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Cosmos, Fiction and Transcendence: Photography and Conceptual Art in Communist Bratislava

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the development of Conceptual Art in Bratislava during the communist period, with specific emphasis on the practices produced throughout the so-called 'Normalisation' (1968–1989). The text starts by introducing the functioning mechanisms of the Czechoslovakian artistic scene of the time. It then moves on to analyse the work of Július Koller, Rudolf Sikora and Ľubomír Ďurček. It would be argued that, despite the difficult conditions for art production present in Bratislava during Normalisation years, Conceptual Art served its precursors as an escape valve for their political vindications, which they manifested through the use of puns, parody, irony, metaphors and the design of elaborated cosmological fictions through utopian and dystopian projections of their own political and cultural reality. In doing so, the unique properties of photography, such as its reduced size, low cost and indexical qualities, turned the medium into the most suitable form to materialise their conceptual practice.

From the Academy to the Underground: Conceptual Art in Bratislava

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. As a consequence, they were denied the freelance licence that allowed artists to earn money from their practice.¹ and lost state access to artistic resources such as oil painting or canvases. All these limitations, which were directed to impede any possibility of free expression, determined a radical change in the production process of most Czechoslovakian practitioners.

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. This paper is thus dedicated to analyse the work of some of these artists, as well as the role played by the photographic medium in the development of Conceptual Art practices in Normalised Bratislava.

¹ In communist Czechoslovakia, the right to work of every citizen was understood as an unavoidable 'work 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 Artist's Union were able to apply for this license. 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*, Prague: Open Society Institute, 1999, pp. 37-38.

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

With the establishment of Normalisation and the return to the claustrophobic living conditions of the early communist times, a very 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.²

A key figure of this so-called Cosmology movement was Július Koller (1939–2007). Soon after graduating from Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, he abandoned painting and started to experiment with alternative media such as photography and graphic design. 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.³ 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.⁴



Július Koller, *Universal Fantastic Orientation 6*, 1978, Painted Gelatine Silver Print

² See Aurel Hrabušický, 'Cosmic Poetry', in Katarína Bajkurová, Aurel Hrabušický and Katarína Müllerová, eds, *Slovak Picture (Anti-Picture). 20th Century in Slovak Visual Art*, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2008, pp 169–171

³ Georg Schöllhammer, 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement', in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, pp 125–126

⁴ Július Koller, 'Conversation Between Július Koller and Roman Ondák', in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p 136

