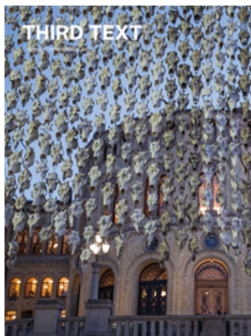

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Introduction

The last two decades of communist rule in Czechoslovakia were characterised by a harsh totalitarianism that led to the aggravation of artistic repression and the intensification of censorship mechanisms. This period, known as 'Normalisation', followed the Soviet invasion of the country in 1968, designed to re-establish control over Czechoslovakia's politics, and extended until the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. Under such conditions, several artists from Bratislava found in Conceptual Art an intimate, secret space, where they saw a way for their political anxieties to be released.

This article starts by exposing the operational framework for the production and distribution of art photographs in Czechoslovakia during the years of Normalisation, with the aim of establishing the differences between official and unofficial spheres of practice, and the limits of the so-called 'Grey Zone', functioning between the two. It then moves on to introduce the development of conceptual art practices in Bratislava during the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957–1968): a period of progressive political reforms that opened up possibilities for artists to communicate their work publicly. It will be discussed how, despite the repression introduced following the establishment of Normalisation in 1968, the reforms achieved during the Thaw continued to stimulate the artistic production of a number of Slovak artist during the last two decades of communist

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rule, including that of Július Koller, Rudolf Sikora and Ľubomír Ďurček. The article argues that, notwithstanding the difficult circumstances for the production and distribution of conceptual artworks during Normalisation, the creative strategies used by these artist to disguise the meaning underlying their work – such as the use of puns, irony and metaphors – alongside their efforts to communicate their practice in the unofficial art scene, served to protect their artistic autonomy while contributing to a sense of community and support among fellow conceptual artists.

The research conducted for the production of this article was possible thanks to the collaboration of numerous Czech and Slovak artists, publishers and curators, whose work contributed to the development of art photography practices during the Czechoslovakian Normalisation. Their accounts were collected through several interviews and complemented with information from a variety of regional written sources, as well as the analysis of selected artworks produced during this period.

Art Photography Practices under Normalisation (1968–1989)

From a political point of view, the configuration of the context of art production in which Czechoslovakian art photography operated between 1968 and 1989, was determined by two key factors: the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957–1968) and the Normalisation period (1968–1989).

The so-called 'Czechoslovakian Thaw' (1957–1968) followed the death of Stalin in 1953 and the establishing by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev of a political thaw throughout the entire Soviet Union. During those years, the President of Czechoslovakia, Antonín Novotný, approved a series of progressive reforms.[1] As censorship mechanisms were relaxed, the conditions for art photographers improved significantly. Thanks to a timid opening of the art scene, avant-garde photographers whose work had been banned from the public scene after the establishment of Communism in 1948, once again had the opportunity to exhibit in public venues.[2] In addition, a number of new photography journals and periodicals started to publish art photographs, such as the quarterly *Revue Fotografie*, directed by Daniela Mrázková, who managed to publish a wide variety of photographic content that was often far removed from the official artistic policy of the State.[3] Various photography books were also printed during this period through the State's publishing house SNKLHU, and the first public photographic collection was also established in 1962 at the Moravian Gallery in Brno under the direction of Czech curator Antonín Dufek.[4]

Following the defeat of the reformist movement known as 'The Prague Spring' in 1968 and the establishment of Normalisation in 1968, the public sphere in Czechoslovakia was 'pacified' through a wave of political purges. Censorship mechanisms were intensified and repression against intellectuals was aggravated.[5] But improvements in the conditions for the development of art photography practices achieved during the Thaw would not be completely diminished by Czechoslovakia's new president Gustáv Husák. While most photographs were again highly scrutinised by the editors-in-chief working for national newspapers, the

1 Richard J Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, Routledge, New York, 1997, pp 268–325

2 Vladimír Birgus and Jan Mlčoch, *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Kant Publications, Prague, 2005, p 173

3 Ibid, pp 197–198

4 Antonín Dufek,'Half a Century of The Moravian Gallery in Brno', in Antonín Dufek, ed, *Full Spectrum*, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Kant, Prague, 2011, pp 17–18

5 Mariane Mazzone, 'Drawing Conceptual Lessons from 1968', in *Third Text 96*, vol 23, issue 1, January 2009, pp 79–84

national editorial house SNKLHU and most official journals, along with certain publications such as *Revue Fotografie*, continued to publish a variety of art photographs and remained relatively relaxed about the topics explored. Likewise, the photographic collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno continued to grow, incorporating art photographs by practitioners from all over the country, while a second public photography collection was established under the direction of curator Anna Fárová in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.[6] These advances in the sphere of public photography stimulated a parallel development of numerous underground activities that could never gain the support of the regime, and which were thus organised exclusively within the private realm. Under such conditions, a new, mid-ground known as the 'Grey Zone' started to emerge.

The expression 'Grey Zone' has been repeatedly used by art historians and curators in the Czech Republic and Slovakia since the late 1970s. The term makes reference to the space developed between the official and underground art scenes that operated simultaneously during the Normalisation period (1968–1989). This space covered a range of strategic activities through which a number of artists and curators attempted to preserve a normal functioning of the artistic production in the repressive atmosphere of the Normalisation years.[7] In order to determine how this mid-ground space operated, it becomes essential to establish where its two extremes stood – that is, what was considered the official photography scene and why the underground scene remained within the scope of unofficial activities.

Under the communist regime, in order for any photographer to access the public sphere and make their work openly available, their photographs needed to be sanctioned as acceptable through the various regulation systems present in the different public institutions where photography operated. The type of activities that took place within the public sphere included the publication of photographs in the official press, journals or through the State's book publishing house, the participation in exhibitions at museums and national galleries, the access to the State's art trading shops, 'Dílo', the possibility of becoming a member of the Union of Visual Artists and the participation in public commissions.

In this scenario, the 'Grey Zone' operating within the public sphere was formed by few micro-spaces, where the conditions for the dissemination of photographs allowed certain practitioners to enter the official realm without compromising their artistic autonomy. These exceptional conditions were present in a small number of places, but their existence was nonetheless highly significant for the development of art photography during Normalisation. Concretely, this so-called 'Grey Zone' was present in the publishing arena, where editors-in-chief such as Daniela Mrázková promoted the publication of a wide range of art photographs that did not always align with the State's publishing policy.[8] With regards to the exhibition activity in public museums and galleries, it was thanks to Fárová and Dufek that numerous art photographs entered the official scene after their inclusion in public photographic collections.[9] At an academic level, Professor Ján Šmok promoted an atmosphere of freedom within FAMU School, where photography students were able to explore a wide range of photographic topics beyond the ideological limitations imposed by the regime.[10] All these examples formed the so-called 'Grey Zone' of the official photography scene.

6 See Anna Fárová's biography in Zuzana Meisnerová Wismered, ed, *Anna Fárová & fotografie/Photography*, Langhans – PRO, Prague, 2007

7 Pavlina Morganová, 'Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries', in Lucie Ševčíková and Eva Žáková, eds, *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, The Arts and Theatre Institute, Prague, 2012, pp 23–25

8 Birgus and Mlčoch, *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, op cit, pp 197–198

9 Antonín Dufek, *Full Spectrum*, op cit, pp 17–18

10 Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Vadimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Prague, 17 November 2014

The underground scene, on the other hand, operated solely within the private realm. It did not receive any public funding and was entirely organised by individual citizens in the absence of any state support. This was the space where most art photographers operated during the times of Normalisation; it was a place which, despite its financial limitations and the risks it faced, helped promote the development of the medium by stimulating practitioners and enabling a fluent artistic dialogue among its members. These underground activities were rather diverse and included the organisation of small exhibitions, private lectures and discussions in reduced groups of artists and intellectuals, the edition of *samizdat* publications, artistic collaborations or occasional contacts with international artists and curators. These activities took place at all sorts of private and alternative spaces, such as artists' apartments, cafés, foyers of cinemas, abandoned buildings or in the open air. But while some of these events took place in absolute secrecy and thus managed to avoid censorship mechanisms, other activities, like the many underground exhibitions also organised by Farová and Dufek, could be easily surveilled by the authorities, since they often ran in open spaces which virtually anyone could access. These types of unofficial events, privately organised but publicly presented, constitute the so-called 'Grey Zone' of the unofficial photography scene.

