

## **Georg Schöllhammer**

Engagement instead of Arrangement

Julius Koller's Erratic Work on the Re-Conception of Aesthetic Space 1960ff

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### **Julius Koller's Erratic Work on the Re-Conception of Aesthetic Space 1960ff**

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In the early sixties of the last century, a hopeful spirit of modernism had moved into private ateliers in the art scenes of Bratislava as well. The existential fears from the period of the Stalinist dictate of realism had already elicited initial counter-reactions after 1956 in the extreme subjectivism of tachist painting. Yet the groups and positions that now emerged were able to feel accepted again in the international canon of modernism with their kinetic objects, light works, and their structural-geometric abstraction. In the second post-war decade, a generation of neo-constructivist artist on both sides of the Iron Curtain had formed a kind of international association. (1)

Bratislava was not the center of Czechoslovakia; always a bit disadvantaged by its rival Prague, it was located at the margin. From 1959 to 1965, at the time of this first upheaval, Julius Koller completed his study of painting with Jan Zelibski at the conservative academy of the Slovakian capital.

During these years, the repressive climate was gradually loosened, and the harbingers of the Prague Spring of 1968 made it possible to deal more freely with artistic means of representation - and also enabled a new approach to aesthetic work. In a way, neo-constructive modernism, the new abstraction, which clearly also tied into the grand tradition of Czechoslovakian avant-gardes of the inter-war period, functioned not only as a sign of the end of Stalinism, but also as a kind of repression machine: the new modernism was also a substitute for the errors and oversights of socialism and its models of social modernization, criticized mass culture and its everyday objects, placed artistic work in an abstract space of work on the form, and was the vanishing point from the real world of the Cold War.

Even as a student - at that time he was painting homogeneous urban landscapes for himself, analyses of space pressed into the concrete - Julius Koller already took a critical stance with respect to the modernist principles of order in the political and cultural upheavals in Czechoslovakia in the early sixties. Koller was less interested in the abstract construction of space, within which his artistic work spread out. Instead, he found a new understanding of the social space of the city formulated in the approaches of the international avant-gardes critical of modernism, following Dada and Duchamps, in Nouveau Realisme and Fluxus, in the "psychogeographical" explorations of the Situationist International. This was a theme, from which it was possible to imagine a different position. Counter to the cynical technoid fantasies of omnipotence of the socialist state apparatus and its designers, or the gestalt-therapeutical ambitions of the fashionable modernists, the direct experience of the reality of the art work was to be returned to the individual. Starting from this idea, Koller has consistently developed his position up to the present day, and an oeuvre that in its stringency, obsession and peculiarity could well be called one of the most erratic and consistent of European contemporary art. It is perhaps most comparable with the universe of a Marcel Broodthaer.

Julius Koller was not alone with his rejection of modernist pathos in Bratislava of the sixties. There were a number of thematic, formal or subject matter correspondences, for instance, with the work of the Happsoc group around Z. Kostrova, Stano Filko and Alexander Mlynarczyk, who developed a locally transformed form of object happenings from their contacts with the Parisian Nouveau Realisme around Pierre Restany and Yves Klein (1964). In fact, through Restany, the work of the group around Mlynarczyk - an originary amalgamation of Fluxus strategies, pop adaptations and architectonic functionalism critique with a multitude of theatrically surreal elements - was widely received throughout Europe at that time. Also in Stano Filko's psychedelic environments, objects and mappings drawing from McLuhanist media theory and situationist architectural fantasies, there was an expression of a will to deal with the fragmenting of subjectivity in the bureaucratic and organizational apparatuses of Real-Socialist societies in a form-critical way. Their titles were full of cosmological terms and cybernetic metaphors, such as "Universal Environment" or "Poetry about Space-Cosmos", etc. And for the artists in Bratislava in the early sixties, pop art was also another precedent for a method that enabled using material from cultural everyday production.