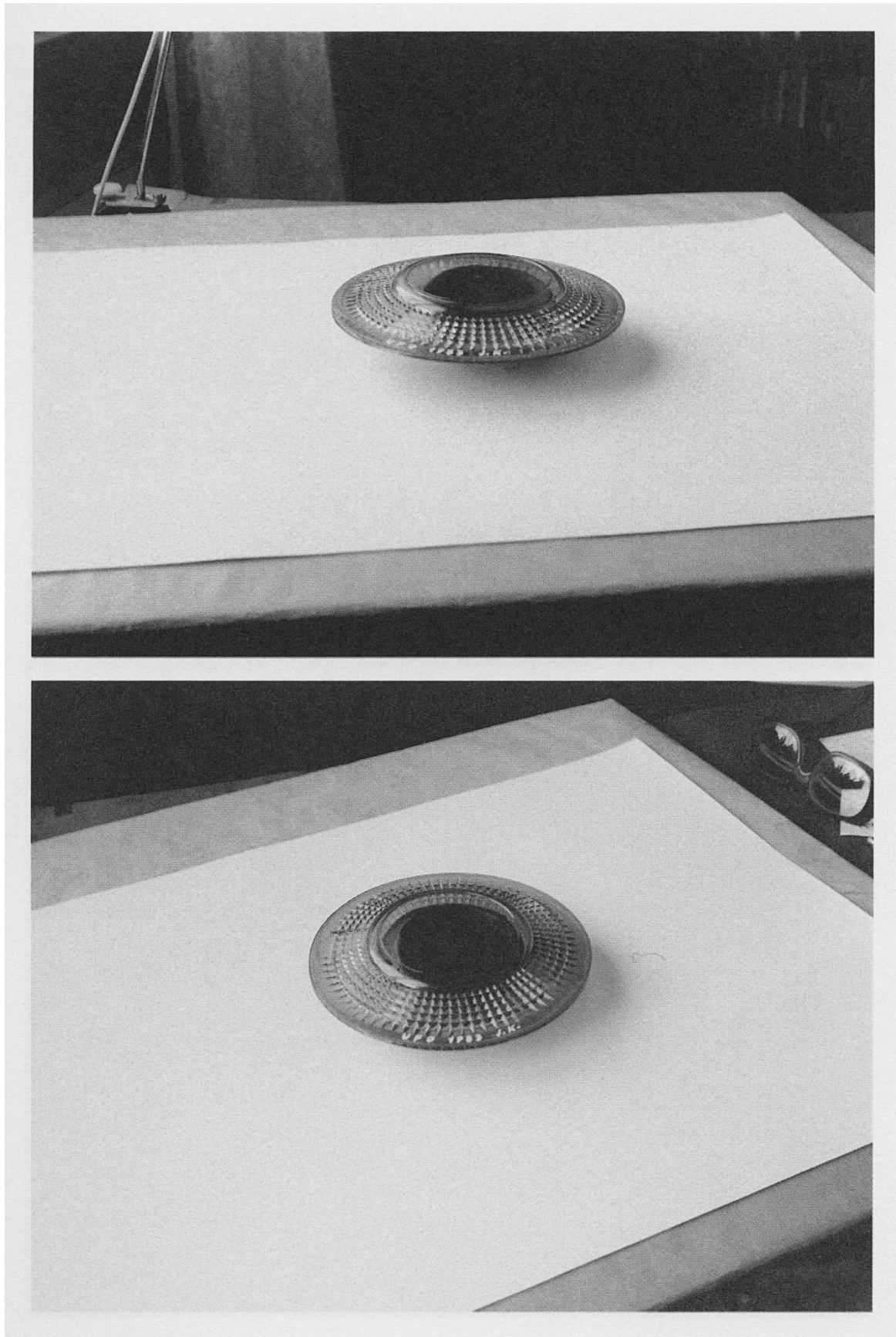


Figure 1. Július Koller, *Archaeological Cultural Situation*, 1989, Gelatine Silver Print

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'.⁵

In practical terms, however, his 'U.F.O.' project consists of a series of actions performed for the camera by Koller himself, alongside some graphic work printed as postcards, posters and visit 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.⁶ The captions read: 'Archaeological Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)', 'Flying Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)' (fig. 1), '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 very 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 officialism, where all types of artistic expression could be accepted.

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. His parallel 'U.F.O.' universe enables Koller to express conceptually a political critique in a way difficult for the authorities to decode. This universe operates as an ideal, free place, where the possibilities of personal expression have no limits.

Koller's friend Rudolf Sikora (1946) is another very relevant figure of Slovak conceptual art. Slightly younger than his colleague, Sikora also studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. 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.

⁵ Július Koller, as quoted by Schöllhammer, 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement', p 128

⁶ Ibid, p 129

Like his peers Koller and Filko – with whom he repeatedly collaborated – Sikora was also fascinated by cosmology.⁷ His interest, however, covers a wider variety of related topics than Koller's oeuvre. Although he is constantly looking up at the universe, he does it from an anchored earthly existence. From very early on, Sikora manifested a deep concern for ecological issues. From the early 1970s, the artist produced numerous pieces showing his preoccupation for the fatal consequences that economic growth was inflicting on nature.⁸ In this aspect, Sikora was certainly a pioneer, not only within his country but also on the global artistic scene. One of his most iconic works that deal with the topic of ecology include *Exclamation Mark, 1974* (fig. 2). In this piece, 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, at an industrial landscape or inside a shopping centre. While Koller's question mark denoted the artist's feeling of uncertainty in relation to his very existence, Sikora's exclamation mark aims at a direct awareness.⁹

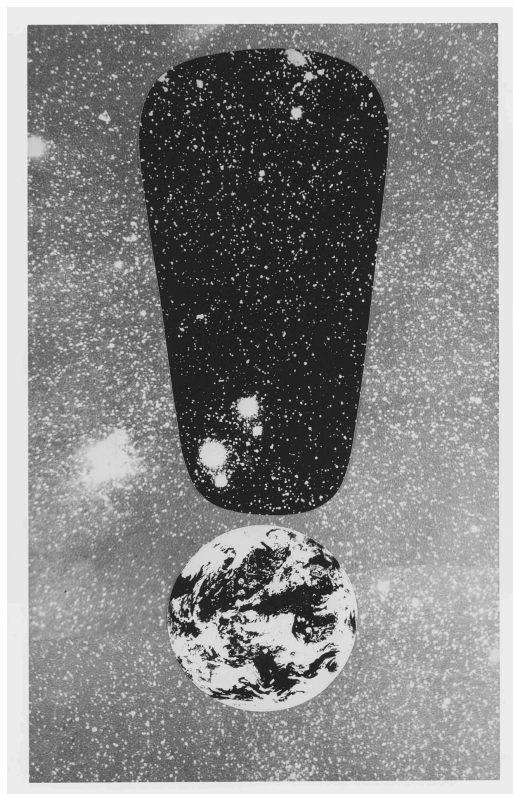


Figure 2. Rudolf Sikora, *Exclamation Mark, 1974*, Photo-collage, Paper on Plywood