There are multiple reasons why this 'Grey Zone', operating both in the official and unofficial realm, could survive under the repressive atmosphere present throughout Normalisation. On the one hand, as explained by artist and historian Vladimír Birgus, photography lacked the explicit power of the written word, which meant its visual message had to be decoded, something that was not often easily achieved by the general public. On the other, in order to keep things running as smoothly as possible, the artists rarely explained their work in public, while curators and editors abstained from writing politically about it and usually offered scant information about the practice at stake.[11] Under the existing repression, however, the regime retained very clear limits regarding what could be tolerated, even when it operated exclusively within the unofficial scene. For instance, the authorities did not welcome documentary photographs depicting what the State considered a 'pessimistic' view of Socialism.[12] When declared as such, these had to be removed from an exhibition, even if they were taken and shown in a purely private environment with no intention of publishing them. The case of Czech photographer Jindřich Štreit, who was imprisoned for ten months after documenting and exhibiting photographs of the Czechoslovakian general elections of 1981, is an example of how dangerous it could be to exhibit critical photographs. But it was not only these types of photographs that were under the spotlight. The censors also watched very carefully the documentation of conceptual works, such as happenings and performances. Photographers working in this arena, such as the Czech Jan Ságl, were extremely cautious and usually kept their work in secret, completely hidden from the public scene.[13]

Having established what both scenes consisted of and where the so-called 'Grey Zone' stood, it becomes essential to avoid an oversimplification of this reality by dividing artists' attitudes into 'in-favour' or 'against'. It is important to note that art photography practices produced in the times of Normalisation were the result of a complex inner

11 Interview with Vadimír Birgus, 17 November 2014

12 Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Nikola Krutilová, trans, Prague, 20 November 2014

13 Interview with photographer Jan Ságl, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Alena Saglova, trans, Prague, 16 November 2014

negotiation by each photographer, who searched for their own ways of expression and, overall, for the preservation of an autonomous meaning in their artwork. As expressed by curator Antonín Dufek, what these photographers had in common was that they were all ultimately 'seekers of alternatives'.[14] But the fact they looked for autonomous forms of artistic expression does not mean that they isolated themselves by constantly rejecting the established rules of the game. On the contrary, most art photographers had no choice but to participate in the official cultural structure in one way or the other. While few photographers held a completely different profession in order to keep their photographic practice untouched by officialdom, the great majority of them accepted the fact that they had to join the officially controlled Artists' Union if they wanted to undertake freelance work.[15] In order to make ends meet, a number of them combined their private photographic practice with occasional work in public commissions. Such was the case, for example, of Vladimír Birgus, who for a few years produced official tourist photographs in the form of optimistic picture-postcards.[16] These 'migrations' between the official and unofficial photography scenes were rather frequent and thus make it difficult to simply label a practitioner as either dissident or collaborator.

A Movement to Free One's Self

The emergence of Conceptual Art in Czechoslovakia during the early years of Normalisation did not start from scratch. On the contrary, it must be understood as a continuation of the progressive creative thought cultivated during previous years in the artistic circles of Prague and Bratislava.

During the decade preceding the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, a moderate thaw allowed the development of certain art practices that had previously been prosecuted in the country since the establishment of a strict communist rule in 1948. From 1957, under the leadership of President Antonín Novotný, some progressive reforms were put in place and the arts experienced considerable liberalisation. While only some artists gained access to public exhibitions, the repression of those producing work within the unofficial sphere was relaxed. In the period between 1964 and 1968, Czechoslovakian culture experienced a great expansion. Throughout those years, the work of some international artists was shown in the country, including that by Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein or the Gutai Group, and in 1966 the Fluxus festival was held for the first time in Prague.[17] Although the festival took place under the watchful eyes of the authorities, it nevertheless constituted a breaking point in the attitude of the Regime towards progressive Western art.[18] By the mid-1960s, Post-surrealism and Art-informel abstraction tendencies were tolerated within the realm of 'imaginative art' and shown in unofficial venues.[19] But although these progressive art practices took place only in the parallel underground culture, their activities remained relatively fluid during this period.[20]

The arrival of Soviet troops in Prague in August 1968 put an end to the liberal reforms introduced during the previous decade. The so-called 'Normalisation' was established by the new leader, Gustáv Husák.[21]

14 Antonín Dufek, 'Photographic Alternatives', in Antonín Dufek, ed, *The Third Side of the Wall*, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, KANT, Prague, 2009

15 Interviews with Jaromír Čejka and Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Nikola Krutilová, trans, Prague, 17 and 20 November 2014

16 Interview with Jaromír Čejka, 17 November 2014

17 Morganová, 'Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries', op cit, pp 20–21

18 Pavlina Morganová, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, Karolinum Press, Prague, 2014, p 23

19 The term 'post-surrealism' in Czechoslovakia refers to the surrealist trend developed after the World War II and which expanded rapidly during the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957–1968). See Krzysztof Fijalkowski, 'Objective Poetry: Post-War Czech Surrealist Photography and the Everyday', in Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Michael Richardson and Ian Walker, eds, *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia: On the Needles of Days*, Ashgate, London, 2013, pp 89–102.

20 Morganová, 'Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries', op cit, p 23

21 Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, op cit, pp 326–344

The occupation was followed by a huge wave of emigration and a large purge within the Communist Party. Harsh censorship was re-established and only eight per cent of the members of the Union of Visual Artists were allowed to remain.[22] The style of Socialist Realism prevailed once again within the official art scene, with artists exploring their individual views on the much-needed reforms of Normalisation.[23] In this scenario, some practitioners whose progressive work had started to see the light during the Thaw (1957–1967) shut themselves up in their studios waiting for the wind of change. Others joined forces in alternative groups whose members supported and protected each other, such as the Crusaders' School of Pure Humour Without Jokes.[24] Given the lack of state funding for their alternative exhibitions, numerous artists shifted expensive pictorial or sculptural practices towards conceptual work. Land art and performance art became the most suitable forms of expression for those who would not give up their artistic autonomy. Unlike conceptual works produced in the USA, the aim of Czechoslovakian artists was not to change art or the institutions where it had traditionally operated. Their work constituted simultaneously a critical space for self-expression and personal protest. Often produced in their free time and at their own expense, their basic starting point was a need to devote themselves to this activity, with no need for public recognition and despite the threat of prosecution. Away from the city's surveillance apparatus, nature was often turned into a key scenario for body-art practices and conceptual interventions in the open air.[25] These performances sometimes took place in basements, apartments or artists' studios before a small gathering. At other times it was the author alone who would carry out the artistic action without an audience. Far away from the sight of the secret police, these places served as safe bunkers where – at least for the length of the event – both the artist and their participating audience could exercise a certain artistic freedom.

In this scenario, photography played an essential role. On the one hand, it served to document these secret performative events at a time when video recording was a luxury. On the other hand, its relatively cheap price also encouraged many conceptual artists to adopt photography as their main medium of expression. Prints and negatives were also easier to hide, transport and post than paintings or sculptures.[26] Sometimes, artists performed directly for the camera, turning their work into a photo-performance. At other times they photographed installations; turning the photograph–object into a secondary sculpture. The formal properties of the medium were also explored by some of these artists, who questioned its indexical abilities, perceptive qualities or perpetual nature. Quite often the negatives were not printed because of a lack of resources, and when they were, only a couple of small, unframed prints were privately produced.[27] We could argue that, in contrast to Conceptual Art practices developed in the USA and Western Europe, the 'dematerialisation of the art object' in Czechoslovakian Conceptual Art responded not so much to a critique of high art as a commodity for an elite audience, but to a lack of funding for costly art materials and their desire to position their practice away from state-sanctioned art forms.[28]

It is also important to note that the use of photography in Conceptual Art was done by artists, not art photographers. Art photography practices were not considered 'conceptual' within the Czechoslovakian

22 Morganová, 'Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries', op cit, p 22

23 From 1948 the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia started to apply norms of Socialist Realism in photography. The schematic and staged images served the State's apparatus to educate society by representing what the new social order was meant to look like. These often consistent of *tableaux vivants* depicting the life of happy workers and revolutionary heroes. Photomontages and airbrushing techniques were also a common practice that fitted perfectly the propaganda uses of the media. However, the harsh application of Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia had a very short life. The timid political thaw introduced in 1957, which allowed a certain liberalisation of the arts scene, also had its effect in the photography arena. The range of possible topics was expanded and the strict aesthetic rules that characterise Socialist Realism were relaxed. See Birgus and Mlčoch, *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, p 150.

