

Július Koller : : : Inverse Situationism

Miško ŠUVAKOVIĆ

Abstract

The central subject and theme of this study is the self-referential discussion, critical analysis and interpretation of the lifestyle, artistic context, and various media and post-media realizations of Slovak Neo-Avant-Garde artist Július Koller. The concepts, artworks, and documents of Július Koller are discussed in relation to Western, Eastern European, Czechoslovakian, and Slovak Neo-Avant-Garde and Conceptual Art. Special attention is given to the analysis and understanding of Koller's ideas and his realizations of Anti-Happenings, Anti-Paintings, textual works, and the U.F.O. project. The ideologies of Eastern European situationism (*Invers Situationism*) are confronted with the conditions of Neo-Avant-Garde integration of art and life, that is, alienation and emancipation of human ordinary life. The aim of this study is to confront the singular and universal characteristics of artistic work on the margins of real socialism and the transition of real socialism to capitalism.

Keywords: Anti-Happening, ČSSR, Inverse Situationism, question mark, Slovakian Society, U.F.O., Universal-Cultural Futurological Operation

Step into emptiness (or) step through emptiness

All around me is Europe.¹ The continent extends to the left, to the right, in front and behind. Up and down. I stood on a paved path leading to an elevation. It felt like I was standing on a runway for aircraft take-off and landing. I could see Danube from the elevation. It was late morning on February 19, 2025, around 11 am. Curator Darko Šimičić was talking about Koller's UFO project. I listened carefully. A gentle breeze tousled my hair and brushed across my face. The bridge below the elevation led to the other side of the dark river. I could imagine, somewhere between the view of the Danube and the place where I stood, Július Koller walking behind a

toy flying saucer – or perhaps an unidentified flying yet crystallized phantasm. I expected him to appear. It was, of course, my fantasy. If I could only activate the time machine – time compression and unwinding – I could encounter Július at the very moment of the event he named *Mysterious Cultural Situation (UFO)*.²

Szombathy Bálint, an artist from Vojvodina, was the first to introduce me to the work of Július Koller. It took place at the April Meetings entitled Expanded Media at the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade on April 16, 1976. Balint spoke about Július's postal messages. He believed that communication between artists was one of the most important – essential – models of action for contemporary artists at the time. Koller was a fanatical participant in communication and mail art.

¹ In researching and writing this text, I received invaluable support from Daniel Grůň, Darko Šimičić, the Július Koller Society, Elisabeth Konrath from the Martin Janda Gallery, and Dr. Nedo Maid.

² Július Koller, *Mysterious Cultural Situation (UFO)*, diptych, photograph: Květoslava Fulierová, 1988. Július Koller Society, Bratislava.

Europe is all around me.

It is necessary to identify a fictional situation of encounter – between Július and me, or Július and a UFO, or a UFO and me. This is an imagined situation that needs to be identified, indexed, and interpreted. Myths cannot be sustained without interpretation. Július expects my interpretation – he expects me to move from the narrative to the discourse of myth interpretation, which hovers like an aura around Július Koller. The aura is both a material effect (Walter Benjamin) and an esoteric energetic environment of the body (Allan Watts). The interpretation of the myth of Július Koller might be yet another contribution to his gesture, an inscription into the great, though lost, book of our planet, of our world.

Europe is all around me.

Július Koller was born on May 28, 1939, which is three months before the start of the Second World War. When the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR) was established in 1945, he was six years old. In 1965 he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. That same year, he began using the term “anti-happening”. He used the prefix “anti” in various combinations to emphasize the shifting relationships between affect and concept – that is, the rejection of the spectacle of the artistic act and the motivation for conscious reflection on everyday life – the real politics of social normality. He had certain, though not overly optimistic, expectations of the reform movements in the Czechoslovak society. Despite his skepticism, he had a particular feeling – he longed for the uncertainty of a transformation in the conditions of life, and that meant a sense of purpose in an artistic activity. He longed for an open international communication. He was twenty-nine years old when on August 22, 1968, the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Army invaded the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. What followed was a frustrating confrontation with the thwarting of his longing to overcome the “gray normality”. This marked the beginning of what I would call his systematic and systemic deconstruction, reconstruction, de-ideologization, and re-ontologization of normality. For him, the UFO (= Unidentified Flying Object) was a provocative blend of affect and concept – of the abnormal, the unusual, and the unexpected within the all-pervasive repressive normality. The affective

yet hidden auras that emerged from the liquidation of the *Prague Spring* and the affective–conceptual invocation of the UFO were asymmetries in relation to the everyday, expected reality of socialist and occupational normality. Asymmetry was the starting point of inquiry (= ?) within the illusions and phantoms of normality. The defining element of most of his collages, readymades, assemblages, anti-happenings, and anti-paintings – as well as the situations with which he veiled the idealisms of normality – became the question mark (symbol = ?) directed at himself, at others, and at the collective – society as a whole and as a sum of singularities. In contrast to an opaque past and a frustrating present, he turned towards questions – question marks = ? – addressed to the future. Conceptually and existentially, he turned towards historization that fell out from an unrealized future. The experience of the unreal was the core of his phantasm of the UFO. His exploration of space found alternatives in the politics of time, which was rendered perceivable through space. He searched for “cultural situations” – modalities of amateur activities and micro-collective socializations in sports, marginal or amateur art, and mystified communication. When the Berlin Wall fell, he was fifty years old. When the project of the Czechoslovak state came to an end and the independent Czech and Slovak Republics were formed in 1993 he was fifty-four. At that point, he entered global and simultaneously local processes of socio-economic transition. He was internationally recognized as an exceptional artist of heroic unusual work within the framework of state and macro-cultural normality. He died in 2007 at the age of sixty-eight.