These various stimuli - Pop, Flux, Nouveau Realisme, Dada - and the euphoric notion of being able to turn everything into art, being able to include everything in the system of art, which the group shared, underwent a reversion, however, in the work of the young Julius Koller. In 1965, the same year in which the Happsoc Manifesto appeared, Koller published his manifesto:

"Antihappening (System of Subjective Objectivity)":

Contrary to the happening, which is a "way to put an artistic act into action", the Anti-happening aimed at a "cultural reshaping of the subject, at awareness, at the surroundings and the real world. Through the means of textual designation ('making known'), cultural demarcation becomes part of the cultural context", it says in "Antihappening".

### Anti-Happening

In Koller's manifesto, a performative act of designation, a conscious act of subjectification through the designation, an act of cultural demarcation at the level of production, so to speak, contravenes the myth of the regaining of innateness in dramatic self-performance, of the foundation of identity in a liberating psychodramatic act, as it was imagined by the protagonists of the happening developed from Fluxus. Yet it was not only at the level of aesthetic acts, but also at that of the analysis of the status of the art work as object that Koller's stance contradicted the mental worlds that were common at that time.

Contrary to Duchamps' transposition of any arbitrary object into the art sphere through simple displacement, Koller's strategy consists of using real objects, the real world, everyday life as a given program for an automatically aesthetic and endless operation - an aesthetic displacement intended to put an end to aesthetics, but which enables a general aestheticization of the world at the same time - because, in fact, potentially every object could enter into this virtual performance.

With a formulation that one could also regard as determinative for the Situationist Internationale, Koller suggests that the textual existence of a poetic impulse cannot

develop the full potential of its radical, anti-hegemonic power. Instead, this power, this potential, can only come into full effect in the realm of concrete action, in an act of designation. Or indeed in a cultural strategy that seeks inclusion in a cultural system, from which the happening seeks its vanishing point, reverses it and represents it as one that is purely definitionally textual, which could be transformed into a system of designation. Koller makes this distinction and transforms the anthropological process into a signifi-  
catory process: the Anti-Happening.

The Anti-Happening demonstrates conceptual acts or objects. It presents them and thus creates situations - cultural situations. This act of demonstration designates a situation as a cultural space and makes use of non-fixing concept of the formation of identity. The performative act that Koller poses with his demonstration operations thinks about forms of the functional or emotional utilization and occupation of a place or a situation and makes the exquisite malleability and the rigidity of spatial conventions visible to viewers at the same time. Every real or imagined observer can also conduct themselves contrary to the cultural situation created in this act of designation, but can also experience designating as a characteristic, which first defines the identity of their cultural body.

What Koller employs in his work with his Anti-Happening Manifesto is nothing less than a concept of identity as praxis, which does not appear to be determined by the cultural situation, but rather is first granted its option for action in the designation.

#### Anti-Pictures

This strategy now allowed Koller to extend the designating operation universally to various media: the text works on paper - stamped with children's stamps - began in 1965, indicating the mental space of the Anti-Happening distributed in various editions. This praxis was inspired by the Dadaists and the Surrealists, who used text and collage extensively in their work, and by the Lettrists, whose unitary urbanism aimed to develop emotionally founded city maps, which should then serve as the foundation for the construction of new, utopian environments.

After 1967/1968, the first pictures were also created, in which Koller used white latex paint instead of oil paint, and in which the question mark appears for the first time - which was later to mutate repeatedly in various media and aggregate states into the symbol of Koller's designation stances. Thereafter, these pictures were called Anti-Pictures; after 1968/69 they were also to be given form in a special variation, namely as text-pictures on a textile ground, "Textextiles".

The "Invitation to an Idea" - as Koller once called the text works on the Anti-Happenings - and the palimpsests and serial arrangements of the anti-pictures distanced themselves not only formally from the academisms of the modernists and the psychophysical emancipatory gestures of the Happenings and material assemblages of the vitalists among Koller's local colleagues. Koller dispensed with any form of technical mastery, for example. The anti-pictures have an amateurish style. In this way, they were to accomplish their mission to "engage instead of arrange" (Koller).