24 This was an association of creative writers, visual and action artists, whose activities began in the mid-1960s and culminated in the mid-1970s. Some of its members included Karel Nepraš, Jan Steklík, Eugen Brikcius, Olaf Hanel and Helena Wilsonová, among others. They all identified their work as oppositional to state approved art and their meetings served as a form of support and mutual inspiration under the repressive political conditions of Normalisation. Morganová, *Czech Action Art*, op cit, pp 25.

25 Morganová, *Czech Action Art*, op cit, pp 24–25

26 Interview with Ľubomír Ďurček, Bratislava, conducted by Paula

Gortázar, Ľuboš Kotlár, trans, Prague, 16 September 2016

27 Interview with Peter Rónai, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Ľuboš Kotlár, trans, Prague, 16 September 2016

28 See Lucy R Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, London, 2001 (1973), p viii

photography scene. Instead, they were placed within the 'imaginative photography' field – a category introduced in Czechoslovakia in the mid-1960s, which made reference to non-documentary photography practices, where the notions of illusion, fantasy and imagination were at the core of the photographer's work.[29] This separation between art photography and conceptual photographic work meant that the latter was rarely published or exhibited alongside art photographs in alternative venues and, with few exceptions, never considered for the public photographic collections of the Moravian Gallery in Brno or that of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.[30] Such consideration thus kept conceptual works of photography away from the public artistic realm and totally separate from other art photography practices.

From the Academy to the Underground: Conceptual Art in Bratislava

The roots of Slovak Conceptual Art could be traced back to the pseudoliberal artistic conditions present during the political thaw of the 1960s. More specifically, 1965 is commonly agreed to have set up the start of conceptual thought in Slovakia. That year, a collaboration between the artists Stano Filko and Alex Mlynárčik, with a manifesto written by art theorist Zita Kostrová, gave birth to the legendary *Happsoc I* project.[31] The project was designed as a social happening in which the entire city of Bratislava was invited to participate. Through a simply designed invitation card, the artists encouraged citizens to turn the city into a work of art between 1 May and 9 May 1965. The invitation listed a series of urban objects that were to be used to produce the action each day. Next to the object, a number was given in the form of statistical information. A concrete day was then precisely stated when each of these objects was to be elevated to the realm of art.[32] While the tautological function of the work ('the whole city will be art') evidences the conceptual nature of this project, it was also directly linked to French Nouvéau Realism by the movement's founder Pierre Restany. In a visit to Bratislava in 1965, Restany described the enumeration of objects in *Happsoc I* 'as a way to record and reveal the *societé trouvé* or found society'. The French movement – known as the European counterpart of Pop Art – has since been understood as a strong influence on Slovak conceptual artists.[33]

As innocent as the *Happsoc I* happening might seem, during communist times this event was certainly provocative in political terms. On the one hand, the use of those precise dates confers the evident political character on the project. The week was enclosed between two key days: 1 May is Labour Day and 9 May is the anniversary of the Slovak liberation from Nazi forces. Conversely, inviting citizens to engage in a participatory artistic action went way beyond the organisational power granted to the individual by the totalitarian state. The content of the action, however, was still rather playful, and the soft political vindication did not result in negative consequences for its authors.[34] These were, in any case, the times of the Thaw (1957–1967), when the artistic sphere was still enjoying a relaxed atmosphere.[35]

29 Vaclav Macek, *Slovak Imaginative Photography 1981–1997*, FOTOFO, Bratislava, 1998, pp 4–10

30 Interview with Václav Macek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Bratislava, 12 September 2016

31 See full manifesto in Stano Filko, Zita Kostrova and Alex Mlynárčik, 'Manifest "HAPPSOC"' [1965], in Laura J Hoptman, ed, *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, MIT Press, Minneapolis, 2002, pp 85–87

32 Borys Kršňák, ed, *Conceptual Art and Communism in Slovakia in 1965–1989 or 50 years of Slovak Neo-Avant Garde*, exhibition catalogue, BBLA Gallery, New York, 2015, p 3

33 Ibid

34 Interview with Rufolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Ľuboš Kotlár, trans, Bratislava, 15 September 2016

35 Kršňák, ed, *Conceptual Art and Communism in Slovakia*, p 4

Following the Soviet Invasion of Prague in 1968 and the establishment of the Normalisation period in the entire Czechoslovakian territory, censorship mechanisms were intensified and numerous practitioners were expelled from the Union of Visual Artists. In the resolution of 2 November 1972, the committee of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists elaborated a list denouncing a series of subversive artistic activities that had taken place during the 1960s. As a result, their authors were expelled from the Union, their work was excluded from acquisition in public collections and the artists were banned from participating in exhibitions in Czechoslovakia or abroad. In addition, further censorship measures were implemented during the early 1970s: articles on the development of contemporary art were forbidden, numerous art catalogues were censored and many art theoreticians were forced to leave their teaching positions or editorial roles.[36] This included conceptual artists Peter Bartoš and Alex Mlynárčik, whose project *II Permanent Manifestations* was described as 'a dangerous precedent and a typical example of the decadent and bourgeois trends coming from the West'.[37]

In this scenario of augmented censorship, conceptual artists from Bratislava developed a variety of strategies to pursue their independent artistic production and disguise the critical content of their work. Expelled from the Union, they were denied the freelance licence that allowed artists to earn money from their practice.[38] With a lack of access to artistic commissions, all sorts of alternative jobs – often precarious – provided them with a living, allowing them to practice their art on the side. They also lost state access to artistic resources (oil painting, canvases, clay, etc), and since studio spaces were only allocated to Union members, most were forced to produce their work in their apartments.[39] All these conditions, which were intended to impede any possibility of free expression, determined a radical change in the production process. Large paintings and sculptural pieces had to be substituted by small photographic prints and posters.[40] As explained by photo-historian Václav Macek, sometimes a piece of white paper or a leaflet was all they needed to materialise their work. Idea-art was also created in the form of small visiting cards and postcards, which allowed them to be easily and secretly posted.[41]

Under such conditions, a particular cultural phenomenon emerged: the inclination of Slovak conceptual artists towards the subject of outer space, where the wider universe is treated as a utopian, alternative reality – a space of escape from both repression and political critique. In this sense, we could argue that these types of practice could be considered as utopian models of artwork in the sense defined by USA theorist Richard Noble. According to Noble, in order for an artwork to be utopian it needs to have a double characteristic. On the one hand, it must represent a vision of a better place than the one the artist inhabits. On the other, it must offer an insight into the contradictions that drive the artist's will to escape their current circumstances. But overall, he explains, all utopian artworks are political, since they are born out of the awareness of the imperfections of a given system and propose a series of (fictional) solutions to improve the current state of affairs.[42]

But the proliferation of such interest in cosmology was not a coincidence. During the previous decade and due to the relaxation of censorship mechanisms during the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957–1968), the dream

36 Aurel Hrabušicky, *Slovak Visual Art 1970–1985*, Beata Havelská, trans, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2002, p 236

37 Andrea Bátorová, *The Art of Contestation Performative Practices in the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia*, Comenius University, Bratislava, p 178

38 In communist Czechoslovakia, the requirement of every citizen to work was understood as an unavoidable 'duty'. After the age of fifteen, unless a person was either disabled, a registered student or a married woman, being unemployed constituted a serious criminal offence. Regular police checks controlled citizens' employment cards, which were stamped with details of their employment situation. Since most artists would be constantly changing their work placement, a special freelance license guaranteed their inclusion in the legal side of communist labour law. However, only the members of the Artists' Union were able to apply for this licence. In order to access the Union, applicants needed an official artistic qualification as well as passing a rigorous test that determined their 'ideological suitability' to enter the Union. See Jan Michl, *Institutional Framework Around Successful Art Forms in Czechoslovakia*, Open Society Institute, Prague, 1999, pp 37–38.