Logic of a question mark (?): contexts

Július Koller was a participant in antagonistic, visible or invisible, yet highly complex and heterogeneous events within the late modern and contemporary Slovak society. After the Second World War, Slovak socialist society was shaped by numerous restrictions, suspended utopias, and distrustful investigations, imposed censorship, as well as repressed traumatic individual and/or collective impulses. It was a society caught in the non-transparent trap of three traumatic hegemonic affects: (i) Czech national cultural domination within the ČSSR; (ii)

the untouchable yet alluring proximity of Austria's liberal, post-denazified society; and, certainly, (iii) the constant political and economic pressure of the Soviet Union through actions – special operations – in both public and private life within the Eastern Bloc, particularly in Czechoslovakia after 1968.

In such contextual conditions and circumstances, Július Koller “developed an anti-political approach and *an attack* on artistic conventions”.³ Many of his works were defined by an “amateur or pseudo-amateur style”,⁴ through which he directly revealed their striking anti-aesthetic and anti-artistic significance. See, for example, paintings that have no formal development, but instead appear as anomalous reactions to the life situations of the time: *Artist* (1963), *Sea* (1963 – 1964), *Industrial Landscape* (1965), *Painting* (1965), *Anti-Painting (Slogans on the Wall)*, 1968), or *Antipainting* (Raster, 1969). The anti-political attack was both morphologically and existentially connected to the “anti-artistic actions and effects”: “engagement instead of arrangement”.⁵ The cards printed with the texts *Anti-Happening/ Subjective-Objective System* (1965) served as indexical markers of his artistic and cultural engagement. His anti-art actions were part of a zeitgeist that was characterised by a pronounced fascination with and self-critical interest in the French *Nouveau Réalisme* and the American new “neo-Dadaist” art emerging after the Second World War.

For instance, a theoretical interest in the “trans-cultural practices” of the neo-avant-garde in Eastern Europe was also shown by certain Eastern European art writers: Yugoslav art theoretician Oto Bihalji-Merin,⁶ Polish aesthetician Stefan Morawski,⁷

and Czech philosopher Petr Rezek. These were intellectual responses to the fundamental transformations in the international art world of late Modernism. The changes in the formal object-based morphology and the ontology of *the new art* also demanded a shift in the epistemology of art. What was sought was not only a new practice, but also a new sensibility – and further, a new understanding of anomalous artistic practices: happening, readymade, assemblage, process, dematerialization, communication, etc. Artists and theoreticians worked towards the radicalization of *negative dialectics* – that is, the relationship between art and society. They longed for a new sensibility: to feel the world in a different, new, and liberating way.⁸

The anti-political and anti-artistic effects were linked to “the anti-philosophical thinking/feeling”. This unfolded on the border between individual and collective trauma, driven by a cold and introverted infantilism that emerged in the deep shadows of the Cold War Wall dividing Europe into East and West. The anti-political positioning on the artistic and cultural scenes in Eastern Europe⁹ was motivated by a search for alternatives to the dominant, everyday state-party politicization of society, discourse, affective experience of reality, and sustainable subjectivity under real socialism. It can be understood as an attempt to construct a “sphere of politics outside the influence of the government”,¹⁰ the party, and everyday cultural normality. The state-party politicization of society functioned as a higher-order practice of surveillance, control, and regulation of forms of life – thus enabling both real and imagined censorship/self-censorship. The anti-art emerged as an ambivalent, transgressive situation that originated

³ KEMP-WELCH, K.: Doubt. In: *Anti-Politics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956 – 1989*. London 2017, p. 57.

⁴ GRŮŇ, D.: Confrontations with amateur artists as an artistic project and educational practice: Lubomír Ďurček, Květoslava Fulierová and Július Koller. In: *AMA. Lubomír Ďurček, Květoslava Fulierová, Július Koller and Amateur Artists*. Ed.: GRŮŇ, D. Vienna 2020, pp. 8 – 21.

⁵ *Early Works*. In: *Július Koller ONE MAN ANTI SHOW. Dokumentation. Documentation. Dokumentácia*. Eds.: GRŮŇ, D. – RHOMBERG, K. – SCHÖLLHAMMER, G. Wien 2016 – 2017, p. 63.

⁶ BIHALJI-MERIN, O.: Anti umetnost i nova stvarnost / Povratak prirodi i ne prirodi. In: *Umetnost*, 1966, No. 7, pp. 5 – 22.

⁷ MORAVSKI, S.: Neonarhizam i neoavangarda. In: *Sumrak estetike*. Trans.: RAJČIĆ, B. Banjaluka 1990, pp. 75 – 102.

⁸ MARCUSE, H.: The New Sensibility. In: *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston 1969, pp. 23 – 48.

⁹ Compare with: KEMP-WELCH, K.: Introduction. In: *Anti-politics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956 – 1989*. London 2017, p. 4; KONRÁD, G.: *Antipolitics: An Essay*. Trans.: ALLEN, R. E. San Diego 1984.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 3.

