

## The Decentralization of Art

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In the past ten or fifteen years, dozens of texts have been published regarding so-called Eastern art in the post-socialist condition, and it is possible to almost taxonomically organize all of their main concerns. From demands for compensation (re-evaluation of the cultures of these countries), to demands for emancipation (to be extricated from evaluation in terms of the universal Western view), to demands for new cartography (in respect to the deconstruction of Western cartography), to the dilemma of whether to construct a new identity and a new model of consciousness by accepting different values, or just the opposite, to insist on one's own models of creativity.

Contemporary ex-socialist Central and South-Eastern Europe is, in its own way, in a post-colonial era, in the sense that the model of the center and the periphery still holds, and even fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the East, in terms of politics, economics, tourism, and art, still maintains a curiously marginal Otherness. The East even colonizes itself from the inside, which means that it is again reconstructing its own history upon which it is building its own values.(1)

Larger multinational states, for example Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, also have their own individual post-colonial discussions. Their actualization brings a kind of relief and paradoxically opens the possibility to have an unencumbered, direct experience with these cultures and nations with which we, before this time, had lived within one system (and in some cases even in the form of a single state, as in the case of former Czechoslovakia) under which we had often mythologized our own superiority and differences. In any case, the division of Czechoslovakia rid both the Czechs and the Slovaks of their past traumas, allowing each to mature to the point of the liberating recognition of shared differences and of the different "truths" about the histories and culture in the former Czechoslovak state.

At the same time, it has become clear that at least as important as the questions of defense against the outside, reparations for losses from the totalitarian era, or integration into Western history are the "relational problems" within the former Eastern bloc, which are neglected even though they can evince new awareness. The introduction of important figures from ex-socialist art into new contexts is an active practice with sources that are still producing work. A synoptic view of the differentiated strategies of so-called Eastern art is perhaps a promising way to disengage from the aforementioned regurgitated themes and to gain distance from confrontational and bi-polar positions. While compensating for the losses of Totality we probably do not have a chance one way or another to discover

some kind of “truth” about the past. From the example of common history, we know that at the most it will contain some truth about our construction of the past. This holds true for both the West as well as for the East. A single solution does not exist. The contemporary era resembles more the cultural histories constituted of small histories and their digressions from the grand panopticon of History. The favoritism of this style is liberating, but it brings with it de-politicization and some attempts to return to the pre-Modern “original” state.(2)

The respective art histories of the ex-socialist countries in the second half of the twentieth century are examples of highly differentiated internal and external relations, which relativize simplified views. The internal differences and conflicts within the cultural scene of Czechoslovakia can exemplify them in this exhibition in several instances.

In the Czech Republic after the Second World War, one of the most profound alternative artistic developments was the last avant-garde movement—Surrealism—with its “inner model,” as formulated by Breton.(3) Karel Teige, a key figure in the interwar avant-garde continued to use it after the war as a strategic construct in a polemic with the “exterior model” of academic art and socialist-realism. The wartime experience, however, introduced a different philosophy of the day: Existentialism, suitable for analyzing concrete experiences and later for the existential situation in the totalitarian regime after 1948.

The cultural scene of the time read the philosophy of existence, adopted and actualized it as the absurdity of the painful life under the régime of the day. Post-surrealistic art, which is in fact a hybrid of the Surrealist inner model and the philosophy of existence, called in the Czech milieu “Structural Abstraction,” became the model for the majority from the 1960s on. Its war background remained the constant anthropology and anthropocentrism of existential philosophy. In a situation burdened with an inner anthropological model, which in the form of so-called “imaginative art” in fact declared itself a constant of Czech culture, it was necessary to make a radical step: to de-subjectivize art and substitute it with a non-anthropocentric concept. One of the first steps was the “Total Realism” program in the poetry of philosopher Egon Bondy, later a central figure in the Czech underground. In his 1950 collection *Totální realismus*, actual events from the Socialist world and pragmatic records of his “lyrical I/Me” are listed side by side, without individual engagement or ranking in terms of value.(4) Total Realism is in actuality a raw appropriation of reality, and its technique resembles the simplest kind of assembly, just as Jiří Kolář used in his “confrontage,” found photographs simply pasted next to one another. The strategy of adoption, assembly, and manifestation of an artwork as an event on the playing field