39 Interview with Peter Rónai, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Ľuboš Kotlár, trans, Bratislava, 10 September 2016

40 Interview with Václav Macek, 12 September 2016

41 Interview with Ľubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Ľuboš Kotlár, trans, Bratislava, 16 September 2016

Július Koller and Květoslava Fulierová collaboration, *Universal Fantastic Orientation 6,* 1978, painted photographic print, photo: Július Koller Society

42 Richard Noble, ed, *Utopias*, MIT Press, London, 2009, p 14

of space travel was nourished by sci-fi movies, which had gradually started to be shown in the country. With the establishment of Normalisation and the return to the claustrophobic living conditions of the early communist times, conceptual artists found – up in the sky – a place

where the range of their sight could not be restricted.[43] The fantasy of extra-terrestrial existence turned somehow into a palpable hope. The role of the individual in relation to a wider cosmos – as insignificant as it might seem – became an incredibly powerful source of inspiration for these artists. The interest in the unknown universe, however, does not seem to be born out of mere curiosity. In such questioning, there is also an evident search for the meaning of life and human transcendence against the background of political repression. Being deprived by the State of the practice of any type of spiritual belief, these artists might also have felt a need to search for answers beyond their earthbound (confined) realm. As we might observe from the following examples, the notions of life and death are constantly being referred to in their practice.

Transcendence as Political Stance: The Work of Július Koller and Rudolf Sikora

A key figure of the Cosmology movement was Július Koller (1939–2007). In 1965, Koller completed his painting studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. There, he met his fellows, Stano Filko and Alex Mlynárčik. Soon after graduating, he abandoned painting and started to experiment with alternative media, with photography soon becoming his preferred mode of expression, alongside graphic art. In 1968, coinciding with the invasion of Prague by Soviet troops, Koller used for the first time the symbol which would become a constant in his entire oeuvre: the question mark.[44] According to Austrian writer and curator Georg Schöllhammer, this symbol had a double function: on the one hand, it asked about the human relation to the cosmos, while on the other, it questioned the individual's relation to society.[45] Throughout Koller's life, the question mark appears in a variety of forms and is often recorded through photographs. At times, the artist painted it on different surfaces and then photographed them; at other times, he drew them directly onto the photographic print, and on repeated occasions the sign was placed directly onto his own body before he performed for the camera. In the context of a totalitarian regime, this constant questioning in the photograph through self-portrait could be read as a metaphor for a vindication of the right to hold an individual thought.

In 1970, two years after the defeat of the Prague Spring, Koller introduced his insignia concept *U.F.O.*, under which his main body of work would develop for the next thirty years. In Koller's hands, through the use of puns, the term stands for 'Universal-Cultural Futurological Situations'. As he explained in his manifesto, these cultural situations were:

> Subjective Cultural Actions; operations which in the universality of the objective reality, form cultural situations directed into the future. The operations will effect psychophysical projects of cosmonautic culture and instead of a new art-aesthetics, will create a new life, a new subject, awareness, creativity and a new cultural reality.[46]

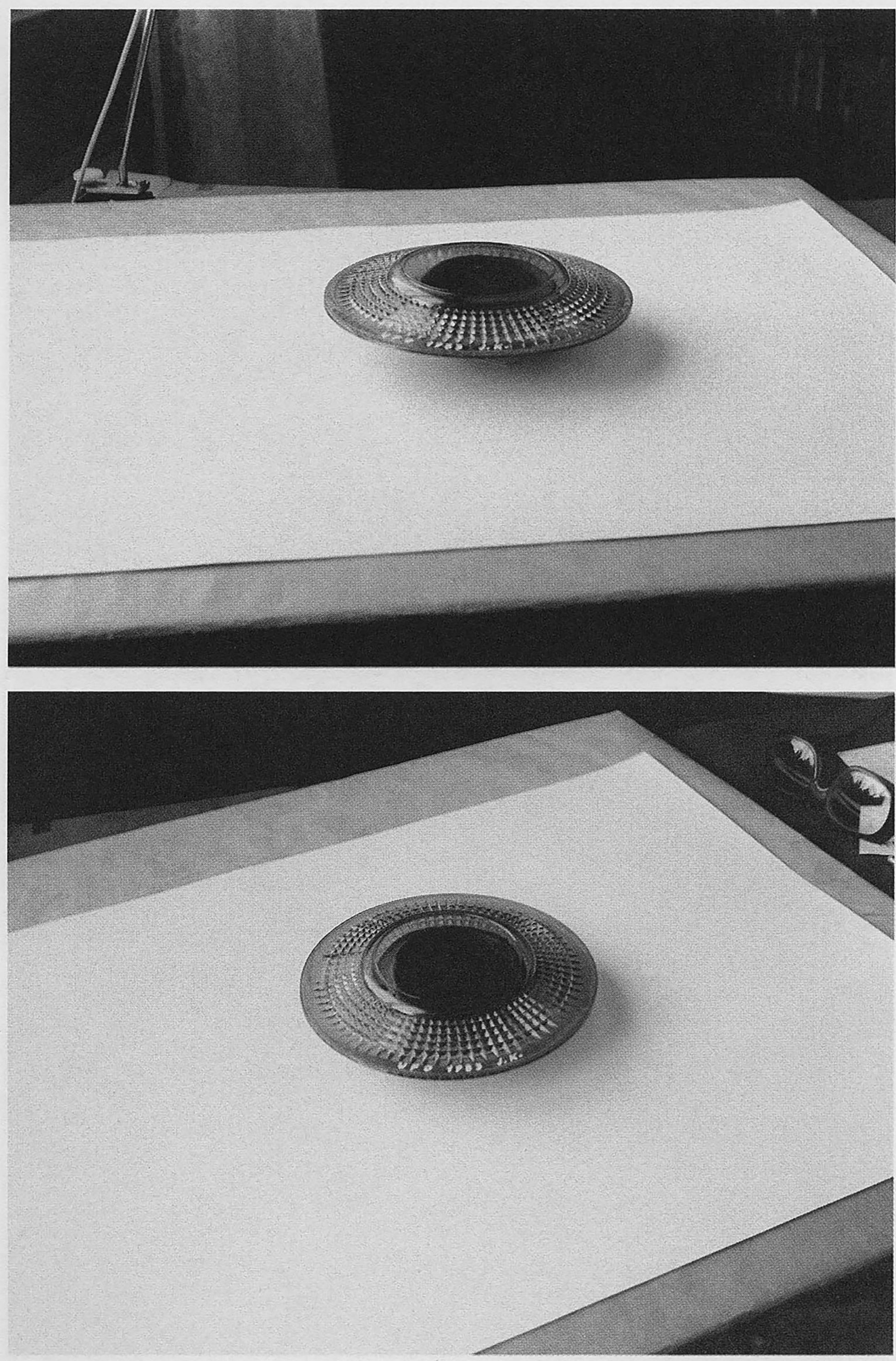
In practical terms, the *U.F.O.* project consists of a series of actions performed for the camera by Koller himself, alongside some graphic work

43 See Aurel Hrabušický, 'Cosmic Poetry', in Katarína Bajkurová, Aurel Hrabušický and Katarina Müllerová, eds, *Slovak Picture (Anti-Picture). 20th Century in Slovak Visual Art*, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2008, pp 169–171