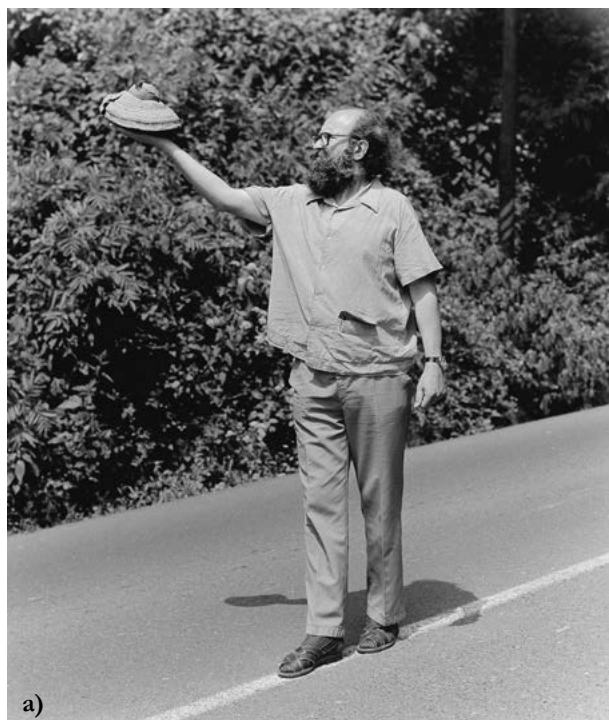


Fig. 1a-b: Júlíus Koller, *Mysterious Cultural Situation 1., 2. (U.F.O.)* / *Záhadná kultúrna situácia 1., 2. (U.F.O.)*, Č&B fotografia, Photo: Kvetoslava Fulierová. Júlíus Koller Society, Bratislava.

from below, not from above. It was a fundamental transgressive inversion.

One should not forget that such and similar anomalies of dominant modernist practices in both the West (abstraction) and the East (realism) were also pointed out, from a completely different perspective, by British artists from the Art & Language group (Mel Ramsden, Michael Baldwin) through a series of paintings depicting the Soviet revolutionary leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in the style of American action painter Jackson Pollock's *dripping* technique. They revealed the Cold War symptom embedded within painterly poetics. Their paintings are multiple anomalies because they simultaneously: (a) refer to the object and content of socialist realism – for example, the face of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin; and (b) refer to the typical and real painting modes of two opposing Cold War political and ideological systems: action-based liberal expressionism versus socialist collectivist apologetic realism. The thesis of Art & Language was that the action painting was based on the poetics of the autonomy of art, even though it

served the American Cold War political propaganda, while the Soviet socialist realism was based on the stance of politicising art, although in reality the artist did not have the freedom for personal engagement.¹¹

The position of anti-art owed much to the myth of Marcel Duchamp's "indifferent intervention": "only the artist can create anti-art" out of non-art and art alike. On the other hand, the Eastern European neo-avant-gardes and conceptual art emerged as an active resistance to the dominance of covert socialist realism within the modalities of socialist modernism. Mimetic socialist modernism, present in almost all the countries and cultures of the Eastern Bloc, took its models from the soft late-capitalist Modernism – in other words, anti-art was a form of resistance to an aestheticism based on the rejection of the conceptual in favor of the sensually-beautiful, with socialist or revolutionary connotations. Not without irony, one could say that

¹¹ *Art & Language: Portrait de V. I. Lenin*, Paris 1981.

the resistance of anti-art as an anti-political tactic stemmed from the rejection of the late aesthetics of Matisse and Picasso in favor of the *readymade*, and of collage, montage, and assemblage procedures drawn from the trivial forms of everyday life and their demonstrative situations. A minimum of materialisation provoked maximally intense affects, as well as a decentering of their place within the normality of everyday life. The anti-artistic and anti-aesthetic were disruptions in official political identification. Koller's postal telegram form as an artistic artifact (dated November 19, 1970) contained a minimal inscription of words and a maximal accumulation of anomalous expectations.

ART? NO!
UME ? NIE !

It was a primary algorithm for enacting the potentiality of anti-art and anti-politics through a deeply personal inquiry into the topics: Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing? What is the purpose of all this? What for...?

Situationism, Anti-happening and tactical anomalies

Július Koller's situationism was grounded between: (1) political indifference – a suspicion towards the collectively imposed “we” and its social validity and visibility; (2) aesthetic indifference – the aesthetically and functionally beautiful is not necessarily a quality of contemporary art, especially not at the level of engagement; and (3) the relationship between concept and affect within the gray everyday life, without reference to party-based evaluation. One could utter a careless, narrative, and descriptive phrase that suggests the connotative atmosphere in which neo-avant-garde and conceptual artists operated on the other side of the Wall: “I feel like an *Alien* – a visitor from outer space, a traveler aboard a UFO.”

In a literal sense of the word, Július Koller was not merely a witness to the Slovak society, culture and

art in the second half of the twentieth century and the first seven years of the twenty-first century. He was not an artist whose works or actions can simply be used to reconstruct the past – whether of a single life or the collective life of the culture and society in which he was born, raised, worked, and died. Július Koller was an uncertain, capricious, and questioning enigma – a kind of serious symptom within the social, cultural, artistic, and aesthetic anomalies. In other words, Július does not bear witness to life within the Slovak society in a realist or forensic manner, but rather actively reveals the conceptual and affective – or, conversely, anti-conceptual and anti-affective – mechanisms of enacting the disharmony between the subjective and objective conditions of transforming an individual into a subject, a subject into a citizen, and a citizen into humanity. He positioned himself as an active and engaged symptom. But what is a symptom in this case? A symptom “can be attributed to a defect of symbolization; it is the centre of opacity in the subject because it has not been verbalised, because it has not been translated into words, because it would disappear the moment it was turned into a specific word”.¹² A symptom is the sliding and floating of meaning.

Therefore, Július Koller identified himself with a question mark (?) or with endless questioning (???).¹³ This was a primary and fundamental gesture of subjectivization: *a decision to embrace questioning as a way of re-examining the anomalous processes within art and culture*. He was often an *erased trace*, or a positioned unsolvable riddle, or a betrayed expectation of the “normality” of art, culture, and, certainly, everyday life under real socialism. He was a symptom within daily life filled with a belief in a reformed and better tomorrow – that is, socialism with a human face. But he was also a symptom in everyday life marked by transitional hopes for the coming liberal democracy and free market. He was a symptom of the crises of the promised society of abundance that was to be.

