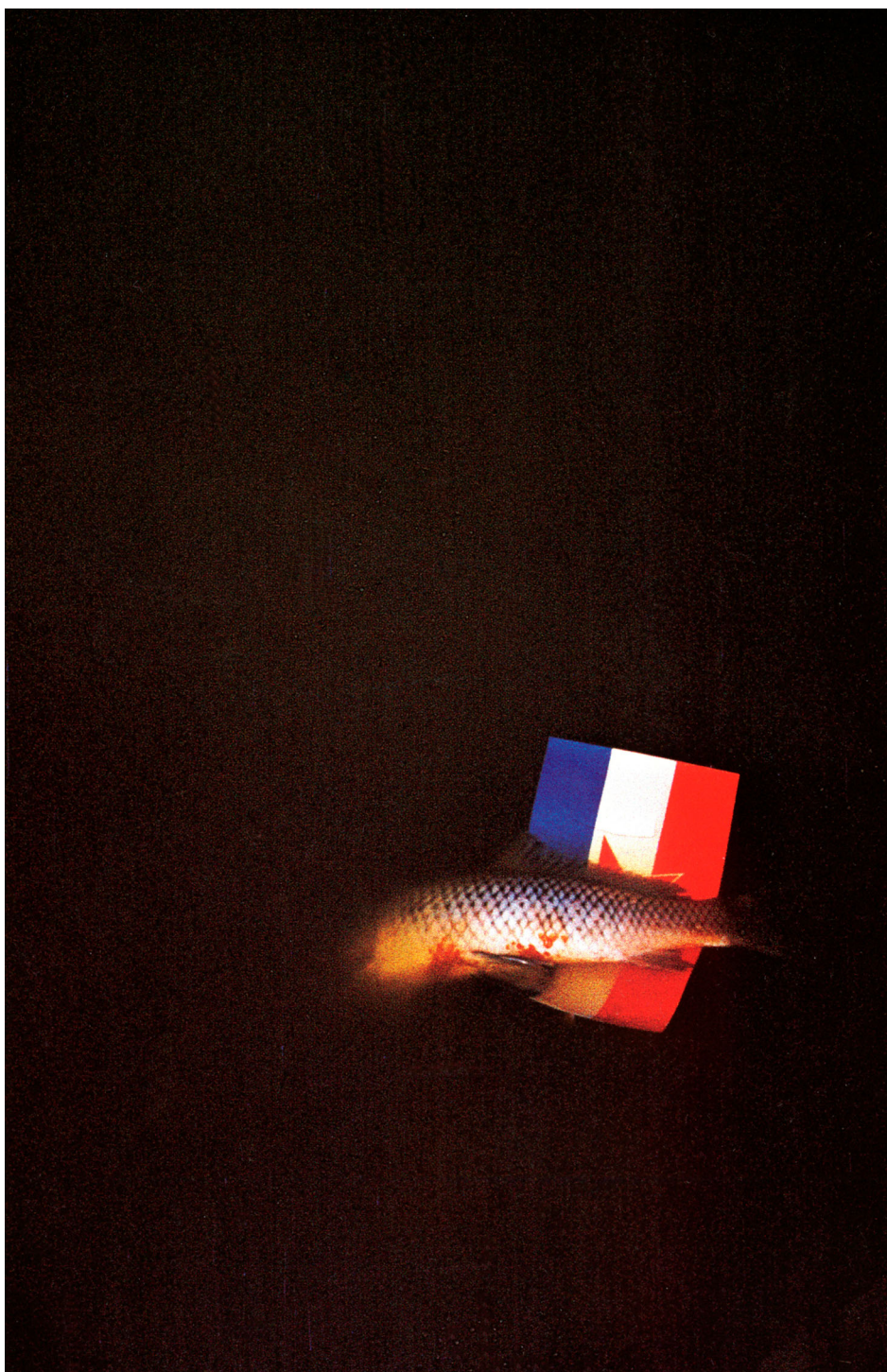
60 Ibid, pp 120–121





Bálint Szombathy, *Flags 1* (Flag on Pole), 1972, transparent colour slide





Bálint Szombathy, *Flags 2 (Flag and Fish)*, 1972, transparent colour slide





Bálint Szombathy, *Flags 3 (Flag-ribbon and Bush)*, 1972, transparent colour slide



closest to the concerns of the international student movement, was Marcuse.