of the Czech scene in the 1960s caused a reversal and became within the scene an unexpected Other. The new model also demanded a new construction of history and its actualized line of development (František Kupka, the Russian Constructivism of Vladmír Malewitsch, the Kineticism of Zdeněk Pešánek, and other similar trends, generally gathered under Neo-Constructivism).

The reversal to a non-anthropocentric approach is represented in the Czech milieu mainly by the artist group Křižovatka (Crossroads), including Karel Malich, Jiří Kolář, Vladislav Mirvald, Zdeněk Sýkora, and so on, with a program of so-called objective tendencies. In place of the "Apocalyptic Narrative," emphasis was above all placed on the non-symbolic presence of the object. For that reason, Malich's wire sculptures have a latent Kineticism, and even the criticism at the time revealed that they are a kind of model of a kinesthetic body. Initially, Utopian architecture was one of his defining concerns. This is why, he actually understood the sculptures as models of constructions, the large scale realization of which lacked the necessary resources and new technology. They were not far from the Situationists' operational diagrams, though they drew on more personal sources. Malich's non-anthropomorphic concept of events in space, however, necessarily constantly expanded into extreme dimensions ("A segment of unknown but understood space.") In them, Malich appropriated non-human open space where it is impossible to differentiate between what is organic, natural, geometric, and non-living. His "landscapes in the air" broke away from the concrete observation of objects, and therefore functioned as a pure flow of energy. The "cosmicization," so common in similar projects of the 1960s, ultimately grew in his work into the form of "becoming the Universe." (5)

In Slovakia, the strategy of appropriating reality was played out in a different context. As opposed to the Czech milieu, encumbered with its post-surrealist inheritance, in 1965 a series of radical Happsoc ("happening" and "society") events were introduced. In the first of these events, undersigned by authors Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčik, and Zita Kostrová, a whole segment of reality was appropriated—the city of Bratislava: the urban situation including all property, residents, their relationships, opinions, and the reactions of the public. This radical gesture was accompanied by a manifesto calling for the complex experiencing of un-stylized reality, exempted off any interventions from everyday existence, which was meant to function solely by means of the energy of its relationships and tensions and lead the viewer to non-violent engagement. The impulse behind this ready-made total reality was the French New Realism, and Pierre Restany was the first interpreter of the Slovak event. The Happsoc I actions led to an important cultural political affair: "the cultural decentralization in a dualistic country" such as Czechoslovakia

was, and in the end to a shift in focus to the Slovak "other."(6) The Duchampian appropriation of found reality is here transcended by the appropriation of social reality, and positively identified with total reality. The strategy of appropriating human production and the given moment of social practice has continued in Slovakia with Filko's further universal actions: from the appropriation of all of Czechoslovakia, to the entire international world, and even the entire cosmos. This expansion neutralized differences between one's self and others, withdrew from the ambition to illustrate the absurdity of the world and maintain a cynical distance, which was in actuality a grotesque view cultivated commonly in the Czech center. There are other clear differences from the strategy of happenings which were being conducted in the domestic scene in Prague, for example by Milan Knížák. Happenings, as opposed to Happsoc, stimulated action and embrace theatrical moments. They progressed more or less according to a prepared scenario and incorporated both pedagogical and occasionally messianic goals, while the totality of found experience was believed to be complete, without corrective ambitions.

A younger generation, formed on the basis of Filko and Mlynarčík's activities, collectively came onto the scene in 1970 under the name Otevřený ateliér (Open Studio). At the beginning of the 1970s that group of artists, Stano Filko, Július Koller, Igor Gazdik, Rudolf Sikora, Miloš Laky and Ján Zavorský, prepared futurological actions in natural surroundings and worked further on theories of interplanetary communications, theories of signification, and other conceptual projects.