Koller's artworks are not, in the conventional sense of the word, completed aesthetic art pieces. His artistic work is not the productive labour of making things and/or objects for exchange. On the

¹² MILER, Ž.-A.: Uvod u učenje Žaka Lakana. Trans.: VIDA KOVIĆ PETROV, K. In: *Treći program RB*, 1986, No. 68, p. 217.

¹³ Question Mark. In: GRUŇ – RHOMBERG – SCHÖLLHAMMER 2016 – 2017 (see in note 5), p. 162.

contrary, Július's artistic practice transforms from a situation of *productive labour* into an event of doing (*it's about doing, acting – or flying*). He is therefore closely aligned with the concept of “anti-art” or a “language game”,¹⁴ which operates by analogy with sports or gambling.

Playing the game by the rules. Playing the game without following the rules.

Playing the game while constantly changing the rules. Rejecting and appropriating new rules. Preserving the game. Obliterating the game. Július was fascinated by games – their aesthetics and anti-aesthetics, ethics and anti-ethics, and, above all, their politics, which was a form of anti-politics in contrast to the real-political demands of the party, cultural workers, and society as a socialist community: “As of 1967, Koller proposed to transform sport into a cultural situation.”¹⁵ Sport was—idealized – as a situation that represented the zero degree of spectacle, offering its *body* to his artistic interventions. As a non-spectacle, sport became an alternative to the official public subjectivity and thus, perhaps, a promise of the potentiality of a “democratic liberalism”. The game was assumed to be a possibility for “democratic communication”. The failure of the game was the failure of democratic communication.

He systematically worked with chaotic and fragmented relationships between *situations* and *acts of doing* within the everyday life in which he was a participant. He worked on an everyday life, which was the most important part of his existence. He moved chaotically through a daily reality that exceeded him – both in relation to society (the proximity/distance to people) and in relation to the universe (the proximity/distance to cosmic entities or agents – UFOs). These relationships were at the same time entirely concrete, yet also imaginary and, unexpectedly, speculative impacts introduced into an experiential everyday life. The impact was not presented as a resulting aesthetic or artistic object, but rather as a situation whose consequences lay in the realm of personal experience of affect and the rational testing of the concept of affect and affectivity. As an artist, he adopted the



Fig. 2: Július Koller, *Antihappening (System of subjective Objectivity)* / *Antihappening (Systém subjektívnej objektivity)*, 196, stamping on paper, 11.5 × 16,5 cm. Photo: Július Koller Society, Bratislava.

sensibility of a sports player or a member of audience of sporting duels (playing ping-pong, tennis) on the level of the desubjectivization of a citizen into the subjectivization of an individual. He transposed the “sense of play” into a symptom, thereby provoking the confines of the world he lived in. Provocation is a challenge, but also an expectation of response, reply, repression or erasure, neglect or censorship. Provocation is an opening of a hybrid field of potentiality. It is as if the artist Július was asking what could emerge from his intentional or accidental gesture, one imbued with the meanings and energies of anti-art, anti-politics, and anti-action.

Július' work was unambiguously an affective-conceptual form of life whose singularity made him exist on the verge of invisibility. For instance: the U.F.O.-naut J.K. with ping-pong balls between the eyeglasses and eye lids from 1970; or *Flying Cultural Situation* (U.F.O.) from 1983. This is an important paradox of the Eastern European situationism: the artist does not offer answers, but rather questions.¹⁶ It is not about total visibility as in the West, but about visibility that appears as if it cannot be seen. It was a complex and contradictory confrontation with problems. When one says the art of Július Koller, it

¹⁴ WITTGENSTEIN, L.: 7, 19, 66. In: *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. ANSCOMBE, G.E.M. Oxford 2009, pp. 8, 11, 36.

¹⁵ KEMP-WELCH 2017 (see in note 3), p. 69.

¹⁶ Compare with the interview of Jan Budaja with Koller. In: *38D*, Samizdat, 1981.

means the same as when one says the life of Július Koller. Or in the form of a diagram:

Art=Life
Affect Concept

(affect detaches itself from concept/concept detaches itself from affect)

Július Koller = Július Koller = question mark (?)

If his labour, his doing and his action I see as “an inverse situationism”, then I differentiate between three distinct spectacle modalities:

1. The spectacle in the late capitalism: “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images.”¹⁷
2. The socialist party–state real socialism: spectacle is an ideology/politics at the stage of accumulation that turns it into an image.
3. The spectacle in anti–politics and anti–art of the Eastern European, or more precisely Slovak neo–avant–garde: the inverse spectacle is the stage of accumulation of the anti–picture, anti–happening, anti–art, and, ultimately, anti–politics in which images become active affects and concepts at the boundaries of the visible and the invisible. The visible becomes invisible. The invisible reveals itself as the promise of the visible.

Oh, well, is the truth of the truth true?

Did he have a clear or elusive experience of his visible and invisible self?

Július Koller lived and worked in the ČSSR and, later, in transitional Slovakia. His biographical and artistic geopolitical location proved to be deeply connected to the “cognitive restructuring of the field” in late modern, late socialist, and ultimately contemporary culture and art. He found himself within the fissures – capillary passages – between the dominant socialist art, politics, and philosophy, and the asymmetric, anomalous microworlds of marginalized anti–art, anti–politics, and anti–philosophy – which for him constituted a significant inverse situation-

ism. Meanwhile, Július was not a situationist in the sense of the French “situationism” of Guy Debord, which was directed against consumerist, i.e., Western society of the spectacle. His “situationism” emerged on the margins of a socialist society as a provocation against ideology – that is, against the Eastern European society of the spectacle. His orientation leaned more towards de–accumulation – the entropy of the image in its transformation into anti–picture, anti–happening, and anti–art – rather than towards the accumulation of capital, ideology, or politics into a publicly omnipresent image encompassing all other visible and invisible forms of life.