Koller was not interested in pure painting, but rather in developing a pictorial, sign-like

typology of the text body. He strung together serial question marks or plus and minus symbols or dots and ellipses that closed into a question mark, wrote the word "reality" in superimpositions or the formula "illusionism"; waving lines appeared later, the swastika, rune-like signs, etc. This typology is always thought in relation to its function as a reference to that which it is intended to designate - the counter-space. Koller's manifestos and reference systems always have a dual character. On the one hand they insist on an abstractness of form and its capability for unlimited repetition, for insistence. On the other hand, though, Koller never loses sight, for instance in the anti-pictures, of the materiality of painting linked with the forms.

#### U.F.O. and U.F.O.naut

In 1970, two years after the brutal suppression of the dreams of a possible third way of socialism in Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact tanks in August 1968, Koller introduced a new three-letter field of concepts into his work in another manifesto: U.F.O. In this manifesto, from which over the following thirty years and more Koller's main group of works of the same name was to develop, "Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations" - U.F.O., the realistic, anti-illusionist approach of the anti-happenings and anti-pictures is underscored again. However, its possibility for realization is postponed for the future and ironically embedded in a cosmology of uncertainty, the pseudo-science of extraterrestrial flying objects:

"SUBJECTIVE CULTURAL ACTIONS-OPERATIONS WHICH IN THE UNIVERSALITY OF OBJECTIVE REALITY FORM CULTURAL SITUATIONS DIRECTED INTO THE FUTURE. THE OPERATIONS WILL EFFECT PSYCHOPHYSICAL PROJECTS OF COSMOHUMANISTIC CULTURE AND INSTEAD OF A NEW ART-AESTHETICS WILL CREATE A NEW LIFE, A NEW SUBJECT, AWARENESS, CREATIVITY AND A NEW CULTURAL REALITY."

The U.F.O. concept thus suspends any connection between Koller's definitive, performative designation work and the passivity of social circumstances in Czechoslovakia of the normalization years. Against the inevitable acceptance of decisions made elsewhere; the various conditionings of private life, the fabrication of the everyday as ideological spectacle, in short against all passivity, the U.F.O. act of designation poses something that is overly enciphered in the media in relation to the event that is always already interpreted, just as it has always deciphered: a place of emptiness and of determinability, a real place; a place that is not represented, but rather is present - at least in the concept and the medium of its presentation.

With U.F.O., a complex reference and relationship system arises between the acts of designation and their possibility of mutating: in various works in subsequent years, the O. has assumed the names object or ornament or orientation or observation or opustane obrazu (release of the image) or otaznik (question mark), etc., etc.; the F. has mutated into functional, folkloristic, factographic, filosofic, fantastic, flyer, and so forth.

The universal cultural situations that U.F.O. designates can become typical cultural situations, new cultural situations, flying cultural situations, cultic cultural situations, objective cultural situations. Universal functional expertises can be imagined.

Yet it is not only these mutations that exist in Koller's system U.F.O. and in the indexical

space that it assumes in the chronology of the work. There is also a system of recursive ties. Actions can be repeated at intervals of time in celebrations, in anniversaries, and performed again, biographically affirming the content of the original action. The designating acts of the U.F.O.s are applied to every possible medium, to actions, drawings, to book objects and maps, to texts and installations.

Beginning in 1970 (and up to the present), the figure of the author also steps out of the signature in U.F.O. into a pictorial presence as U.F.Onaut J.K.: “UNIVERSAL FUTUROLOGICAL ORIENTATION - THE PROCESS OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HEAD (PORTRAIT) OF J.K. EXPRESSING A PERSONAL CULTURAL SITUATION. THE PHOTO-VISUALISATION WILL TAKE PLACE AT TIME (YEARLY) INTERVALS INTO THE FUTURE.”

Koller, who was himself a practicing athlete, has always also found a field of reference for his reality concepts in the regulations, the sequences of action and in the props of various types of sports. In the “Gallery of the Young” in Bratislava in 1970, instead of an exhibition, Koller set up a ping-pong club for one month, where visitors could play. Like other demonstrative moments of the work, such as manually inscribing a question mark in the sand field of a tennis court a year earlier and working with chalk and the line marking wagon (Contact, 1969), this act of transformation was not intended to be passive representation, but rather an active one, triggering an existential movement - a momentary existential creativity that expresses itself in a cultural situation.