Then the manifesto and project White Space in a White Space (1973/1974) of Filko, together with Laky and Zavorský liberated art of reality, transcending it into an immaterial awareness beyond subjectivity and time separated from this world.(7) We can compare the 12 points of the Manifesto of a White Space in a White Space with the "12 Rules for a New Academy" which Ad Reinhardt wrote in 1957.(8) It is well known in art history that attempts to make emptiness into a common medium led painting to the brink of disappearing and to a purely abstract conception of the world. Among Slovak artists, the desire to place art outside the phenomenal world has also had the character of a process from the very beginning; it is a repetition of the search for a method to grasp the purely absolute in the complete objectivity of the installation (fabric painted with white paint, the rhythm of white columns, white paint on photographs). In a later phase, Stano Filko worked with the chaos of the unfathomable empty pictorial space by absorbing it into his inner world, turning it inside out, and shaping with it an inner cosmos of Me Myself. It no longer materializes it physically, but describes the empty pictorial surface verbally, with the text of his own cosmology.

He protects himself from chaos by naming, ordering, and systematizing it, by constantly supplementing and multiplying to thereby articulate his own highly personal interpretation of the universe. Three manifestos labeled as “text-art” were published on the theme of “White Space.” In 1977, appeared “Emotion. Pure Emotion” followed by “Transcendence” in 1978 and finally “Transcendental Meditation” in 1980. A definite parallel with this internalization of the cosmos can be found in the late work of Karel Malich: situations personally experienced by him became a part of his open “empty” wire sculptures and helped to carry the barely manageable burden of the turbulence that erupted from endless absolute emptiness.

In parallel with Happsoc, the non-anthropocentric principle was represented in Slovakia from the mid-1960s by the “cosmo-humanistic” culture of Július Koller. (9) His artistic strategy was based on so-called operations. They were, in fact, personal interventions in the normal realities of life, which triggered them and turned them into so-called cultural situations. Koller’s work, therefore, is in fact a permanent demonstration of a common situation that constantly forms itself anew. The only way of conveying this was the linguistic form, the endless text-based activity: the publication of text-kart (text cards), card objects, propositions and proclamations. An exacting intellectual approach reduces the space for theatricality—common in happenings—as well as space for evaluation, subjective experience, and aesthetics.

Proclamations often have a limiting function: anti-happening, anti-picture, non-art, non-color, trans-art. They demonstratively proclaim a retreat from aesthetics, decry aesthetic values and content, and are comparable with the parallels from the same period as the Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal by Robert Morris from 1963 or the Statements of Lawrence Weiner, which introduced the conceptual aesthetic into the international scene in the 1960s. Koller, too, came up completely independently with relations and conditions within which his propositions were meant to function and should be read: they were for the most part technically produced with a primitive printer; they were distributed through channels other than official institutions and their exhibitions, they were dependent on language, and they also required of the addressees to participate in their content intellectually.

Permanent self-identification is yet another aspect of Koller’s activities. He literally performs and captures in the photographs his own non-human second identity as an “UFO-naut,” as an extra-terrestrial alien. This relates to his non-anthropocentric cosmo-humanistic culture, and his new identity allows him to push his operations into a wider space-time dimension. His life-long pedagogic work with the lay waters down the universal model of situations and lends it an added social dimension.

Koller's counterpart in the Czech scene, despite the difference in generation, is Jiří Kovanda.<sup>(10)</sup> Kovanda does not confront us with the concrete and universal, subjective and objective, but rather moves in the in-between space, in the obscure points of intersection, where neither extreme can be used without leading to its deformation. It is a situation naturally derived from routine living, a ready-made of lived reality that Kovanda rather tests and investigates than labels categorically. As opposed to Koller, he steers away from intellectual definition. His strategy is just the opposite, he attempts to accidentally discover and engage situations. He drags us into reality without aiming for any kind of interpretation—in this sense, apolitically. Found reality itself is the background within which he implants his intervention. The performance, because it appears unfocused, frees the space for its own non-demonstrative acceptance, for a fusion with the commonplace and a return to everyday reality. This strategy only found its followers in the latest generation of Vollcontemporary artists who again accepted Kovanda's invisible commonness and minimal shifts which function subversively in the contemporary post-medial world, supersaturated as it is with images and information.