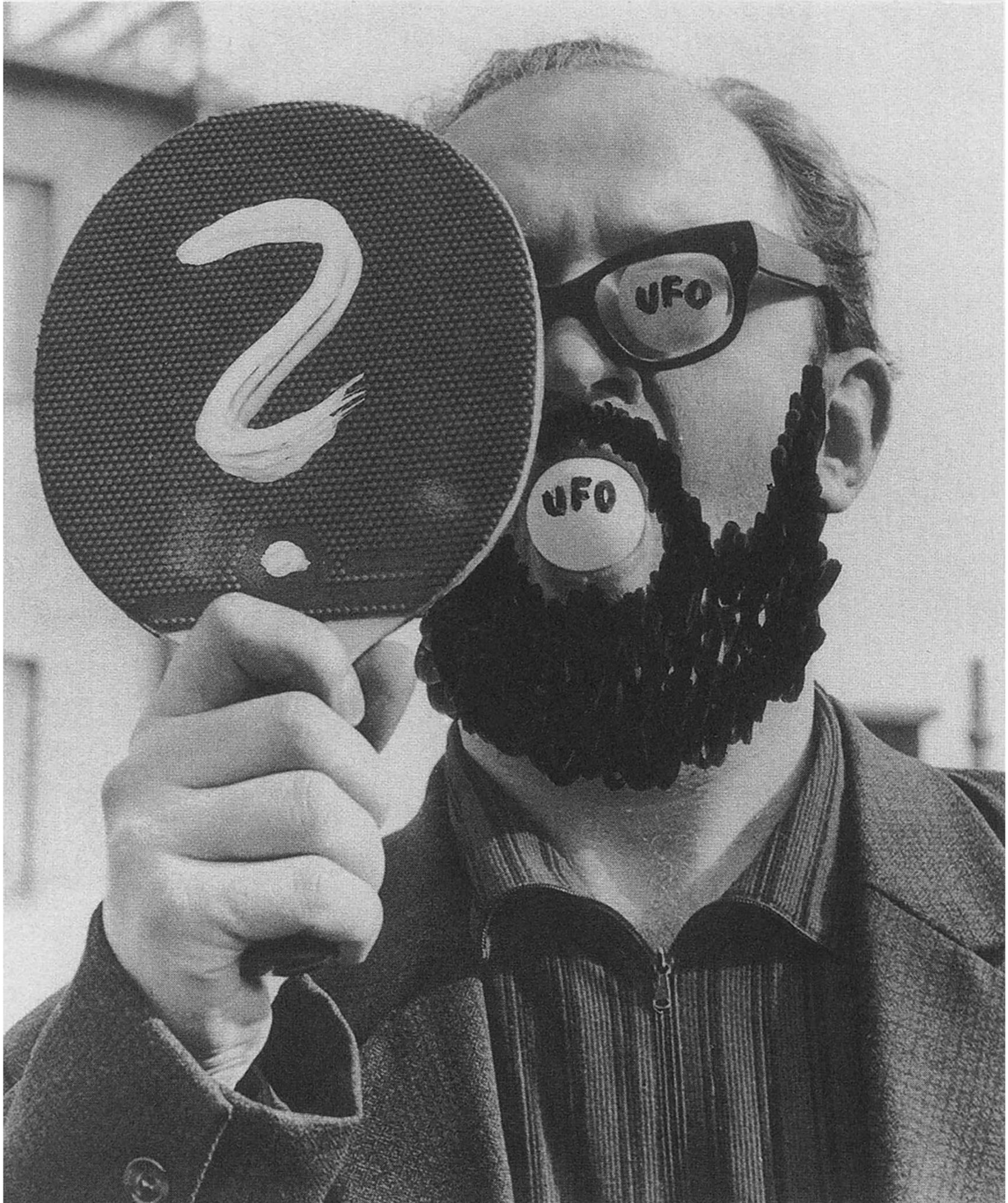
44 Georg Schöllhammer, 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement', in *Július Koller, Univerzalné Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, pp 125–126

45 Július Koller, 'Conversation Between Júlious Koller and Roman Ondák', in *Július Koller, Univerzalné Futurologické Operácie*, op cit, p 136

46 Július Koller, as quoted by Schöllhammer, 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement', op cit, p 128



Július Koller, *Archaeological Cultural Situation*, 1989, photographic print, photo: Július Koller Society



Július Koller, *UFO-naut J.K*, 1980, photographic print, photo: Július Koller Society

printed as postcards, posters and visiting cards. The question mark is often present throughout this cycle, as are references to black holes and flying saucers. Each of these works constitutes an act of designation using variations of his *U.F.O.* concept.[47] The captions read: *Archaeological Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)*, *Flying Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)*,

47 Ibid, p 129

Impossible Cultural Situation (U.F.O.), etc. Hence, through the use of puns, Koller creates a relationship system that operates between the designation of a concrete act and the infinite possibilities of its mutation. Although the political character of the work might not be easily readable, we could argue that in the cultural context of communist Czechoslovakia, Koller's subversiveness is achieved by the free exercise of redefining the content of a cultural situation. Simultaneously, the numerous variations of his *U.F.O.* concept in each of the captions might well point to the necessity of an inclusive artistic ground away from officialdom, where all types of artistic expression could be accepted.

Once a year between 1970 and 2000, Koller also made self-portraits, partially covering his gaze with different objects. Unlike his *U.F.O.* images, where the photographs depict various elements of the action, all the photographs from the *U.F.O.-naut J.K.* series are straight headshots of the artist. This closer approach to his facial features suggests an even greater vindication of the artist's subjectivity and his individual power to question reality's status quo. In the project manifesto he writes: 'Universal futurological orientation; the process of transformation of the head (object) of J.K. expressing a personal cultural situation. The photo-visualisation will take place at a time (yearly) intervals into the future.'[48]

Through these self-portraits Koller seems to escape reality by returning as some sort of extra-terrestrial visitor, who comes both as an observer and source of interrogations. According to the author himself, both *U.F.O.* and *U.F.O.-naut J.K*, constituted 'a way of fleeing with every day existence, from the political and cultural situation'.[49] But there also appears to be a specific search for meaning in life in the work of the Slovak cosmologist, as he constantly attempts to identify the possibility of his own transcendence. We must not forget that by the time communism was established in Czechoslovakia in 1948, religion was banned and Christians were no longer able to practise their faith in public.[50] Július Koller makes an explicit reference to Christian faith in his *U.F.O.-naut J.K* series. In an interview with the artist, he explains that his initials – placed intentionally as part of the project title – are also the initials of Jesus Christ in the Slovak language. According to Koller, the letters allude to the humanist culture that forms 'the fundamental concept' of his life.[51] He then further explains that the recurrent use of question marks symbolises his position not only within the political situation of Czechoslovakia, but also in relation to his existence in the wider world.[52] Was he comparing his own presence on Earth to that of Jesus Christ? Or could he have suggested that Jesus Christ might have been some sort of extra-terrestrial being (U.F.O.-naut)? While only Koller would have been able to answer these questions, it is evident that his work carries a heavy transcendental weight throughout.

Most significant about his practice, however, is the formation of a complex fictional space, where the author constructs a utopian existence away from the unidirectional norms and repression of the State. This universe operates as an ideal, free place, where the possibilities of personal expression have no limits. In this sense, his fictional universe coincides with the group of utopian fictions defined by Raymond Williams as *The Paradise*, which the writer describes as a place elsewhere, where a happier life is made possible, formed by 'the projections of a magical or

48 Ibid, p 128

49 Július Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist', in *Július Koller, Univerzalné Futurologické Operácie*, op cit, p 145

50 Hrabušický, 'Cosmic Poetry', p 169

51 Koller, 'Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist', op cit, p 144

52 Ibid

religious consciousness, inherently universal and timeless, thus commonly beyond the conditions of any imaginable ordinary or worldly life'.[53] His parallel 'U.F.O.' universe enables Koller to express conceptually a political critique which was probably difficult for the general public to decode. It remains unclear, however, whether the authorities put any efforts into understanding the meaning behind his work. What is known is that Koller was expelled from the Slovak Union of Visual Artists because his works were seen as subversive, which suggests the authorities must have seen a certain threat in his artistic practice.

Koller's friend, Rudolf Sikora (1946–) is another relevant figure of Slovak conceptual art. Slightly younger than his colleague, Sikora also studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. Like the majority of progressive artists from the times of Normalisation, he was never accepted as a member of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists. Once students graduated, they were asked to sit an oral examination where, among other aptitudes, the panel evaluated their commitment to communist ideals. Only those who passed this test were allowed to join the Union and work as freelance artists. As happened to a number of his colleagues, Sikora failed to convince the jury and was thus banned from the Union. According to the artist, however, due to some fortunate bureaucratic mistake, he finally obtained the stamped ID that confirmed his ability to work as an artist and undertake public commissions.[54]

During his student years, Sikora produced various abstract paintings with repeated reference to topics of life and death, as well as to the subjects of topography and geometry. He soon started to include writing and symbols in his work and, by the early 1970s, he had practically abandoned painting in favour of photography and graphic design. According to Sikora, what ultimately mattered was the idea he was trying to communicate: the medium was always secondary. However, as he explained, beyond the limited access he had to oil paint and canvases during Normalisation times, photography and graphics became his favourite media due to their indexical properties, which allowed him to be very precise when communicating his visual message.[55] The majority of his works, however, are produced through a great variety of mixed-media techniques. He often painted on top of photographic prints. A photocollage is later photographed and transformed into a poster containing different graphic elements. Negatives are scratched and then exposed multiple times in the darkroom. Variations of a given work are also produced throughout the years, shifting its meaning as time goes by. Such complexity and richness of the material production of his work has conferred a special place on Sikora, not only within the realm of Slovak visual arts, but also in the photography scene. As argued by photo-historian Václav Macek, while for a long time Sikora's work was omitted from public photographic collections in Czechoslovakia because it lacked traditional photographic qualities, his contribution to Slovak photography is nowadays widely acknowledged.[56]

Like his peers Koller and Filko – with whom he repeatedly collaborated – Sikora was also fascinated by cosmology.[57] His interest, however, covers a wider variety of topics than those present in Koller's oeuvre. Although he is constantly looking up at the universe, he does it from an anchored earthly existence. From early on, Sikora manifested a deep concern for ecological issues. From the early 1970s, the artist pro-