In addition to this option for action, Koller also finds here a formal reference to the motif of sequencing, the serial, the possibility of structural connection: the grid structure of the strings of a tennis racket, the tennis net (the mediator, the middle, the medium of the game, knotted into a serial, non-hierarchical structure) and fishing nets become permanent props in the U.F.O. stock. After 1972 until into the 80s, however, Koller interrupted this work with set pieces. Their immanent suggestion of fairness and the abstract rules of relationships, for which sport stands, seemed unsuitable to him. Around 1972, the emphasis on formulas like “new life!” and “new creativity” vanished altogether. Koller focused on the motif of isolation again - in times of normalization, which socially isolates one but also compels conformity. In this way, Koller indirectly asserted that art as an effective counterforce against the society of the so-called “normalization years” had per se become superfluous.

UmeNie

The Pingpong Monument (1970-72) could be a metaphor for the reality of the normalization years. In this photo collage, Koller’s hand stretches out holding a tennis racket monumentally before the silhouette of a modernist satellite city, as though the Black Hole that the form of the racket delineates were announcing the lacuna following the Congress of the Association of Slovakian Fine Artists (ZSVU) from November 1972, where a number of art praxes were prohibited and where the de facto re-establishment of the socialist realism of the 50s as art doctrine took place. Koller’s re-decoration of the Slovakian wooden houses with question marks in a photo collage in 1978 - with which a touristic national symbol of Czechoslovakia of the 70s became a Universal Folkloristic

Object - reacts directly. And it reacts again with a performative act. During these years, symbols of eternity appear more and more often in the text works, along with question marks and the negation NIE (art: umenie becomes UmeNie or nevermore). Endless bands of Möbius strips, round, pressed into loops or triangles, spirals and ying-yangs present U.F.O. even more explicitly as an operation of designation turning back to itself. Combined with the Bermuda Triangle and the Ufo idea of an all-consuming and extra-terrestrially cleansed space, Koller then employs the idea of Atlantis for the first time in his system. Performative balancing acts were performed during this period, demarcations, the “levelings”, in which Koller subordinated himself to the scale of measurement markings on houses in the old city of Bratislava, for example, or delimited a zebra crossing with traffic huts to an anti-picture. A child and the artist stand on a hill in front of a school in Bratislava, with their hands spread as though ready to fly as a poetic Anti-Icarus. Koller draws the logbook of his expedition from a sand pile in the new housing area near the Danube - and thus near the Iron Curtain -, in which he lives, on a sandy hill near the border along the river, already under permanent surveillance by the border troops.

Naturally, the establishment of such a branching system of order suggests ascribing a mythologizing function to Koller’s meticulous designations, his categorizations. And in fact it is not uncommon that Koller’s work is simply assigned to the genre designation “individual mythologies”, the metonymic, often escapist tendency of art in the 70s. An escapism into self-enclosure against the real situation experienced as the evils of history or the evils of politics in periods of normalization is not uncommon in the art of European avant-gardes from the Soviet hemisphere of the 70s. The mythologization of one’s own existence and the decontextualization of one’s own work, the creation of parallel universes, was ultimately a possible strategy of resistance against totalitarian oppression. “Yet by striving for the quality of the absolute, it became an a-historical construct” (1). For Julius Koller, though, it was not a matter of his work transcending the local circumstances perceived as limiting, or of creating a dissident identity by appropriating the values of western avant-gardes. His compensation for the traumatic historical experience of being closed in found another, adequate expression in his biography: he was a teacher for painting at an art school for hobby painters. In this way, too, one’s own work can be defined in discontinuity with the local traditions of modernity and modernism!