In his lecture, Marcuse stated that the student movement was an intellectual avant-garde which articulated what was still unvoiced in the wider population and those concerns also illuminated the inadequacies of dominant ideologies, 'even socialist ideologies (reformist as well as radical leftist ideologies)'.<sup>61</sup> Marcuse emphasised that a new Marxism could no longer be described as 'socialist humanism'.<sup>62</sup> The students were sharply critical of humanism, argued Marcuse, because it represented for them an old form of repression and sublimation that was no longer necessary. He wrote, 'to them humanism remains an idealistic concept which minimizes the power and the weight of the brute matter, the power and the weight of the body, of the mutilated biology, of man, of his mutilated life instincts'.<sup>63</sup> Industrial society had been based on a separation of labour and leisure, and on a specific dialectic of necessity and freedom. Now, in affluent societies a new dialectic was coming into play, where the realm of freedom was pervaded by the realm of necessity, but where also the realm of freedom entered the realm of necessity. 'The work process itself, the socially necessary work, becomes, in its rationality, subject to the free play of the mind, of imagination, the free play with the pleasurable possibilities of things and nature.'<sup>64</sup> Marcuse demanded that a qualitatively different type of society was needed, based on new sensibilities and new values. He emphasised that the student movement had been first to make that demand explicit.<sup>65</sup> In the midst of the proceedings of the Korčula summer school on 21 August 1968, the news broke of the violent ending of the Prague Spring.

## 1972

Josef Szombathy is Hungarian-speaking and comes from the border town Subotica in the autonomous region of Vojvodina in Serbia, a rural area with a few small towns and Novi Sad as its capital. Szombathy founded the group Bosch + Bosch in 1969 together with Slavko Matković.<sup>66</sup> The groups Bosch + Bosch, and KÔD, also from Vojvodina, were core protagonists of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia.<sup>67</sup>

In 1972 the artist Bálint Szombathy carried out a series of works in which he deconstructed the Yugoslav flag which consisted of the French Tricolour, rotated by ninety degrees with a red star added in the centre. The colours of the Tricolour symbolised liberty, equality and fraternity, the red star stood for the victorious revolution. Szombathy bought several hundred Yugoslavian paper flags, some of which were misprinted, with either the blue or the red colour missing. This gave him the idea of 'using them as deconstructive elements, applied amongst the regular paper flags'.<sup>68</sup> The first photo action took place at a lake near Subotica in Serbia. Szombathy fixed the flags onto tree trunks and (wooden) power poles, as well as placing them on the water. Since a fish kill took place at exactly at that time, he combined the flags with bleeding fish carcasses. Another version of the work shows a bush in a hilly landscape and a ribbon made of the Yugoslav flag wrapped around the bush in the manner of decorative ribbons and girdle of flowers to decorate a coffin.

61 Herbert Marcuse, 'The Realm of Freedom and the Realm of Necessity: A Reconsideration', *Praxis: A Philosophical Journal* 1/2, 1969, p 21

62 Ibid

63 Ibid, pp 21–22

64 Ibid, p 23

65 Ibid, pp 24–25

66 Other members were László Szalma, László Kerekes, Katalin Ladik, Attila Csernik and Ante Vukov.

67 Emese Kürti, ed, *Bosch + Bosch*, Dániel Sipos, trans, acb ResearchLab, Budapest, 2016, p 7

68 Bálint Szombathy, email to the author, 7 Nov 2016, private archive

These images may be interpreted as symbolising the demise of the Yugoslav experiment understood as a progressive utopia. Between 1971 and 1972, progressive and popular politicians were replaced by party apparatchiks in Zagreb and Belgrade in the context of the so-called Croatian Spring. Although the work deconstructed a symbol of socialist Yugoslavia, it was very different from later work which also incorporated state symbols, such as the Zagreb Group of Six or Slovenian NSK. Szombathy's *Flags* were sincere, the work mourned the demise of the Yugoslav experiment, the inability for fresh reforms and the ossification of the regime. The price paid was not only general stagnation, but ultimately, the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The deconstruction of *Flags* in 1972 is thus also extremely anticipatory of future events. In *Flags II* (1993), a performance, Szombathy recontextualised the earlier work by making explicit its relation to the Yugoslav civil war.

Serbian art theorist and historian Miško Šuvaković differentiates between a first and second wave of protagonists of the New Art Practice. While the first wave still believed 'that critical and subversive works of art could offer a political, or at least ethical corrective to anomalies of modernism', the second wave, like the Zagreb Group of Six, among others, showed 'that the art of the moment was taking place at a different scene behind the principle of hope promised by the Marxist utopia'.<sup>69</sup>

The New Art Practice was the type of art that was acceptable to the new sensibilities expressed by the student movement, finding a space in the newly created student cultural centres. Artists such as Bosch + Bosch developed an experimental practice which was formulating Marcuse's 'new sensibility'. The student movement had not created that new sensibility and those values in ready-made form but merely hinted at them in an initial emotional outbreak in which a radical social imaginary was first aired.<sup>70</sup> It fell to the artists to give those new ideas about the world clearer shape in the years to come. The artists of Bosch + Bosch were expanding the networks, they brought new human and non-human factors into play. Yet at the same time, the Yugoslav experiment was falling apart, and the regime demonstrated its capacity for blunt repression.