53 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* [1980], Verso, London, 2005 p 198

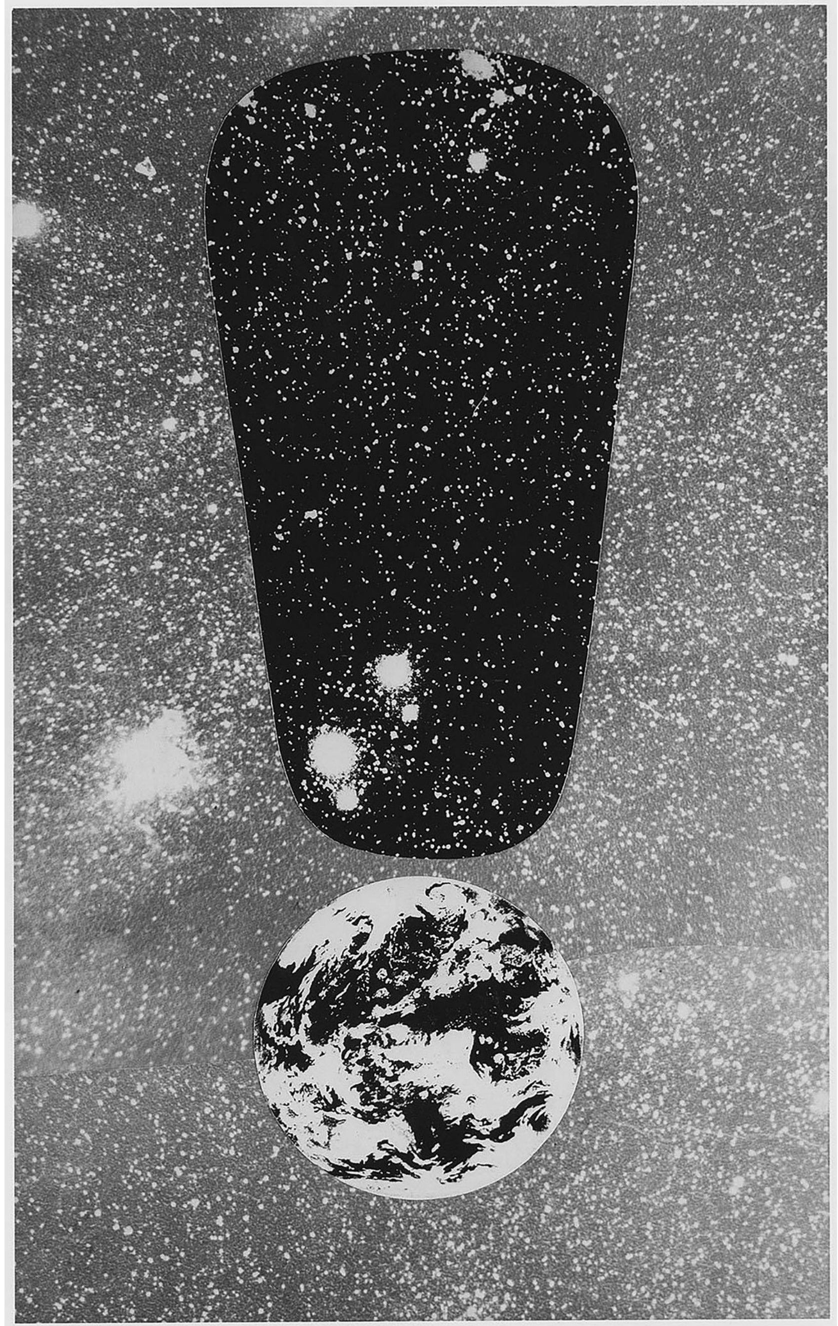
54 Interview with Rudolf Sikora, 15 September 2016

55 Ibid

56 Václav Macek, 'Energized Photography', in Kátarina Bajkurová, ed, *Alone with Photography: Rudolf Sikora*, Central European House of Photography, Bratislava, 2016, p 67

57 Sikora's fascination with the cosmos becomes evident in his numerous projects in which the universe is the main subject matter, such as his photographic series from 1972 depicting a black hole, which includes images such as *Horizontal Impact of the Unknown (Different) Energy*, 1979.

Rudolf Sikora, *The Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet*, 1972, photographs on canvas, photo: courtesy of the artist



Rudolf Sikora, *Exclamation Mark, 1974*, photocollage, paper on plywood, photo: courtesy of the artist

duced numerous pieces showing his preoccupation with the fatal consequences that economic growth was inflicting on nature.[58] In this aspect, Sikora was certainly a pioneer, not only within his country but also in the global artistic scene. Ecological awareness at that time had only started to emerge in Western societies and, considering the isolation of Czechoslovakia during Normalisation years, it is remarkable that he was able to acknowledge those issues from such a confined cultural context.

According to the artist, it was thanks to a Polish samizdat publication that he became acquainted with the fragile environmental situation of our planet.[59] The publication was distributed secretly in Czechoslovakia and it contained the entire report *The Limits of Growth* (1972), produced by the environmentalist group Club of Rome – an activist collective, founded in 1968 that confronted continuous material growth.[60] Some of Sikora's most iconic works dealing with the topic of ecology include *The Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet* (1972) and *Exclamation Mark* (1974). The first consists of a series of six photographs that depict a vertical cut of the atmospheric layers and the Earth's crust. Between them we can see iconic buildings of the different civilisations that have populated the planet until the present day. From the Stone Age to the industrial society, Sikora makes a contrast between the ever-changing state of civilisation in opposition to the immutability of the planet's layers. Instead of buildings, the last image depicts the explosion of the atomic bomb as a symbol of the final human-inflicted devastation that might eventually turn Earth into a dead planet. An exclamation mark painted on the last photograph further accentuates the necessity of immediate action.

In the photo-collage *Exclamation Mark*, Sikora turns the globe into the lower section of the graphic symbol. The top section – formed by the open night sky – seems to make reference to our galaxy, while the image background could be identified as the wider universe. In 1974, Sikora made multiple versions of this work, placing the exclamation mark in the forest, in an industrial landscape or inside a shopping centre. While Koller's question mark denoted the artist's feeling of uncertainty in relation to his own existence, Sikora's exclamation mark aims at a direct awareness.[61] His work also appears far less ambiguous than Koller's. He tries to identify precisely the issue in question – often of an environmental or existential nature – and communicates it visually in quite a clear and direct manner. Making use of a few elements whose signifiers are easily identifiable, Sikora usually points to the contrast between them, inviting the viewer to reflect and take action.

Sikora's environmental works could also be considered as a model of dystopian artwork. Through visual means, he represents a place of catastrophe and destruction where a worse life – or the complete absence of it – is imagined and envisaged in a future time as irreversible. This type of dystopia, understood as the result of human irrational development, is what Raymond Williams identified as the opposite of the utopian fiction of technological transformation. In this dystopia, he explains, the technical discoveries and their developments result in a catastrophic worsening of our living conditions.[62] But we could go one step further and suggest that the awareness Sikora was aiming for went beyond his environmental worries. In his essay *Censorship Today: Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses*, Slavoj Žižek discusses the 'echoing