⁷ Sikora's fascination with the cosmos becomes evident in his numerous projects where the universe is the main subject matter, such as his photographic series from 1972 depicting a black hole, which includes images like *Horizontal Impact of the Unknown (Different) Energy*, 1979

⁸ See Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Central European University Press, Hungary, 2015, pp 151–196

⁹ Interview Rudolf Sikora, trans, Bratislava, 15 September 2016

But 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.¹⁰ But we could go one step further and suggest that the awareness Sikora was aiming for went beyond his environmental worries. In a way, by making visible the possibility of a devastated environment, Sikora could also be trying to trigger a very different and less distant awareness; that is, 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.¹¹ 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 more palpable threat.

Eubomír 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 Eubomír Ďurček (b.1948).¹² 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 of 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 in his artistic production.¹³

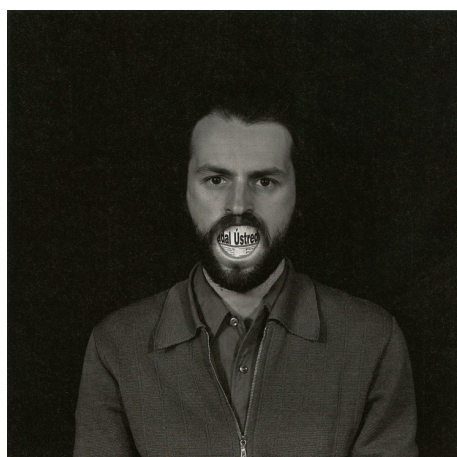


Figure 3. Eubomír Ďurček *Visitor (Five Visits)*, 1980, Gelatine Silver Print

¹⁰ Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, p 196

¹¹ Ibid

¹² It was not until 2013 that Ďurček had his first major retrospective exhibition in Slovakia at the National Gallery in Bratislava

¹³ Interview with Eubomír Ďurček, Bratislava, 15 September 2016

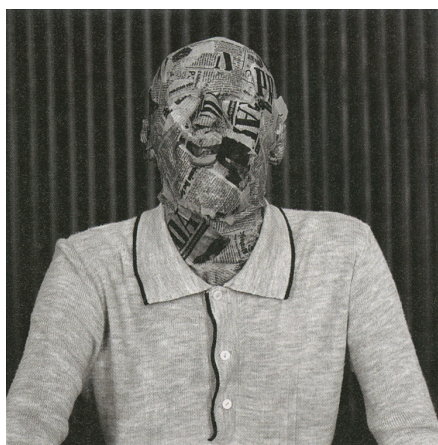


Figure 4. *The Head in Pravda*, 1989, Gelatine Silver Print

A large part of Ďurček's work involves a concern with the process of communication, which he explored from different perspectives. His most political works question the truth of the State's publications and constitute a critique against the propagandistic use of public media. The Slovak daily newspaper *Pravda (Truth)*, was 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 (fig. 3). The self-portrait refers to a performance that was never documented visually but which final scene was re-enacted later by the artist in front of a camera. During the event, Ďurček filled his mouth with cuttings of *Pravda* and visited several friends at their apartments. In his notes the artist wrote: 'I rang at the door. My mouth was filled with *Pravda* newspaper. Twenty seconds after the door opened I went home. I could not respond because my mouth was filled with truth'.¹⁴ 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 a very 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 actually impossible for him to say a word. In a similar photo-performance from 1989, *The Head In Pravda*, he applied the same ironic strategy and covered his entire head with the newspaper (fig. 4). 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 and its more than probable repressive consequences.

¹⁴ Lubomír Ďurček, as quoted by Mira Keratová, in Mira Keratova and Petra Hanáková, eds, 'Situational Models of Communication', *Lubomír Ďurček*, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2013, p 51

Conclusion

As we have seen, 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 communist authorities to detect 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 fact of distancing their practice from the official lines of 'Soviet art', already placed these practitioners at the centre of the authorities' vigilance. Its very form turned the work into a rebellious artistic practice and was thus viewed with suspicion as constituting a subversive attitude.

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. 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 very specific medium. While for North 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 secretly. Due in part to this crucial fact, their work managed to cross tight 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, they were denied the right to do so through their exclusion from membership of 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.