In 1971, Szombathy became graphic editor of the magazine *Új Szimpozium*, a Hungarian language literary magazine published in Novi Sad.

The No. 77/1971 issue of *Új Szimpozium* (New Symposium), was banned because of a film essay, published in Hungarian translation, by a young Serbian artist, Miroslav Mandić, in which he satirized the personality cult that had developed around Tito. Mandić was charged with offence against the head of state, and the chief editor, Ottó Tolnai was charged with contributing to the offence against Tito and the state. Mandić was sentenced to one year in jail, while Tolnai was given a suspended prison sentence.<sup>71</sup>

Mandić and Bogdanović were members of KÔD, a group from Novi Sad which was launched only slightly later than Bosch + Bosch and in many ways had similar orientations but also insisted on being different, in a spirit of friendly rivalry.<sup>72</sup> Another artist, Slavko Bogdanović was sentenced to jail, because he criticised the Vojvodina party leadership in the Belgrade weekly paper, *Student*. Szombathy was also graphic guest editor of *Student*. In this capacity he designed the cover of a special

69 Miško Šuvaković, 'Art as a Political Machine: Fragments of the Late Socialist and Postsocialist Art of Mitteleuropa and the Balkans', in Aleš Erjavec, ed, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003, p 121

70 George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*, South End Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1987

71 Szombathy, email to the author, 30 October 2016, private archive

72 Mirko Radojičić, 'Activity of the Group KÔD: Novi Sad', in Susovski, ed, *The New Art Practice*, op cit, pp 38–47

issue of *Student* magazine on American underground culture, published on 30 April 1971, with texts by Jerry Rubin, Timothy Leary, William Burroughs, Abbie Hoffman, etc. 'This issue was immediately banned from distribution, so it never got to the public' remembers Szombathy.<sup>73</sup> The front cover showed the US flag flipped around, with the caption, 'Made in Yugoslavia'.

Szombathy took the sentencing of Bogdanović and Mandić as a warning sign and kept his slides of the *Flags* series secret until 1990, when Yugoslavia ceased to exist. Another pretext for the repressive tendencies of the regime was given by the Croatian Spring, a movement which had started out as progressive and populist, but turned nationalist. Tito did not just blame nationalism for the crisis but a deeper ideological crisis in the Party, with a tolerance of 'anti-Marxist' and 'pro-Western' tendencies.<sup>74</sup> In 1972 Tito also moved against the liberal and technocratic elements within the Serbian party. As a consequence, more liberal and progressive politicians in Serbia and other nations were also forced to step down. This is how Bálint Szombathy experienced it:

In this respect, 1972 can be seen as a borderline, even though several university periodicals had been terminated way back in the aftermath of the 1968 student rebellions. Certain progressive intellectual processes were slowing down or died down, as their representatives – both within and outside the Communist Party – were considered enemies of the party and the working class. By this, they essentially hindered young people from being active members of the party leadership, which resulted in the fact that the country's leadership, i.e., political power, was gradually seized by a gerontocracy. With the dying out of the old generation of political leaders, the Socialist system ceased to exist, just as it happened elsewhere in Eastern Europe.<sup>75</sup>

## 1978

In 1977 curators in Zagreb made one final attempt to relaunch New Tendencies. By that time the neo-constructivist design ideology went against the tide. To the same extent that the project of Yugoslav self-managed socialism had disintegrated, the ideas of the first phase of New Tendencies lacked a social base. In 1977, curators in Zagreb, in particular Radoslav Putar, who had been involved from the very beginning, tried to make another defining exhibition that would bring together the most progressive tendencies in the art of the day under the title Art and Society. The letters in the archives of the Gallery of Contemporary Art, (now MSU) reveal that (New) Tendencies had lost much of its earlier attractiveness to foreign artists and intellectuals.<sup>76</sup> Zagreb invited the great names of Arte Povera and Conceptual art, yet many of the answers were negative or evasive. The organisers thus cancelled Tendencies 6, originally scheduled for the autumn of 1977, and held only a symposium in September 1978.