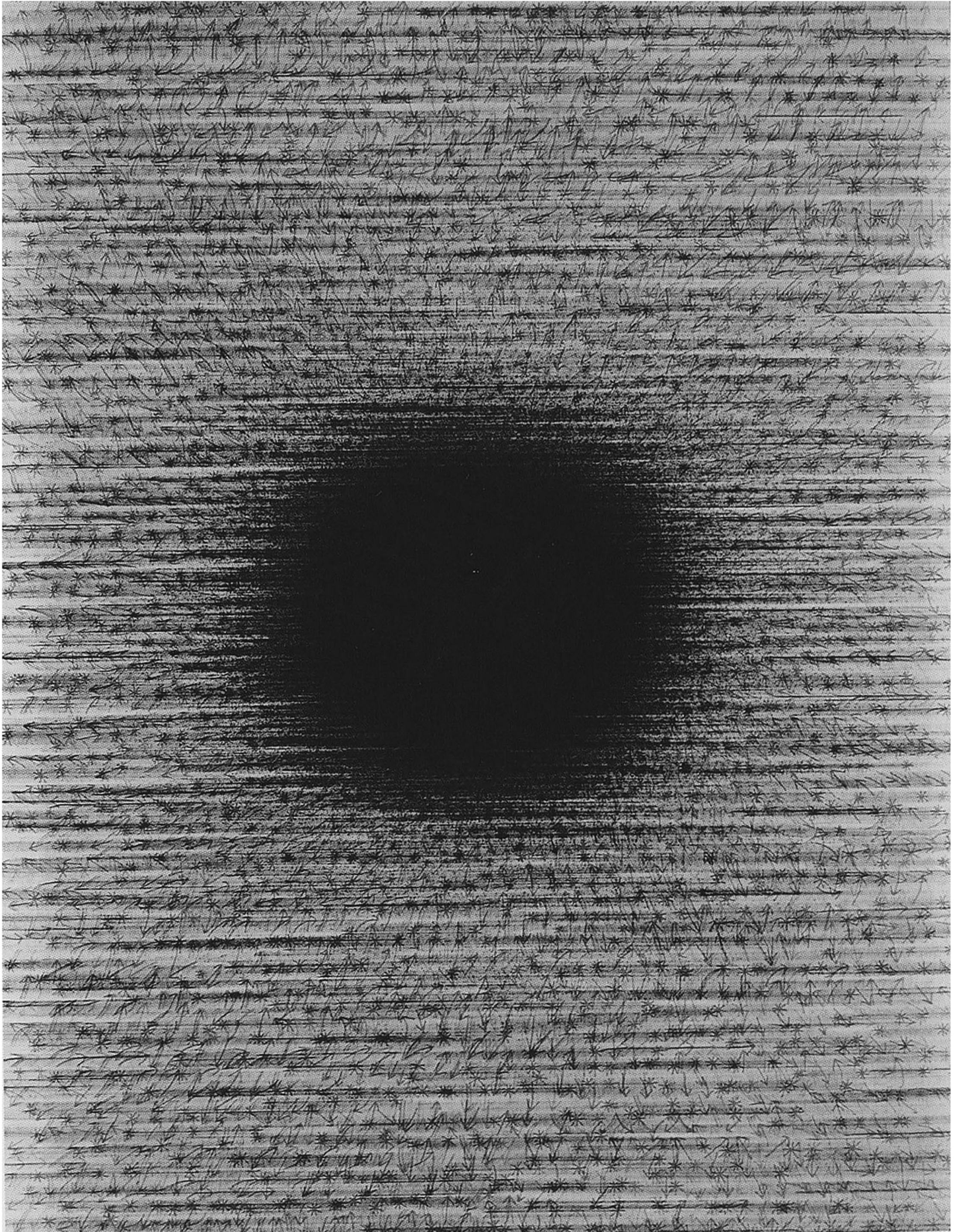
58 See Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Central European University Press, Hungary, 2015, pp 151–196

59 Interview with Rufolf Sikora, 15 September 2016

60 Fowkes, *The Green Bloc*, op cit, p 180

61 Interview Rudolf Sikora, 15 September 2016

62 Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, op cit, p 196



Rudolf Sikora, *Horizontal Impact of the Unknown (Different) Energy*, 1979, photograph on paper, photo: courtesy of the artist

Rudolf Sikora, From *Atrophic Principle (self-portrait)*, 1983–1984, photograph on paper, photo: courtesy of the artist

between the internal and external Real in psychoanalysis', as articulated by Freud and Lacan.[63] Žižek explains how, for Freud, external shocks owe their impact to pre-existing traumatic psychic reality, so that the encounter with the unexpected shocking situation of the (exterior) real, triggers the true (interior) real. In this sense, we could argue that by making visible the possible – but imagined – devastated future environment, Sikora could also be trying to trigger a different and less-distant awareness: the calamities that the totalitarian State was inflicting on Czechoslovakian society, which in Lacan could be identified as the 'unknowns knowns' – or things we do not know we know.[64] Thus, by displacing the danger from the State's repression on to a devastating pollution, the author could be trying to illuminate the consciousness of Czechoslovakian citizens, suggesting a reflection on the presence of a much closer and palpable threat.

In the mid-1970s, Sikora introduced three other graphic symbols that would continue to appear in his work until the present day: the asterisk, symbolising birth; the crucifix, which makes reference to death; and an arrow representing the present time as an 'inevitable flow'.[65] These marks are usually painted on photographic prints and seem to point to humanity's fate and the natural cycle of life. During the second half of the 1970s, he produced a series of images in which a black hole is surrounded by these three symbols. Through several variations of the photograph, the author moved the photographic paper under the enlarger in order to produce different effects, which visual result gives meaning and name to each of these versions: *Horizontal Impact of the Unknown*, *Asymmetric Impact of the Unknown*, *Total Impact of the Unknown*, etc. These works suggest the inescapable fate of human beings, subject to the rules of nature, and its capacity to create and destroy energy beyond the control of the individual.

From 1980 onwards, Sikora starts to appear in his work, as if he wished to explore a direct bodily experience within his cosmological universe. During this period, the artist appears as an observer of a complex existential situation. His graphic symbols are often painted on his skin or depicted around his silhouette. The relation between man and cosmos is also questioned in his series *Atrophic Principle (self-portrait)* from 1984, in which Sikora combines radiographies of his own skeleton with images of the night sky.

The work produced by Sikora during the Normalisation period suggests a desire to escape a rather claustrophobic existence. While his concern with ecology was born out of scientific evidence of the Earth's fragile environmental situation, his interest in the forces of cosmological elements and their relation to human existence seems to arise from a personal search for a parallel fantasy outside Czechoslovakian borders. In a recent interview, he explained how, instead of focusing on the everyday problems of the time, he aimed at bigger, global questions. What mattered the most, he explained, was not finding a concrete answer, but asking – and understanding – the meaning of the question itself.[66] In a certain way, this could be understood as a rebellious position, too. By avoiding a direct political critique in his work and ignoring the abuses inflicted by the authorities, Sikora somehow resists attributing any importance to totalitarianism itself, and even delegitimises – from his individual perspective – the regime's effective power over an individual (Sikora) who is able to enjoy a much richer, wider and deeper existence.

63 Žižek Slavoj, 'Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Mass', Part 2, http://www.lacan.com/zizecology2.htm, accessed 1 March 2023

64 Ibid

65 Interview Rudolf Sikora, 15 September 2016

66 Interview Rudolf Sikora, 15 September 2016

Beyond the relevance of his artistic practice, Sikora was – alongside Filko and Koller – one of the leaders of the Conceptual Art movement in Slovakia. On 19 November 1970, he hosted the *First Open Studio* in his house in Bratislava. Following a series of creative workshops and discussions that connected the new generation of upcoming artists, eighteen conceptual artists took part in this underground exhibition. The show welcomed all types of artistic production and it served as an introduction to a younger generation of practitioners – including Sikora – who were determined to explore the limits of art despite the harsh political atmosphere. The art on display at the *First Open Studio* ranged from minimalist interventions to works of Conceptual Art and progressive music pieces.[67] On the day after the opening, Sikora was interrogated for the first time by the secret police. This would be the first of a series of arrests that the author would suffer during the period of Normalisation. As a result of these detentions, he would often have his passport confiscated, sometimes for several months.[68]

In 1971, Sikora organised a series of meetings called 'Tuesdays' that took place in his apartment in Bratislava alongside friends from the unofficial art scene, including Koller, Filko and Michall Kern among others. During these gatherings, the artists produced collaborative projects, organised exhibitions and discussed their individual artistic programmes with their peers. According to Sikora, from time to time one of them managed to introduce an art catalogue, obtained on their travels abroad, which was then circulated among their colleagues. That type of information – though very limited – allowed them to remain more or less aware of the art movements developed elsewhere outside Czechoslovakia. As Sikora explains, contact with Russian conceptual artists from the Moscow circle was very limited. According to the artist, this was because, in the eyes of the Russian authorities, establishing contact with Czechoslovakian artists or those from other communist countries outside the Soviet Union represented a threat as dangerous as the West itself. More frequent were relations among the unofficial art scenes of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Since it was sometimes possible to obtain a visa to travel to non-Soviet communist countries from the Eastern Bloc, a regular collaboration was established among conceptual artists from these countries.[69] In 1973, Sikora organised 'Symposium I' – a meeting between representatives of these three countries at which they discussed different ways cooperating artistically.[70] With regards to exhibiting abroad, according to Sikora and other artists such as Ľubomír Ďurček, this became possible thanks to the small size of the work they produced during Normalisation times. The modus operandi consisted of posting their artwork (prints, postcards, posters, etc) to different art institutions in Western Europe, the United States and Canada. The parcel often contained a note asking the institution not to return their works. While they were giving their work away, this mechanism allowed them to show it outside Czechoslovakian borders and to have it included in different international art collections.[71]

Sikora's active role as an artist and promoter of Conceptual Art, both inside and outside Czechoslovakian borders, turned him into one of the most influential representatives of the unofficial art scene of the 1970s and the 1980s. From 1989 onwards, Sikora continued to actively produce his work, and is currently considered one of the most important contemporary artists in Slovakia.