Július was not an innocent bystander or an infantile witness — that is, an accomplice — to turbulent transformations. He was an exceptional “player” and “executor of works.” He was an intelligible “affective cartographer” and a “conceptual archivist” within life itself, within the singularity and distinctiveness of a unique form of life and the impact of life inscribed between the Cold War and the post–Cold War structuring of a dominant European reality — the everyday, which in the language of cultural politics is called “normality.” He worked on self–archiving, on precise self–historicization beyond the formal obligations of logical and linear development within the art history during the period from 1970 to 2007.¹⁸

Július was not a cultural labourer on a construction site of “normality” but an executor of anomalies with reference to the offered or imposed patterns of normalcy and normalization of life as a medium of power of — whether that of the state, the party, or even the influence of Western high modernist art. What mattered to him, therefore, were the concepts of anti–art and anti–happening, or more precisely, the anti–picture, which today might be described as anti–media production and the realization of situations that are not easily identified within the field of art and, more importantly, within the fields of public, social, and cultural normality. He worked by collecting, archiving, and collaging numerous entirely ordinary samples of media — primarily printed — both information and disinformation, that *floated* or *drifted through* Slovak (and formerly Czechoslovak)

¹⁷ DEBORD, G. : Culmination of Separation. In: *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. KNABB, K. Canberra 2002, p. 11.

¹⁸ Self–Chronology. In: *Július Koller. ONE MAN ANTI SHOW*. Eds.: GRÚŇ, D. – RHOMBERG, K. – SCHÖLLHAMMER, G. Wien; Köln 2016, p. 75.

cultural and social space in the aftermath of the Soviet occupation. He was interested in the transition from artistic practice to cultural, informational, and communicational activism. He faced the confrontation between the normative and anomalous nature of the existing and enforced forms of social and cultural normality.¹⁹ Here is one indicative statement by Július: “My activity rests on a recognition of the struggle of antithesis, on an admission of the world’s unsolvability. Why should we receive an answer from nature, from God, from people? I don’t mind the unknown.”²⁰

Therefore, I suppose that the social and cultural normality of the Czechoslovakian and /or Slovakian society was a *dispositif* (space, material, medium) for interventions (affective regimes), set-up situations (relational sequences) and *phantasms* (conceptual impacts) of Július Koller’s production and impacts. It is a matter of impact anti-production in unstable and impermeable domains between art and culture. His zone of movement is the interspace between art and culture. Art, like fine sand in an open palm, scattered into the impacts of non-art, anti-art – that is, into the porosities of everyday life, which we understand as “normal, inevitable culture”. Normality, with all its public and tacit norms, but also anomalies, is presented as a *dispositif* (space, material, medium) for interventions, situations, and *phantasms*. However, all the parameters of standardised normality cannot, at all times, be subjected to party and bureaucratic supervision, control, censorship, or perhaps even punishment. That is why Július’s artistic and cultural practice is recognized as a transgression of the ideological illusion of normality, transparency, and political innocence. It is not about grand gestures, but about minimal micro-interventions that index, modify, and fundamentally destabilize the normalization of life, both in the gray reality of socialism and in the expansive transition of post-socialism.

Contrary to normality is *discommonality*. Contrary to transparency is opacity, blurriness, or a vibrant, flickering reality. Contrary to innocence is a curious blend of cunning and naiveté, indifference, and a staged – cool – detachment. Koller’s world seemingly appears as a world without traps or secret places – yet

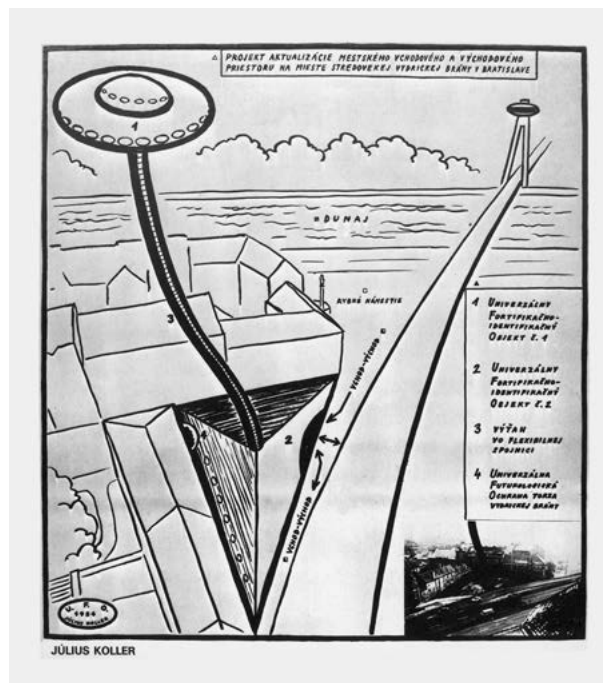


Fig. 3: Július Koller, *Universal Fortification-identification Object (U.F.O.)*, 1984 / *Univerzálny Fortifikačno-identifikačný Objekt (U.F.O.)*, print on paper, 27,3 × 24,5 cm. Photo: Július Koller Society, Bratislava.

traps are set everywhere, and secret places are built or dismantled in the continuous effort to attain normality. Even those who avoid the traps of normality end up setting traps themselves. These are the paradoxes and contradictions in which Július Koller’s life and work existed. Paradoxes and contradictions revealed themselves through anti-acts that subtracted “parts of meaning” from the whole of individual or collective self-recognition and self-identification within the everyday normality of Czechoslovak society and culture – and later, of post-socialist Slovakia. His artistic work does not describe – it intervenes in the fabric of sociality and the weave of culturality. It is not about the spectacular, which means grandiose, subtraction of meaning, but about minimal, almost imperceptible gestures of destabilizing normality and its visibility—that is, its recognizability. The concept of anti-happening was appealing: to simultaneously destabilize the Czechoslovak everyday normality and

¹⁹ Normalization (1972 – 1989). In: GRÚŇ – RHOMBERG – SCHÖLLHAMMER 2016 – 2017 (see in note 5), p. 174.