These examples presented from Czech and Slovak art are situationally connected to the newly assembled collection. They are in no respect a representative selection and do not point toward some kind of pseudo-objective "whole" of both national cultures. Nor are they atypical examples that are justified only because of their comprehensibility for the universal cultural situation of the West. Their significance lies elsewhere. On the one hand, they reference the situation that played itself out in the division of the state. After the binding and mediating state and political system of the Eastern bloc ceased to exist (the "disappearing intermediary"), it became possible to see the actual dimensions of both cultures that were previously obscured by the illusion of federalism and respect for the so-called specificity of cultural tradition.

More significant is, however, their reference to the events played out in both countries in the 1960s, which can be labeled as what Slavoj Žižek calls "secondary identification." (When the political situation in the latter half of the 1950s was liberalized, the suppressed universal modernist model of art, which had long before split with primary identification with local tradition and ethnic roots, was necessarily re-actualized. In reality, however, it had already been exhausted by the 1950s (for example, its renewal in the Czech Republic was dependent on the Cubist founders of modern art), it had lost its utopian dimension, and in the meantime incorporated specific cultural codes and traditional iconography. In the 1960s, it passed into a secondary identification with the new universal model of art which, on account of its conceptual approach to art, seemed empty and purged of its

specific content. There emerged a radical Otherness, which personalities such as Stano Filko, Julius Koller, Karel Malich and later also Jiří Kovanda pushed to the edge. Society gave them the status of outsiders, a supplementary role set apart from the culture of the majority. Now, with some distance, it is evident that a “cultural decentralization in dualistic Czechoslovakia” arose leading to a validation of the differences within both scenes. Their recognition has its own political value: far from acknowledging specificity, it is rather Otherness that has universal relevance.

(1) Andrej Szczerski , “Koloniales/Postkoloniales Mitteleuropa – Geschichte kontra Geografie,” in: *Anxiety of Influence*, exhibition catalogue in the Staatsgalerie in Bern, 2004, p. 64 n..

(2) Dušan Třeštík, *Češi a dějiny v postmoderním očistci* (Czechs and History in the Postmodern Purgatory), Prague 2005, pp. 73, 89.

(3) Karel Teige, “The inner Model,” in: *Karel Teige/1900-1951, L'enfant terrible of the Czech modernist avant-garde*, ed. Eric Dlugosch, Rostislav Vácha, MIT Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 339-346.

(4) Egon Bondy: “Totální realismus” (Total Realism), in: *Básnické dílo Egona Bondyho*, vol.2, Prague 1989, p. 5-18. Also see Gertraude Zandová, *Totální realismus a trapná poezie, Česká neoficiální literatura 1948-1953*, Brno 2002

(5) Karel Malich, *Wires/Dráty*, VVP, Prague 2005.

(6) Pierre Restany, INDE, Alex Mlynárčik, Galerie Lara Vincy, Paris, Slovenská národná galéria [Slovak National Gallery] (ed.), Bratislava, 1995, p. 23.

(7) “White Room in a White Room” first intalled and exhibited at the Dum Umeni in Brno in 1974; the exhibition catalogue featured a text by Jiří Valoch.

(8) Ad Reinhardt, “Twelve Rules for a New Academy,” *Artnews*, May 1957.

(9) See Kathrin Romberg, Roman Ondák (Hg.), Julius Koller. *Univerzálné Futurologické Operácie*, Cologne 2003.

(10) See Jirí Kovanda, *Nedokumentováno. Akce a instalace 2005-1976*, Prague 2006.

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