The archive of MSU Zagreb, usually so well maintained with regard to New Tendencies, is almost a black hole when it comes to the content of

73 Szombathy, email to the author, 7 Nov 2016, private archive

74 Tito quoted in *ibid*, p 309

75 Szombathy, email to the author, 30 October 2016, private archive

76 See archive of New Tendencies, MSU Zagreb





Tomislav Gotovac, *I've fucking had it*, 1978, photo: Marijan Susovski, photograph with text work, collection Sarah Gotovac, courtesy Tomislav Gotovac Institute, Zagreb

Tendencies 6. It seems that not a word of what was spoken at the Tendencies 6 symposium has been preserved in written form or as an audio document. Tendencies 6 is still a riddle to be solved. Yet this riddle is intricately linked with the declining currency of the 'brand' New Tendencies. One reason for this is that in the course of the 1970s the artists who had become successful with the first wave of New Tendencies were 'cutting the networks' themselves. They continued working under their individual names rather than under a group identity and in their biographies they silently dropped any mention of New Tendencies. In this way, a movement that had been nearly hegemonic by 1965 became almost completely forgotten by the 1980s. As far as hand-written lists can be reliable sources, it seems that around twenty-five people participated in *Art and Society* in 1978, most of whom were from Yugoslavia and were associated with the new art practice.

One trace that this event left in art history is the photographic work *Pun mi je kurac v* (1978) by Tomislav Gotovac. It consists of a black and white photograph in which the artist and the critic Jesa Denegri are seen holding a printed card with the words 'Pun Mi Je Kurac / Tomislav.' While in the main Gotovac catalogue to date this is translated as 'I've had a dick full [of everything]' <sup>77</sup> this is probably better translated as 'I've fucking had it.' <sup>78</sup>

This was part of a series of printed works with two more pieces which read: 'I don't give a fuck / Tomislav' and 'So screw me god / Tomislav', all works 1978. At Tendencies 6 Gotovac made a lecture performance under the title 'I've fucking had it' in which he 'commented on the current state of

77 Aleksandar Battista Ilić and Diana Nenadić, eds, *Tomislav Gotovac, Monografija*, Hrvatski filmski savez/Croatian Film Clubs' Association, Zagreb, and Muzej suvremene umjetnosti/Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 2003, np

78 Jadranka Vinterhalter, 'Words, Words, Words, ... by Tomislav Gotovac', in Branka Stipančić, *Words and Images*, Maja Soljan, trans, Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts, Zagreb, 1995, p 75

culture and art and [enumerated] what he was fed up with'.<sup>79</sup> The, on the surface level, obscene language should not make us jump to conclusions too quickly. Gotovac was a master of ambiguity whose provocative works functioned on several levels. Although he had started to work in the early 1960s as an experimental film-maker,<sup>80</sup> his work was closer to that of the New Art Practice than to his contemporaries. In 1991 Gotovac was invited by the newly independent nation of Croatia to participate in an exhibition under the title *For the Renewal and Defense of Croatia* in Zagreb. Gotovac reused the existing tryptich of signs and added, handwritten 'I've fucking had it *with commies and serbs*', 'I don't give a fuck *for Jozip Broz Tito and brotherhood and unity*' and 'So screw me god *this is Croatia*'. The modifications reveal the subconscious subtext which those works had always carried. For an artist like Gotovac and the second wave of the new art practice, such as the Group of Six Artists, nothing much else was left to do than to expose the hollowness of the official rhetoric and the conflict between official ideology and the everyday.

The nihilistic and playful subversion of late 1970s artists was explicitly directed against the 'principle of hope' of Ernst Bloch and Praxis philosophers. Whilst Praxis philosophers had hoped that the socialist project could still be rescued by applying ideas of the New Left to the state ideology of self-managed socialism, the second wave of practitioners of the new art no longer held such hopes. Their art rebelled against the ideology of work as such, rather than trying to invest real meaning into the hollowed-out forms of self-managed labour. One of the most iconic works in that regard is the series *Artist at Work* (1978) by Mladen Stilinović. This series of four photographs shows the artist lying in bed. In the first image his face is directed to the camera and the eyes are open, staring blankly into nothingness. In the second image the head is still directed to the camera, but the eyes are closed. The third and fourth image show the artist turned away, fast asleep. The work is a reaction to Neša Paripović's art work *Untitled* (1975), a photographic performance where the artist gazes intently at a page of blank white paper. Although both works can simply be read as a refusal of the ideology of labour, they can also be understood as carefully staged narratives which turn aspects of the everyday into special moments through making them strange. Sanja Iveković's *Triangle* (1978) is another landmark work, a photographic performance, which referenced Tito's motorcade. This art took place indeed on 'a different scene', beyond any utopian horizon. New Tendencies in 1978 had become an impossibility, since the idea of a progressive history had vanished – and with it any hope of utopia.

79 Ibid

80 Ješa Denegri, 'The individual mythology of Tomislav Gotovac', in *Tomislav Gotovac*, op cit, pp 268–276

## Contributors

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