²⁰ Július Koller’s statement in Aurel HRABUŠICKÝ: *Július Koller. Soudy*. Bratislava 1991, unnumbered.

to destabilize the heroic, spectacular behaviorism of Western – primarily American – happenings. To always be in displacement, always assuming a shift and a deviation.

He is a subject or the kind of subject that eludes. Our Július is not entirely our Július. He eluded, and through his elusiveness, he disrupted the sequence of fulfilling the phantasm of everyday normality. A phantasm must be countered by another phantasm. Elusiveness became a key methodology, or more precisely and consistently, an anti-methodology of Július Koller's artistic work, under all and any conditions and circumstances of a truly (un)ordinary life.

ordinary life ↔ (un)ordinary life ↔ unordinary life

Other side of the reality/fiction etc. UFO Psyop

Over time, Július Koller became a sensitive symptom of a deep social, political, and cultural crisis that engulfed Czechoslovakia after the Soviet occupation in August 1968. He did not describe the state of affairs; rather, he acted through minimal shifts and deviations in the flesh, fabric, and weave of those collisions between objectivity and subjectivity that mattered to him. With the external – Soviet-repression, extinguishment, and elimination of the emancipatory project of the “Prague Spring,” a socially, politically, and aesthetically traumatized living space emerged – a space of individual and collective micro- and macro-depressive situations. It was the perfect context for the emergence of the idea of UFO = Unidentified Flying Object.

The engagement that Július advocated for required a radicalization of uncertain, inverse situationist tactics, which led to the question without an answer about a place of man/humanity within the geographic, national, planetary, and cosmic order of the world. What mattered to him was the relationship with the unknown, the foreign, and, in part, the

frightening *phenomena* emerging from the crisis-ridden despair of stalled and obstructed emancipation. He sought questionable modalities of “statement,” “representation,” and “action” under conditions in which there was no evident potential or optimism in everyday individual and collective life. As if it were necessary to speak, in a different language, through different and diverse media of communication, about that which cannot be spoken of.²¹ Something that was both distant and forceful – arriving, for example, from Moscow with the tanks of the Warsaw Pact army – was transposed into the allegorical world of unidentified flying objects and UFOonauts who were both present and absent at the same time. Július's calm and serious Buster Keaton-like humor served as a good starting point for recognizing and appropriating the impossible Other, or the impossible danger, as opposed to the recognizable military and political threat that acted forcefully from outside his life onto his private, public, and social existence.

Július tactically reached for (a) symbolic dispositifs adopted from popular culture – the UFO as a concept and entity from science fiction (SF)²²; and (b) real performative acts through which he could transform the position of the “alternative artist” and “cultural situationist” into a mythic identity of an artist confronting the gaps/hiatuses between the singularity of repressive socialist everyday life and the universality of the dizzying cosmic challenge and motion. By merging the two positions, (a) and (b), he opened a field for enacting effects, expressions, and self-referential presentations of an “individual mythology” – if he couldn't find Aliens and UFOonauts, he himself became a UFOonaut in various situations throughout the long and turbulent three decades at the close of the twentieth century. In doing so, he intuited a new paradigmatic field for redefining the status, appearance, and modalities of the artist's practice. The artist emerges as a central actor in the questioning of subjective and objective, private and public, or inner and outer reality. He orients himself towards the live and mediated event, and towards an

²¹ At this point I politicize Ludwig Wittgenstein's renowned position: 7. In: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans.: PEARS, D. F. – MCGUINNESS, B. F. London 1974, p. 89.

²² Compare with relations of avant-garde practices and the UFO mythology in the American context: GOLSTON, M.: The Diploetics of Alien Nations, Dancing at the Language Barrier and Coda. In: *The Science Fiction of Poetics and the Avant-Garde Imagination*. Tuscaloosa 2024, pp. 172, 189, 200.

During the same period – but in a different context, that of Western international art – curator Harald Szeemann defined *individual mythologies* as “an arena of subjective mythologization through visual statements that claim universal value.”²³ Július anticipated a similar position with statements such as “Anti-happening / System of Subjective-Objectivity,” or “Anti-happening / Subjective-Objective Reality,” as well as “Universal-Cultural Futurological Operation (U.F.O.)”²⁴ or “U.F.O.-naut J.K.”²⁵ In this way, his inverse situationism opened towards a directorial practice within cultural situations that confront – and merge – past, present, and future, along with the tensions between imaginary constructs and conceptual agents, and the boundaries of a human and a cosmic being – that is, a human as a cosmic agent.

Projects by Július Koller are connected to a conceptual UFO formula, no matter how it is being expressed – via situation, operation, UFOonaut identification, UFOmania or alternative galleries (Ganek Gallery²⁶ – UFO Gallery) – and it relies on group or individual visual events of questioning of seemingly invisible differences between fiction and reality. The confrontation of *fiction* and *non-fiction* situations and events became his regenerated and rediscovered *nature*. This was not an escape into metaphysics or even esotericism, but rather a radicalization of the situationist impulse to existentially enter the very



Here are two contemporary, asymmetrical views on UFO modalities!