### Art History as Blemish

Just as so much of the art of the late 60s and early 70s did not fit in the categories provided by the canon, Julius Koller’s work must also be reinterpreted from today’s perspective. The established critical categories that were developed around Post-Minimalism, Concept Art, Land Art and Process Art are hardly suitable for it. Nor did the major exhibitions for the reintegration of eastern European art in a pan-European modern art history, in which Koller’s work was present, fill this lacuna with new ideas of interpretation. The mappings of non-American conceptualisms or performance art, which began in the USA in the second half of the 90s, were too unspecific in their methodical approaches to be able to propose essential re-evaluations. An additional complicating factor is that Koller’s work in the euphoric years of the Prague Spring and the leaden years of nor-

malization afterwards remained hidden - for reasons of local competition - even to the leaders of Czechoslovakian art criticism, such as Jindrich Chalupecki from Prague. (1) For this reason, as early as 1991 in a catalogue essay written by Aurel Hrabusicky for a Koller exhibition at the Povazk Gallery in Ziline, with which the post-Communist rediscovery of Koller's work started, he noted that in reference to Koller's multifaceted praxis, one could not speak of pure conceptualism, but rather of a contextual, broken aesthetic praxis interwoven in manifold references, for which hardly a correspondence could be found on either side of the former Iron Curtain.

Koller's use of the universal as metaphor for the real, his skipping over the local idiolect, the local variations of universalist gestalt figures of late modernism, such as corporeal happening, abstract painting, kineticism and geometric abstraction, were rooted in an idea of the transparency of the aesthetic act as pure event. In a brief period of collaborating with Peter Ronai from the next younger generation after the fall of the wall, which Koller called "New Earnestness", Koller said explicitly that the reference space of the sign must be maintained and opposed the postmodern simulation theory. By appealing to this transparency of the performative act, and to a simple possibility of transformation, as in ping-pong tournaments, for example, or other sport works, Koller explored - not unlike artists of his generation in the 60s from the other side of the bipolar world - the possibilities of a radical transformation of the idea of the work away from the object towards the trace of an action or an instruction for action. Just as radically as his colleagues working conceptually or minimalistically in New York or Los Angeles, Koller casts doubt on the idea of a privileged standpoint of the traditional categories of fine art. The works from the mid-sixties on, the anti-pictures, the textextiles or the U.F.O.s in the early seventies newly defined the aesthetic experience as a multitude of non-specialized forms for approaching the question: What is really and authentically "modern"? How can the idea - or even just the rhetoric - of authenticity be transferred to a new construction of the relations between author, work and observer? Must one take a detour by way of the transient, provisional, arbitrary, in order to newly define this relation? After 1972 Koller's works seem more melancholy. Yet they still create very rigorous situations. If we disregard all the questions regarding the concrete scope of action in Czechoslovakia of the second half of the seventies and attempt to focus on the ideology-critical aspects of the U.F.O. acts and artifacts, we recognize that Koller's work manifests a direct reference to the empty opposite of dialectical teleology, which is inscribed in a large portion of the Marxist tradition. The U.F.O.s name the unsolved contradiction between an objective "determinacy" and a revolutionary activism. Losing trust in the possibility of revolution also means taking leave of the idea of living in historical conditions that evince a potency for change.

For the artist Koller, the analysis of what exists constantly also suggests something explosive. The performative, designating acts and the overflowing yet always coherent system of designation in his actions are always a silent reproach against the strategies, from which everyday life in the leaden years grows. They reveal the arbitrariness of the dominant order. They pose the question of a liberating perspective. Koller's analysis of the everyday is conducted through a three-fold movement similar to the way the French theoretician Henri Lefebvre depicts it as a model for the emancipatory appropriation of space through everyday practices: first societization is accomplished in the form of a

“totalization of society”. At the same time, this process is accompanied by an “extreme individualization”, which ultimately leads to a “particularization”.

Koller’s ostensible fictions leave the conventional genres of illusionist representation and refer back to the production and representation process, which exists in the present in the reality of the designated moment. As bizarre and clownesque as the actions may sometimes seem, an immediate image of the present emerges in all of them, which contains all the force of differentiation. Koller never operates within the framework of so-called “major” themes in relation to the body: pain, sexuality, death, injury, wounding, mental borderline situations of surrender. Instead, Koller operates within the constrictions of everyday schemata of control and order. In this way, he unmasks the imperative that art is there to decipher a deep truth about us and our bodies and our culture, replacing it with a performative act: engagement instead of arrangement.