67 For original footage of *The First Open Studio*, 1970, see http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/the-first-open-studio/, accessed 1 March 2023

68 Interview Rudolf Sikora, 15 September 2016

69 Ibid

70 Eugénia Sikoravá, 'Photo (not) Leaving by Rudolf Sikora', in Katarína Bajkurová, ed, *Alone With Photography: Rudolf Sikora*, Central European House of Photography, Bratislava, 2016, p 11

71 Interview Rudolf Sikora, 15 September 2016. Similar testimony was obtained in an interview with Ľubomír Ďurček, 16 September 2016.

Ľubomír Ďurček, *Visitor (Five Visits)*, 1980, photographic print, photo: courtesy of the artist

Ľubomír Ďurček: Conceptual Analysis of Communication Systems

As well as their widespread interest in the universe and its mysteries, conceptual artists in Slovakia also explored other topics. One of the most interesting artists, who has only recently been recognised nationally, is Ľubomír Ďurček (1948–).[72] Like the majority of his colleagues from Bratislava, he studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts, but after he graduated his application to the Union of Slovak Visual Artists was rejected. As a result, he was prevented from working as a freelance artist and was thus forced to find an alternative profession. Throughout the years of Normalisation, he held different positions as an art teacher and worked independently on his artistic production.[73]

72 It was not until 2013 that Ďurček had his first major retrospective exhibition in Slovakia at the National Gallery in Bratislava

73 Interview with Ľubomír Ďurček, 15 September 2016

Ľubomír Ďurček, *The Head in Pravda (Private Event)*, 1989, photographic print, photo: courtesy of the artist

A large part of Ďurček's work is concerned with the process of communication, which he explored from different perspectives. His most political works question the veracity of the State's publications and constitute a critique of the propagandistic use of public media. The Slovak daily newspaper *Pravda* (Truth), is used in his work on repeated occasions to highlight the regime's control over public information. One of his most celebrated works is *Visitor* (*Five Visits*) from 1980. The self-portrait refers to a performance that was never documented visually but the final scene of which was re-enacted later by the artist in front of a camera. During the event, Ďurček filled his mouth with cuttings of a *Pravda* newspaper and visited several friends at their apartments. In his notes the artist wrote: 'I rang at the door. My mouth was filled with

Ľubomír Ďurček, *Ďurček Determines the Image Space*, 1989, photographic print, photo: courtesy of the artist

Pravda newspaper. Twenty seconds after the door opened I went home. I could not respond because my mouth was filled with truth.'[74] For those who understand its metaphoric and ironic message – that is, all information comes from a unidirectional source (the State), which leaves no space for further self-expression – the work then critiques in an explicit way the unidirectional thought imposed by the regime through official media. However, if the audience is not able to read such irony and metaphor, then the double coding of the work enables an alternative, simple reading: Ďurček's mouth is physically filled with truth (*Pravda*) and therefore it is physically impossible for him to say a word.

Through similar photo-performance from 1989, *The Head in Pravda (Private Event)*, he applied again this ironic strategy and covered his

74 Ľubomír Ďurček, as quoted by Mira Keratová, 'Situational Models of Communication', in Mira Keratova and Petra Hanáková, eds, *Ľubomír Ďurček*, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2013, p 51

entire head with the newspaper. This time Ďurček is not only prevented from speaking but also from seeing from a different perspective or listening to alternative sources of information. In both cases, we could argue that by using a double-coded message in his work, the artist might be trying to preserve his artistic autonomy while simultaneously avoiding a clear criticism of the regime.

In a different approach, Ďurček was also interested in spatial relations and, more concretely, in what he called the 'psycho-geographical mental coordinates'. Through different photo-performances he determines, constructs and alters the properties of the image space: a confined territory artificially constructed. The performance *Ďurček Determines the Image Space* (1989), serves the author to delimit the position of each angle of the squared photograph. Considering the artist's ideological position, however, we might argue that the demarcation of space produced by the photographic frame could well make reference to artificially created political borders. Through an alternative reflection, however, we might also read an internalisation of power structures through parody, as he mimics Lenin's iconic pointing gesture that was widely represented in the Soviet Union through paintings, sculptures, photographs and propaganda posters.

Although Ďurček entered the conceptual art scene in Bratislava slightly later than his peers Koller and Sikora (with most of his work being produced during the 1980s), his contribution to Slovak conceptual art is key to understanding the broad range of topics and strategies developed by conceptual artists to remain artistically motivated during the Normalisation years. Engaged with performance, visual poetry, mail-art and public space interventions, his work is of a highly experimental nature. In line with the trend of 'Apartment-Art' developed during this period in several countries of the Eastern Bloc, he created a private gallery in 1981 in a small room within his parents' flat called *Interspace*, where a variety of works and performances could be experienced, often through a participatory spectatorship.[75] Since the early 1980s, his collaborations with Koller's *U.F.O* project brought him closer to the circle of Slovak conceptual artists and he soon started to take an active part in the many workshops, symposiums and underground exhibitions organised within the unofficial art scene, contributing to the ongoing debates on the nature of artistic production, its communication forms and the progressive role it ought to play within the cultural structures of the time.[76]

Conclusion

The construction of utopian and dystopian realities, as well as the use of puns, parody, metaphors and irony, was developed by Slovak conceptual artists in such complex forms that it would have been practically impossible for the general public to understand the critical message underlying their playful work. But despite the less obvious political character of Slovak Conceptual Art, it is important to understand that the very distancing of their practice from the official lines of Soviet art meant that these practitioners were the focus of the authorities' vigilance. Its very form turned the work into a rebellious artistic practice and it was thus

75 Keratová, 'Situational Models of Communication', op cit, p 44

76 Petra Hanáková, 'Ďurček-Koller Collaboration', in Mira Keratová and Petra Hanáková, eds, *Ľubomír Ďurček*, op cit, pp 73–80

viewed with suspicion as constituting a subversive attitude. On the one hand, the spiritual questioning developed by Koller and Sikora had no place within an atheistic State, where the 'one and only God' was the Party's leader. On the other, the analysis of communication systems, developed by artists like Ďurček, certainly constituted a threat to the long-established – and highly effective – communist propaganda.

While the work analysed might share certain formal properties with Conceptual Art practices developed in North America and Western Europe, their motivations differed radically from those artists producing their work in Bratislava during communist times. It is evident that the individual contexts for the production of Conceptual Art are as diverse as the different cultural conditions present in the territories where such works were produced. In similar terms, the role photography played in Conceptual Art in each of these territories needs to be analysed taking into account the reasons for the choice of that specific medium. While for American artists photography represented a democratic medium – as opposed to painting and sculpture used to produce 'high art' – for Slovak practitioners the use of photography was in part motivated by their lack of access to expensive art materials. In addition, thanks to the reduced size of prints and negatives, the work produced by these artists was easy to hide and post. Due in part to this crucial fact, their work managed to cross state borders and reach several art institutions from both the Eastern and the Western side of the Iron Curtain.

It is also important to point out that although the work produced within the Bratislava circle of Conceptual Art served as an escape valve for those artists to express themselves, the need to produce art outside the official (banned) scene also constituted one of their main motivations. Trained to become practising artists, many were denied the right to do so through their exclusion from the Union of Slovak Visual Artists. As a result, they could not gain access to art materials in the hands of the State or communicate their work on the public scene. We could argue that, while it is true that their practice served somehow as a substitute for oppositional politics, their activities were also directed at offering an alternative – and inclusive – scene for professional artists, who had been neglected by the State and marginalised from the official art sphere. To mitigate such limitations, the activities promoted by artists like Rudolf Sikora through the *First Open Studio* exhibition and the art gatherings held on Tuesdays at his apartment, offered a supportive and stimulating space for like-minded artists. And while it is unlikely that their work changed any material or political conditions, it nonetheless contributed to opening up artistic perspectives, broadening the intellectual basis that ultimately aided the triumph of the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

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