First example: the TV show *Project UFO27* depicts the situation of “UFO mania” in Poland. It refers to the period of the Solidarity trade union movement and the introduction of the military dictatorship by General Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski in 1989. Narratives about the appearance of UFOs marked a politics of affect, more precisely, an escalation of public panic. This series reveals strategies and tactics of manipulation through half-truths and unverified testimonies, as well as institutional and media interventions into the public sphere that diverted attention from the political crisis towards the appearance of UFOs. The presumed UFO, the series suggests, can be interpreted as a construct of political-media manipulation – an ideological lie – woven into public narratives and discourse. Such an ideological lie

²⁴ Compare with Universal–Cultural Futurological Operations (U.F.O.). In: GRÚŇ – RHOMBERG – SCHÖLLHAMMER 2016 – 2017 (see in note 5), p. 163.

²⁶ *Július Koller: Galéria Ganku*. Ed.: GRÚŇ, D. Wien 2014, pp. 58 – 67.



Fig. 5: Július Koller, *Ultra-fantastical Observation*, 1977 / *Ultra-Fantastická Observácia* (U.F.O.), screen printing on paper, 11,4 × 15,9 cm. Photo: Július Koller Society, Bratislava.

diverts attention from the real crisis to an invented one, or to a hinted-at, dangerous, and unexpected UFO phenomenon.

Second example: contemporary American artist Trevor Paglen applies the term “psyop” to situations of cultural obsessions, manipulations and reactions onto media interpretation of the appearance of mysterious flying objects (UFO) in the vicinity of certain American military bases. “Psyop” refers to “psychological operations” (PSO) – strategies designed to transmit selected information and indicators to audiences in order to influence their motives, objective judgment, and ultimately the behavior of governments, institutions, social groups, and major global military and economic powers. These are strategic manipulations of public opinion, achieved through the construction of “disusual phenomena” as real impacts, i.e., as effects of genuine danger. Trevor Paglen clearly stated: “I’d like to acknowledge the concept of ‘psyop realism’ developed separately by artists Jak Ritger and Brandon Bandy and journalist Günseli Yalcinkaya. Echoing Mark Fisher’s term ‘capitalist realism’, ‘psyop realism’ describes

the aesthetic experience of inhabiting a post-irony online landscape that Ritger characterizes as ‘a lack of meaning or possible revolutionary action during climate collapse and the condition of growing up in the most heavily policed and advert-saturated online experience yet’, at a time of ‘intense suspicion and conspiracism, where the term ‘false flag’ is used widely.”²⁸ Paglen thus proposes a hypothesis of a society and a social consciousness determined by psychological operations: *Society of the psyop*²⁹.

Let’s go back to Július!

Július lived and worked in the late analog age, on the threshold of a new digital world. Still, he was a man shaped by the time of mechanical, behavioral, and early media cultures (postal systems, telegraph, radio, photography, film, television) and the early emergence of computers. At that time, “computer visualization,” “machine learning,” “biometric feedback loops,” and “global digital networks” had not yet been developed. Ideology operated as a sensory and conceptual activation of political or anti-political imagination, navigating the space between reality and fiction. Július’s response to ideology was inverse situationism, anti-politics, anti-happening, and the appropriation of anomalies within UFO mythologies. He anticipated anti-politics as a form of resistance to the unquestioned political power that produces and controls the visibility of ideology in the restructuring of private, public, and social life. To confront both the visible and the invisible was at the heart of his situationist and later conceptualist gesture.

I imagine myself somewhere in front of or around Július.

As if on that February 19, 2025 I saw Július while I was standing on a hill above a bridge which leads from the city of Bratislava over the river Danube towards the state border with Austria. Truly, in another and different time, I could imagine Július standing in front of me. I constructed him in thought and projected him into my Imagination. I could imagine Július, with a serious expression on his face, writing a question mark “?” in the sand of a sports field in

²⁷ Polish TV show *Project UFO* (Projekt UFO), author: Kasper Bajon, Netflix, 2025.

²⁸ PAGLEN, T.: *Society of the Psyop, Part 1: UFOs and the Future of Media*. In: *e-flux Index # 5*. Ed. MACBETH, G. New York 2024, p. 395.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 389.

that distant 1969 and not so distant 2003. I could imagine Július, together with the bodies of boys and girls on some hillside, forming – with their bodies – the shape of a question mark “?”.³⁰ The universality of the question versus the singularity of the answer! I could focus on an *astral* Július, walking behind the *thing* (Das Ding)³¹ – that object in his hand or on the ground, which we might call a UFO³². I could ask myself: What is his serious, restrained face concealing? The question of the “secret” of a Central European man in the midst of Eastern Europe became a challenge to my planetary fear of the near

future. Július was digging into the future. Was the future cognitively packed by means of his artistic acts and interventions into that strange *thing* I might carelessly call a UFO or *Das Ding*?

Das Ding = (?) ≠ UFO

Das Ding ≠ (?) = UFO

That is where his anti-metaphysics began as a heterogeneous set of various anti-practices, such as anti-art, anti-happening, anti-politics... *A hovering cultural situation* (UFO).

Július Koller : : : Inverzný situacionizmus

Resumé

Ústredným predmetom a témou tejto štúdie je autoreferenčná diskusia, kritická analýza a interpretácia životného štýlu, umeleckého kontextu a rôznych mediálnych a postmediálnych realizácií slovenského neoavantgardného umelca Júliusa Kollera. Koncepty, umelecké diela a dokumenty Júliusa Kollera sú rozdiskutované vo vzťahu k západnej, východoeurópskej, československej a slovenskej neoavantgardnej a konceptuálnej tvorbe. Osobitná pozornosť je venovaná analýze a pochopeniu Kollerových myšlienok a jeho realizácií Antihappenin-gov, Anti-obrazov, textových diel a projektu U.F.O. Ideové rámce východoeurópskeho situacionizmu (nazývam ich „inverzný situacionizmus“) sú konfrontované s podmienkami neoavantgardnej integrácie umenia a života, teda odcudzenia a emancipácie ľudského bežného života. Cieľom tejto štúdie je konfrontovať singulárne a univerzálne charakteristiky umeleckej tvorby realizovanej na okraji reálneho socializmu a následne počas prechodu reálneho

socializmu ku kapitalizmu. Antipolitické a anti-umelecké účinky boli spojené s „antifilozofickým myslením/cítením“. Toto sa odohrávalo na hranici medzi individuálnou a kolektívnou traumou, poháňané chladným a introvertným infantilizmom, ktorý sa objavil v hlbokom tieni železnej opony a studenej vojny rozdeľujúcej Európu na Východ a Západ. Antipolitické postavenie na umeleckej a kultúrnej scéne vo východnej Európe bolo motivované hľadaním alternatív k dominantnej, každodennej štátno-stranníckej politizácii spoločnosti, diskurzu, afektívneho prežívania reality a udržateľnej subjektivity v reálnom socializme. Možno to chápať ako pokus o vytvorenie „sféry politiky mimo vplyvu vlády, strany a každodennej kultúrnej normality“. Štátno-strannícka politizácia spoločnosti fungovala ako prax vyššieho rádu dohľadu, kontroly a regulácie foriem života – čím umožňovala skutočnú aj imaginárnu cenzúru/autocenzúru. Antiumenie sa objavilo ako ambivalentná, transgresívna situácia,

³⁰ See project: *Universal Futurological Question Mark* (U.F.O.) from 1978.

³¹ HEIDEGGER, M.: The Thing. In: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York 2001, pp. 161 – 180.

³² See project: *Mysterious Cultural Situation 1, 2* (UFO) from 1988.

ktorá vznikla zdola, nie zhora. Bola to zásadná transgresívna inverzia.

V roku 1965 Július Koller absolvoval Vysokú školu výtvarných umení v Bratislave. V tom istom roku začal používať termín „Antihappening“. Predponu „anti“ používal v rôznych kombináciách, aby zdôraznil meniace sa vzťahy medzi afektom a konceptom – teda odmietnutie spektaklu umeleckého aktu a motiváciu k vedomej reflexii každodenného života – skutočnej politiky spoločenskej normality. Mal isté, hoci nie príliš optimistické, očakávania od reformných hnutí v československej spoločnosti. Napriek svojmu skepticizmu mal určitý pocit – túžil po neistote transformácie životných podmienok, a to znamenalo zmysel umeleckej činnosti. Pokračoval v otvorenej medzinárodnej komunikácii. Mal dvadsaťdeväť rokov, keď 22. augusta 1968 vojská Varšavskej zmluvy a Sovietska armáda vpadli do Československej socialistickej republiky. Nasledovala frustrujúca konfrontácia s marením jeho túžby prekonať „sivú normalitu“. Toto znamenalo začiatok toho, čo by som nazval jeho systematickou a systémovou dekonštrukciou, rekonštrukciou, deideologizáciou a reontologizáciou normality. Pre neho bolo UFO (= Neidentifikovaný lietajúci objekt) provokatívnou zmesou afektu a konceptu – abnormálneho, nezvyčajného a neočakávaného v rámci všadeprítomnej represívnej normality. Určujúcim prvkom väčšiny jeho koláží, readymades, asambláží, antihappeningov a antimalieb – ako aj situácií, ktorými zakrýval idealizmy normality – sa stal otáznik (symbol =?) namierený voči sebe samému, voči iným a voči kolektívu – spoločnosti ako celku a ako súhrnu singularít. Na rozdiel od nepriehľadnej minulosti

a frustrujúcej prítomnosti sa obrátil k otázkam – otáznikom =? – adresovaným budúcnosti. Konceptne a existenciálne sa obrátil k historizácii, ktorá vychádzala z nerealizovanej budúcnosti. Zážitok z nereálneho bol jadrom jeho fantazmy UFO. Jeho skúmanie priestoru nachádzalo alternatívy v politike času, ktorá sa stala vnímateľnou prostredníctvom priestoru. Hľadal „kultúrne situácie“ – modality amatérskych aktivít a mikrokolektívnych socializácií v športe, marginálnom alebo amatérskom umení a mystifikovanej komunikácii. Keď padol Berlínsky múr, mal päťdesiat rokov. Keď sa projekt československého štátu skončil a v roku 1993 vznikli samostatné republiky – Česká a Slovenská, mal päťdesiatštyri rokov. V tom čase vstúpil do globálnych a zároveň lokálnych procesov socioeconomickej transformácie. Bol medzinárodne uznávaný ako výnimočný umelec hrdinskej nezvyčajnej tvorby v rámci štátnej a makrokultúrnej normality.

Situacionizmus Júliusa Kollera bol zakorenený medzi: (1) politickou ľahostajnosťou – podozrievaním voči kolektívne vnucovanému „my“ a jeho spoločenskej platnosti a viditeľnosti; (2) estetickou ľahostajnosťou – esteticky a funkčne krásne nie je nevyhnutne kvalitou súčasného umenia, najmä nie na úrovni angažovanosti; a (3) vzťah medzi konceptom a afektom v rámci šedého každodenného života bez odkazu na stranické hodnotenie. Dalo by sa vysloviť neopatrnú, naratívnu a opisnú frázu, ktorá by naznačovala konotatívnu atmosféru, v ktorej neoavantgardní a konceptuálni umelci pôsobili na druhej strane Múru: „Cítim sa ako mimozemšťan – návštevník z vesmíru, cestovateľ na palube UFO.“

Prof. emeritus Miško Šuvaković, Ph.D.

Faculty of Media and Communication
str. Rajka Mitića 16, 11040 Belgrade, Serbia
email: miodragsuvakovic@gmail.com

translation; Ana Gorobinski